

WIT Seminar on Luke 2006
Women and Discipleship in Luke's Gospel Jenny Dawson

There is an old saying that where you stand determines what you see. It is a reminder to all of us who examine biblical texts to become aware of the peculiarities of our own context and the metaphorical glasses through which we look. These are inevitably coloured by factors such as our place in the world, our life experience, and our gender.

The Gospel of Luke has often been regarded as sympathetic to women. Indeed there are 42 passages about women, 23 unique to Luke, which is more than any other Gospel. However, I want to explore the matter of women and discipleship in Luke from the perspective of a hermeneutic of suspicion. This would mean being open to reading against the grain, to stand back from the text and analyse it critically, and to search for the voices or experiences that are omitted or suppressed. Thus I am suggesting a process of considering women and discipleship in Luke's Gospel that looks for the gaps in the text rather than at what is simply present in the text.

To be a disciple is usually understood as being a follower but Christian discipleship implies a process of beginning to share in ministry, which in turn involves mutual acceptance of giftedness, trust, and responsibility. There is nothing about discipleship in this sense which has particularity with regard to gender. Indeed, growing in Christian ministry usually means that both men and women initiate activities of service for which they are charged with some degree of responsibility and for which they can be confident that resourcing and support are obtainable. Accordingly I want to investigate a number of the stories in Luke's Gospel, which involve women, with regard to agency, accountability and accessibility as a means to drawing some conclusions about Luke's attitude to women as disciples. First some preliminary remarks.

Jane Schaberg has suggested that "the Gospel of Luke is an extremely dangerous text, perhaps the most dangerous in the Bible.....Even as this Gospel highlights women as included among the followers of Jesus, subjects of his teaching and objects of his healing, it deftly portrays them as models of subordinate service, excluded from the power centre of the movement and from significant responsibilities. Claiming the authority of Jesus, this portrayal is an attempt to legitimate male dominance in the Christianity of the author's time."¹ Obviously we need to make up our own minds as to whether such a view is defensible. The author of Luke appears to be interested in the education of women in the basics of faith and in presenting women as role models but a hermeneutic of suspicion calls us to ask hard questions and to look below the surface.

The special "L" material (that is usually regarded as material available only to Luke) gives emphasis to women's experience in many places, such as sections of the infancy narratives (chapters 1 and 2), the raising of the son of

¹ "Luke", Carol Newsome and Sharon Ringe (editors). *The Women's Bible Commentary*. London: SPCK, 1992. 275.

the widow of Nain (7:12-17), the forgiven sinner who anoints Jesus (7:36-50), the Galilean women followers of Jesus (8:1-3), Mary and Martha (10:38-42), the women crying out from the crowd (11:27-28), the bent woman (13:10-17), the parable of the sweeping woman (15:8-10), the parable of the persistent widow (18:1-8), the daughters of Jerusalem (32:27-32), the women at the cross (23:49), and the women who prepared spices to anoint Jesus' body (23:56). As I have said, there are many women in the Gospel, and there seems to be tendency for Luke to defend and praise women (for example in the technique called "pairing"²). Luke also refers to widows more frequently than the other gospels, presuming their economic helplessness.

This Gospel is often called "The Gospel of the Poor" just as it has been called "The Gospel of Women", and we are reminded that most of the poor in every age are women and children. In Luke the economically destitute are called blessed (6:20), and disciples are called to leave all, to become poor, and to follow Jesus (5:11, 28; 18:22). Women are named as benefactors (8:2-3) and in other places Luke seems to have particular interest in challenging the rich with warnings and short sayings, but both voluntary generosity and voluntary poverty are obviously values.

It is sometimes suggested that Luke may have had access to a women's source, but inevitably the author had a role in editing, incorporating and shaping, and we cannot assume that any of these stories represent the viewpoint of early Christian women. Clearly too it all takes place within the wider context of ongoing life within the Roman empire so other values become involved.

Could the author of this Gospel have been a woman? "Luke" was probably a Gentile Christian, familiar enough with the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible to use it, blend its sources, and imitate its style. Women of wealth or status in this period were able to be educated and it seems that some were writers. Jane Schaberg suggests that "female authorship is improbable, however, mainly because of the Gospel's attitude toward women. Further the narrator speaks as a man (in the Greek of 1:2)."³

Luke emphasises Jesus' ministry to women, but we must ask hard questions about women's ministry and women's discipleship. What does Luke show them as doing and saying – or not doing and saying?

First a warning. It is sometimes suggested that Jesus was a revolutionary "feminist" pitted against his religious environment and heritage. Recent research into the lives of Jewish women of the time does not support this. It also encourages an attitude of intrinsic opposition to Judaism, but has been used to explain later Christian restriction of women as necessary capitulation to Jewish-Christian tradition. However recent research shows a picture of

² For example, Mary's Song is paired with Zechariah's prophecy (1:46-55 and 1:68-79) and the centurion with the sick slave is followed immediately by the story of the woman with the sick son (7:2-17).

³ Op.cit., 278

great diversity⁴. Some Jewish women were leaders of synagogues⁵, owned land, ran businesses and as I have said earlier were educated. Others were deeply disadvantaged and powerless. No simple contrast favouring early Christianity over ancient Judaism can be made.

However the situation of Roman women may help us to understand Luke's Gospel. Possibly he restricts the roles of women to what would have been acceptable within the Roman Empire, and this may have shaped his interpretation. It seems that even the small numbers of upper class and wealthy Roman women were "emancipated" only in a very restricted vicarious sense, with no real decision-making authority or leadership. The expanded role for women offered through the ministry of Jesus may have aroused suspicion of being anti-Roman, anti-family and even linked with magic. Luke, motivated by the evangelistic desire that Christian leaders and witnesses be widely acceptable, may have blurred evidence of women's leadership and accentuates the leadership by men.

Full discipleship in Luke involves the power and authority to exorcise, heal and preach (see 9:1-6 and 10:1-16). Like the other Gospel writers, Luke does not have any call narrative in which Jesus invites a woman to follow him, no women are commissioned as apostles, and none are named as disciples, although we must ask whether 10:1-16 might have involved women. Instead women are healed or exorcised, and then they serve (*diakonia*). Luke shows only men empowered to speak and bear responsibility (e.g. 24:33, 24:47-49). Women respond with silence.

Before we explore this claim through individual stories, let us note three key points about the comparative quality of female functioning and roles in Luke. Firstly, Luke has no women who challenge Jesus or initiate Gentle mission (compare with Mark 7:24 and John 4). Secondly, in Matthew 28, the women at the tomb not only receive a commission but the Risen Christ appears first to them compared with what happens in Luke 24. Finally this Gospel's depiction of women must be compared with its depiction of men, so we must investigate questions such as whether women are named, whether they speak or are spoken to, and any action that is taken. Again, we will keep in mind the principles of agency, accountability, and access.

Elizabeth, Anna, and Mary of Nazareth, the women involved in the pregnancy stories of John the Baptist and Jesus, seem to have roles more powerful than any other roles for women in Luke, particularly because these may be the women who are given speeches where they are not corrected. It is noteworthy that these three women appear in the context of traditional women's roles of bearing and raising children. All three demonstrate patience, prayer, praise and faith – surely appropriate marks of discipleship.

⁴ Article "Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the New Testament" by Amy Wordelman in *The Women's Bible Commentary*. 390f

⁵ "Luke", 279. Robert Karris in 1993 explored this diversity of roles in an address which was published as "Women and Discipleship in Luke," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56 (1994) 1-20. (Reprinted in *A Feminist Companion to Luke*).

Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth is an encounter expressing women's solidarity. In greeting, Elizabeth, for many years barren in the tradition of Sarah, Rachel, Hannah and others, makes the only christological statement by a woman in this Gospel, describing Mary as "the mother of my Lord", yet the good news about her child and his role is not given to her directly. The widow Anna welcomes the child Jesus with praise and spoke "about him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (2:38): would that we had those words as we do the words of Simeon. Mary herself is a very complex figure, both in the scripture and much more in Christian tradition since. The notion of the "Virgin Mary", honoured by the Church for non-use of her sexuality, has given women very mixed messages about their spirituality and authority. She has a direct encounter with a heavenly being, is commissioned, albeit as a mother, and very early became regarded as a, perhaps the, model believer. Yet she describes herself as the "slave" or "servant" of the Lord, in a passive, submissive response (1:38) – although Luke must surely have intended the word to have a positive value, in the way that Jesus used it later. The Magnificat is a wonderful song of liberation and authority, a revolutionary manifesto. Treasured in many times and places for its vision of freedom from systemic injustice, it has clear allusions to Hannah's song in 1 Samuel and links with proclaiming the good news to the poor (Luke 4:18-19, and Isaiah 61:1-2) as well as looking forward to the resurrection in the way it celebrates the experience of reversal. Mary here is the prophet of the poor. Yet Luke's picture of her is ambiguous: even here while she may be evangelist and prophet, she is not commissioned as others are later. In 2:19 she is the model listener. In 2:33-35,51 she is the passive contemplative. One has to ask if silence, obedient trust and self-sacrifice is Luke's idea of a woman's perfect response to God's call, as no male disciple is depicted or required to be like this. Yet many scholars would claim that she is blessed for her belief (1:45 and 11:27-28) rather than being defined by her biological motherhood.

The story of the woman who had been a sinner (7:36-50) needs to be treated separately from the similar stories in Mark 14:3-9, Matthew 26:6-13, and John 12:1-8. Each Gospel has an account of a woman anointing Jesus, but there are subtle differences and the stories should not be merged. Uniquely in Luke, the episode does not happen as a prelude to the Passion, nor it is not about anointing for death, and nor is there a claim that the woman's memory should be honoured. This person may illustrate the type of woman who became part of Jesus' entourage (8:2-3) but the story is placed before the list of those names. Was she a prostitute? Western Christianity has made this identification but Eastern scholars have always seen 8:2 and 7:37 as describing two different women. There is no real reason why they should be the same except that Luke 7:37 describes her as "a woman in the city who was a sinner". She wets Jesus' feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair, kisses his feet and anoints him. Kissing feet was usually an act of gratitude for pardon. Unbound hair might be a mark of a loose woman. In Luke the emphasis is on the emotion of her action and on Jesus' acceptance of her. It leads immediately into the parable of the two debtors, which Jesus applies to the woman who has shown Jesus love in a way that Simon the inadequate host did not.

The list of the women travelling with Jesus (8:1-3) raises many questions about the people who made up the Jesus movement. Luke names two separate groups as being “with Jesus”: the Twelve (6:12-16) and “some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities”, namely Mary Magdalene, Joanna the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna. These women “provided for (or “served”) them out of their resources. These differing lists raise questions about the people who made up the Jesus movement, especially why Luke never explicitly calls these women disciples. It is likely that the practice of including women in such an itinerant charismatic ministry would have been scandalous but note that this omission is made without comment. What else is omitted? What gender was the silent disciple on the Emmaus road (24:13-35)? Where were there women amongst those who attended the last supper? The separate lists of male and female disciples contrasts with the integrated list of church leaders in Romans 16. Did Luke see women as a distinct and separate community? Were they, as Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza postulates,⁶ significant figures in the table community, sharing in eucharistic leadership and proclamation. Were they wealthy benefactors? This would be likely in the Graeco-Roman world but does not fit with the widely-accepted view that the earliest followers were on society’s margins. Were they patrons from outside the ranks? Was this movement already a female-supported, male-led organisation?

The story of Mary and Martha (10:38-42) seems at first sight to set sister against sister, as Martha appears to be silenced by Jesus and the “one thing”, the “better part”, chosen by Mary, is silent listening. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza⁷ over 20 years ago put forward the view that this story reflects debate at the end of the first century both over the roles of women and over emerging roles within the house-churches that were part of the early Christian movement. She suggests that *diakonia*, often translated service, became a technical term meaning eucharistic table service, proclamation and church leadership. In the story Martha’s *diakonia* and Mary’s rabbinic discipleship word-related activity are described as distinct roles, which would be a situation of Luke’s time rather than of Jesus’. However, to challenge this view, we might observe that Mary’s role here is not questioning or preaching but simply listening: her attitude may be that of a disciple but she is not acting like a disciple (in contrast with the Syro-Phoenician woman or the woman at the well in other Gospels). In John, Martha is shown as making the central christological confession of this Gospel (11:1-45), and Mary performs the identifiably prophetic action of anointing Jesus’s feet (12:1-8).

The final passage from Luke for brief investigation is the description of women at the cross and the empty tomb (23:49 and 24:1-12). In the final three chapters of Luke, women are seen as part of the crowd, their role is lessened as male leaders, especially Peter, emerge more strongly, and, in contrast to other Gospels, the Risen Jesus does not appear to women. However, again in Luke, women are the loyal ones (8:3, 23:49, 23:55, 24:9 – compare with Mark 16:8).

⁶ *In Memory of Her*. London: SCM Press 1983.

⁷ *Op.cit.* 165

At first sight in Luke's Gospel, there appears to be a message that God cares equally for and works through both men and women. Yet at the same time the narrative consistently shows women in helping, supporting capacities, lacking the agency, accountability and access which I have suggested are marks of the kind of discipleship which lead to active ministry. Was Luke saying that only men are suitable ambassadors of the new movement and that perhaps their roles should be limited?

It is surprising to find women being diminished in this particular Gospel, and we may be challenged by Jesus' question to Simon in 7:44: "Do you see this woman?" Perhaps our impression of "many" woman in Luke's Gospel is because we expect to find none or few. Instead there is a silencing. Named men outnumber named women 13:1: there are 10 women named; 9 named men appear in stories but 94 more are mentioned (especially in the genealogy). In Luke's Gospel women speak 15 times. Their actual words are given 10 times. Luke as writer of Acts continues and accentuates this: in Acts women speak only 5 times, their words are given 3 times, and the two individual women spoken to in direct speech (Acts 5 and 16) are condemned and silenced.

Sometimes all is not as it seems, even with biblical scholarship. Disciples of Christ are called to be rigorous, critical in the best sense of that word, and profoundly aware of who is being silenced or made invisible, with regard to in the way that biblical material is both presented and interpreted. Over recent decades, scholars from different cultural and other contexts have offered fresh perspectives and it is my hope that this view of women and discipleship in Luke's Gospel will enable us to continue to ask our own questions at a deep level.

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Questions for discussion:

1. What experiences does your group have of reading the Bible with different groups of people and thus receiving fresh insights?
2. What do you know about the source, origin and context of biblical commentaries that you use?
3. Which biblical story – not only from Luke – has most inspired you as a disciple of Jesus Christ?
4. What do you see as the greatest challenge to the church's discipleship today?