

Jesus was radical in his treatment of women

**An investigation into the evidence for
this statement with reference to two
encounters between Jesus & women
in the Gospels**

Title E. 2.

Root of Title

Topic 2.2 Women and men in the Christian Scriptures

LCRE Syllabus, p55

Unpacking the Title

- **Radical**
- **Investigation**
- **Evidence**
- **Reference to 2 encounters**
- **Gospels**

Gender and Christianity (Religion and Gender part 2) **Objectives:**

- be aware of the roles of women and men from the perspective of a variety of religious traditions, and the connection between images of God and understandings of these roles
- be familiar with the accounts in the Christian scriptures of the encounters between Jesus and women, and the place of women in the early Christian communities
- have an understanding of the significance of gender for personal, social and religious experience in contemporary society
- be aware of the place of men and women in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures
- understand the implications of sex stereotyping for full human and social development.

- trace the development of the role and understanding of gender in religious traditions, in particular the Christian traditions, through the ages

- recognise links between the roles of women and men in society and their roles in religious traditions

- analyse these roles using the visions outlined in scripture and concepts of equality and justice.

This section should contribute to the development of

- critical awareness of the differences in practice between some religious traditions in relation to gender roles

- appreciation of the challenge to move beyond stereotypes.

Cultural Context: The status of women in first century Palestine

Under Jewish law & custom the status of women had become lower to that of men:

- women were excluded from political, public & religious life
- dominant cultural attitude towards women was negative
- women sat apart from men in the synagogue and were not counted as part of the quorum of ten needed for prayer meetings
- women in general did not study or teach the Torah

- ‘Blessed art thou, O Lord, who hast not made me a woman’ was a prayer recited at every service in the synagogue by men
- young women secluded until marriage
- women had to be veiled in public
- women forbidden from talking to men outside their families
- a respectable Jewish male would not talk much with a woman & would definitely not touch any woman to whom he was not related
- women seen as under men’s authority

‘They had become second-class Jews, excluded from the worship and teaching of God, with status scarcely above that of slaves’

**-B.M. Metzger & M.D. Coogan, *‘The Oxford Companion to the Bible’*,
Oxford University Press, New York, 1993, p.806**

Women were considered to be
'in all things inferior to the man'

-- Josephus (Jewish Historian)

*Ref: Josephus, 'Against Apion 2.201, available at
www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/josephus/apion2.html*



‘The relationship of Jesus with women challenged these conventions.’

- Sandra Cullen: Religion and Gender (Veritas, Dublin, 2005, p97)

‘ When we begin to grasp this background we can see why Jesus’ behaviour and attitudes caused such a stir. Jesus sided with those on the margins. Jesus would seem to have violated the customs of the time in every encounter he had with women...’

- *Sandra Cullen, Religion and Gender, p98*

Jesus' encounters with women

There are many examples of Jesus' encounters with women in the Gospels, many of which suggest his radical treatment of them:

- **Mk1:29-31** Simon Peter's mother in law is healed when Jesus takes her by the hand and helps her up
- **Mk 5: 25-34** Jesus cures a woman who had been suffering from a haemorrhage for 12 years (under Levirate laws Jesus would become ritually unclean once he touched this woman & would need to purify himself before entry into the synagogue)
- Jesus refers to her as 'daughter', including her in the family of disciples
- **Mk 7:24-30** Jesus cures a Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter: this is a foreign woman
- **Mk 12: 41-44** The poor widow puts her last mite in the collection

- **Mk 14:3-9** an unnamed woman anoints the head of Jesus
- **Mt 8:14-15** The cure of Peter's mother in law
- **Mt 15:21-28** The Canaanite woman requests healing for her daughter
- **Mt 9:18-26** The cure of the woman with a haemorrhage & the raising of the daughter of a leader of the synagogue, esp the faith of the woman who touched the fringe of Jesus' cloak
- **Mt 27-28** recalls the witness of women to the crucifixion, their vigil at the tomb and the appearance of Jesus to women
- **Luke** devotes 42 passages of the Gospel to women
- **Lk 13:10 f** tells how Jesus heals a woman who had been stooped, (presumably in the male area of the synagogue) – liberation: the woman is set free
- **Lk 7** describes a woman anointing the feet of Jesus – she is described as a sinner in this Gospel
- **Jn 4: 6 -5:30** The Samaritan woman meets Jesus at the well
- **Jn 8** Jesus protects the woman caught in adultery who was about to be stoned

Jesus' radical treatment of women:

- He ignored ritual impurity laws Mt 5: 25-34 He cures a woman who had suffered bleeding for 12 years. It was a transgression for a man to talk to a woman other than his wife or children.
- He spoke to foreign women Jn4:7 – 5:30 Jesus converses with a Samaritan woman at a well. She was ritually unclean being a woman and a foreigner.
- He taught women students Lk 10:38-42 Jesus overthrew centuries of tradition by teaching Mary, sister of Martha. In the first century CE Rabbi Eliezer wrote:
'Rather should the words of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman...Whoever teaches his daughter the Torah is like one who teaches obscenity' (Rabbi Eliezer, 'Mishnah, Sotah 3:4')
- He used terminology which treated women as equal to men: Lk 13:16 he cures a woman and calls her a daughter of Abraham – equal status therefore with sons of Abraham; Lk 7:35-8:50 Jesus forgave a woman's sins, and refers to both women and men as 'children of wisdom'

- He accepted women in his inner circle Lk 8:1-3 refers to 12 male disciples and an unspecified number of female supporters. It is likely that about half of his closest friends were women.
 - He appeared first to 1 or more women after his resurrection Mt 28:9-10 says that Mary Magdalene and 'the other Mary' were the first to meet him after his resurrection.
 - Women were present at Jesus' crucifixion Mt 27:55-56 and Mk 15:40-41 tells of many women following Jesus from Galilee and were present at the crucifixion, while most of the men had fled.
 - Jesus told parallel male / female stories e.g. Healing of a man possessed by a demon and the healing of the mother of Peter's wife, starting in Lk 4:31
- 'Luke expresses by this arrangement that man and woman stand together side by side before God. They are equal in honour and grace; they are endowed with the same gifts and have the same responsibilities.'

H. Flender in Ben Witherington III, '*Women in the Earliest Churches*', Cambridge University Press, Reprinted 1991, p. 129

- **Jesus expressed concern for widows Lk 2:36, 4:26, 7:11, 18:1, 20:47 and 21:1**
- **Divorce Mk 10:11-12 Jesus breaks with the tradition where a man could divorce his wife but she could not divorce her husband. Jesus states that neither spouse can divorce the other, thereby treating both equally.**

Women in the Synoptics:

Episode	Mark	Matthew	Luke
Healing of Simon's mother-in-law	1:29-31	8:14-15	4:38-39
Woman with a flow of blood	5:25-34	9:20-22	8:43-48
Syro-phoenician Woman's Daughter	7:24-30	15:21-28	-----

2 Encounters between Jesus and women:

Encounter 1: The Syro-Phoenician woman

- **Mk 7:24-30 Her daughter is possessed by a demon. The woman seeks a cure from Jesus (Mt 15:21-28 refers to her as the Canaanite woman)**
- **The woman is under a double oppression: her gender and her race**
- **The disciples wanted to send her away**
- **She bowed down at Jesus' feet & begged him to cure her daughter**
- **Surprisingly, Jesus refuses! 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs' (Mk 7:27). (Observant Jews at that time often referred to the Gentiles contemptuously as 'dogs')**
- **The woman persuades Jesus to change his mind:**

‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs’ (Mk 7:28)

- Mt identifies her as a ‘Canaanite woman’ – therefore, an outsider. Jesus, in response to her faith, agrees to the healing - showing the inclusive nature of the reign of God.
- We see Jesus being challenged to see that his ministry is boundless and not restricted to the Jews.
- Jesus relented and healed the woman’s daughter from a distance.
- Cullen writes that *‘Jesus’ self-understanding grows in this encounter’* (p115)
- This is the only account we have of a person who changes the mind of Jesus (? *Query the author’s [B.A. Robinson] comment – Wedding Feast of Cana ?*)
- Dewey says that this woman is one of the most positive role modes in the entire Gospel (J. Dewey, ‘The Gospel of Mark’. E.S. Fiorenza (ed.) *‘Searching The Scriptures – A Feminist Commentary’*, Vol. II, New York: Crossroad, 1994 pps.470-509)

Encounter 2: Mary Magdalene

- She was a leader in the early Christian community, but historical distortions have blurred the true identity and character of Mary Magdalene
- The evangelists agree that she was at the foot of the cross and the first witness to the Resurrection – she is sent to tell the disciples the good news
- She was the first to see the risen Jesus on Easter morning – but women in that cultural context were not trustworthy witnesses, and could not legally witness to anything unless a man corroborated her testimony
- We see her post-resurrection moving from tears to annunciation when she realises that she is speaking to the Lord
- Mary Magdalen received the highest revelation of the meaning of Resurrection. The right of women to equal place among the disciples is defended through her.’ (R. Ruether, *‘Mary – The Feminine Face of the Church’*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977, p.40)

In Mt 28:1-7 Mary Magdalene & the other Mary received the first apostolic commission of any human – to tell the good news of the resurrection to the disciples. This is reinforced by Jesus’ appearance before the two women. They become the first two apostles.

‘Mary Magdalene is mentioned in the Gospels as being among the women who followed Jesus and His disciples. She was present at His Crucifixion and Burial, and went to the tomb on Easter Sunday to anoint His body. She was the first to see the Risen Lord, and to announce His Resurrection to the apostles. Accordingly, she is referred to in early Christian writings as ‘the apostle to the apostles’

- *‘Saint Mary Magdalene: ‘The Apostle to the Apostles’, The Nazarene Way of Essenic Studies, at <http://www.thenazareneway.com/>*

Significance of these encounters:

- Jesus engaged in dialogue with foreign women. This was not the custom for Jewish men.
- Like the woman at the well in Jn 4:7-5:30, the Syro-Phonician woman/Canaanite woman was ritually unclean on two accounts: her gender and her race. The encounter challenges even Jesus to transcend his own expectations of his ministry.
- Mary Magdean stood at the foot of the cross with the other women. The male disciples had fled (except for the disciple whom Jesus loved Jn 19:25-27).
- A woman is the primary witness to the resurrection and is instructed to 'go and tell', making her an 'apostle to the apostles' [*depending on which evangelist's account you read*]
- Fiorenza speaks of the '**discipleship of equals**'. Jesus' message was inclusive.
- Today, Christians are called to action through compassion, regardless of limitations and boundaries. Women are called to fully participate in **discipleship**.

Important questions arise:

- **Why were the positive stories about women downplayed within the tradition?**
- **What if women had redacted the story of Jesus?**
- **What does retrieving these stories do for women and men?**
- **What was the significance of these encounters for the first Christians?**
- **What is the significance of these encounters for Christians today?**

- Cullen, p.120

Content adapted from '*Religion and Gender*' by Sandra Cullen,
Dublin: Veritas, 2005

and

http://www.religioustolerance.org/cfe_bibl.htm (article authored by
B.A. Robinson: The Status of Women in the Christian Gospels)

and

http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Synoptics_Women.htm
(Women in the Synoptic Gospels by Felix Just, S.J. Ph.D.)

How will students ensure that they have fulfilled the Coursework requirements?

- It is a good idea to study the Marking Scheme for Coursework from previous years. This is published by the State Examinations Commission and can be found at www.examinations.ie (go to 'Examination material archive' on the left side of the home page, click on this and follow the instructions to get to the appropriate marking scheme). It is also worth reading the Chief Examiner's Report on Leaving Certificate Religious Education, also available on www.examinations.ie
- Ensure the investigation is relevant to the chosen prescribed title
- Ensure each of the questions for Parts A and B are answered
- Ensure the relevant objectives are evident in Coursework
- Remember that Coursework should show a level of engagement with the prescribed title and an understanding of the relevant objectives, and this should come across in the write up. Students' work should be well researched and reflected upon – not simply plagiarising someone else's work or ideas.

Critical thinking & reflection

Encourage students to really think about the chosen title, why they chose it and what came up in their investigation / research.

Here are a couple of suggestions made by teachers in this regards:

- Encourage students to write down what they know about the topic at the start, before they begin their investigation. Include their reflections on it, their opinions & thoughts on it and note where these have come from.
- Before the Coursework Booklet is completed, engage students in a **reflective exercise** – possibly a group discussion on the topic(s). Ensure that each student has an opportunity to share at least one point that they have found out about the topic(s).

- **Facilitate a deeper discussion involving reflection on the topic/title/ e.g. probe possible bias/assumptions from authors or from students themselves, try to establish the credibility of different sources, try to seek what is the commonly held view of commentators, ask questions, are there other possibilities, can or has a certain view/theory/fact be critiqued/contradicted for example?**
- **Discuss possible implications of the topic in for example 21st century/Ireland etc**
- **What kind of conclusions can be drawn from the investigation?**
- **Why does it matter?**
- **How has the experience/learning confirmed/challenged students' views/opinions/beliefs?**
- **To what extent is the student now more informed about the topic? What further questions remain unanswered or have arisen out of the investigation?**

A couple of examples based on this title:

- **‘Radical’**: how is this term to be defined? Is there any difference between what is considered ‘radical’ from the perspective of a 21st century person in the Irish culture compared to a 1st century Jew living in Palestine...and does this have a bearing on the investigation?
- Any evidence to suggest that Jesus was not as radical in his treatment of women as much of the literature suggests? E.g: women are not named among the 12 disciples. If his treatment of women was truly radical’ wouldn’t he have chosen women among his 12 disciples?
- Mk 12:18-27 refers to a **Levirate marriage**. The widow is required to marry her brother-in-law. Their first born son is considered to be the son of the deceased husband. 7 brothers married her in succession without having a son. Why did Jesus not use this as an opportunity to denounce the perceived unfairness of the Jewish Law in Deut 25:5-10 (or is it possible in fact that he did but his words were not recorded in the Gospel?)

• Mt 15:22-28 the Canaanite woman / Mk 7:25-30 the Syro-Phoenician woman: is it possible that Jesus insulted this woman...referring to her/the Gentiles as 'a dog', with the sub-human implications of that? She had sought a cure for her daughter who was possessed by a demon. Jesus explained that he was sent to bring the Gospels to the Jews, not to the Gentiles such as she. He said it was not right for him to 'take the children's bread and give it to the dogs'. She replied that even the 'dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table'. Jesus then changed his mind and healed the woman's daughter from a distance.

Question: What do you make of Jesus' initial reaction to the woman? Would you consider his reaction to be radical or in line with male thinking in 1st century Palestine?

The Samaritan Woman at the Well John 4: 4-42

- Jesus was 'on a journey' and was tired from the journey when he met this woman at the well of Shechem / Sychar in Samaria. He requested a cup of water from the townswoman.
- It was unusual for a woman to come to the well alone – usually they would come in groups earlier in the morning or later in the day.
- 'Give me a drink' Jn 4:7 'Even spouses did not talk with one another in public' (Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament*, p93).
- The woman challenges his manners, both as a man and as a Jew.
- Jesus assures her that he can offer living water. She misunderstands this as 'flowing water' used in purification rites. Sarcastically, she asks if Jesus thinks he is greater than Jacob, who is linked to this well.
- The conversation deepens, moving from a concrete level to '*an increasingly more spiritual, meaningful, theological level*' (Getty-Sullivan, p94).
- Deep reflection occurs. Jesus lets her know that he 'knows' her and she accepts this.

- The dialogue is lengthy. Vs 7-15 show her misunderstanding. Vs 16-30 shows a woman who is far more thoughtful & reflective & open to Jesus' revelation. She becomes a witness to the truth revealed to her.
- *'The Samaritan woman will be remembered because she was changed from an outcast shunned by others to a witness whom others heard and through whom others believed because they also came to know Jesus'* – Getty-Sullivan, p94.
- The Samaritans were enemies of the Jews and of the Jerusalem Temple which, in a sense, became the source of tension between them. 'The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac & Jacob lived in the north. The shrines of Bethel, Shechem & Mount Gerizim attested to their religious experiences there and lived in the memory of the Samaritans as sacred places. The northern area was anti-monarchy; the period of the united kingdom, with its capital in Jerusalem in the south, lasted a mere hundred years until Saul, David and his son Solomon. The people to the north located their capital in Samaria when the kingdom was divided. According to the Samaritans, their own traditions reached much further back than the monarchy and were much more important' - Getty-Sullivan, pp94-95.

- Shechem was an important religious & political centre – second to Jerusalem. It meant as much to the Samaritans as Jerusalem did to the Jews. Shechem & Jerusalem competed with each other during the Roman period. Both wished to win the favour of Rome. Both feared the wrath of Rome.
- When the evangelist mentions that Jesus ‘had to pass through Samaria’ he is stating a theological necessity. Usually Jews would avoid Samaria on such a journey, and take a longer route. Jesus is in hostile territory at this place.
- *‘Samaritans were regarded as heretics and unclean by the Jews. Jews would ordinarily avoid handling any vessel or utensil touched by a Samaritan. Certainly Jews would not want to drink from a cup offered by a Samaritan. Thus the woman asks sarcastically, ‘How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?’’* (Jn 4:9) – Getty-Sullivan, p95
- She identifies with Jesus: she too is an outcast. They share a common ground. She is alone coming to the well because ‘respectable’ women have ostracized her. Both Jesus and this woman are shunned by religious leaders.

- Despite their 'outside' status, they talk together about the meaning of truth and the nature of spirituality. They acknowledge the divisions in their religious traditions yet find common ground that manages to transcend these tensions.
- Jesus says some challenging things to her: that she is living with one who is not her husband, that salvation will come from the Jews etc. She remains open-minded and receptive to Jesus' message. **She becomes intrigued by him, referring to him as 'sir' – a title conferring honour and respect.** She acknowledges him as a prophet. She even tells others that he is the Messiah. Many Samaritans came to believe that Jesus is 'the saviour of the world' Jn 4:42
- She risks the further rejection of her townspeople when she hurries back to tell them about Jesus. Her witness is unambiguous: 'Come and see a man who has told me everything I have done' (Jn 4:29). ***Her life is laid open, and she shares what she has experienced and now believes. They follow her*** – Getty-Sullivan, p96.

- Her belief in her own experience encourages other Samaritans to believe on the basis of their experience.
- The evangelist uses the technique of 'misunderstanding' to allow Jesus to teach the woman and to lead the reader into deeper spiritual reflection.
- Irony is also used e.g. Jesus asks for a drink but then says that everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again. It is also ironic how Jesus was rejected by his own people, yet accepted by the Samaritans. Jn 2:13-25 describes Jesus' rejection by the Jews with the cleansing of the Temple; Jn 3 tells of Nicodemus questioning Jesus at night but is unwilling to understand the meaning of baptism. Then, the Samaritan woman meets Jesus and becomes a believer, followed by other Samaritans who actually invite Jesus to stay with them.
- *The disciples re-enter the scene after gathering provisions. They are scandalised that Jesus is speaking with a woman. She leaves – 'to do their missionary work for them!' – Getty-Sullivan, p98.*

Source: Adapted from Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament*, The Liturgical Press: Minnesota, 2001

Example 2:

The woman caught in adultery - John 7:53 – 8:11

In what way might Jesus' treatment of her be described as 'radical'?