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The Question

Without question, women are more prominent in Luke's writings than in any of the other three Gospel writers. The interpretation of their presence, however, is contested. In recent years, significant attention has been given to the role the women play in the narratives of Luke and Acts. The silence of their voices after the first few chapters of Luke makes one commentator label it, "an extremely dangerous text, perhaps the most dangerous in the Bible." Can we read Luke as promoting the participation of women in the newly inaugurated Christian community? Or are women present but, after the Gospel prologue, relegated increasingly to silent supportive roles through the rest of Luke's Gospel and Acts? While Mary sings solo, must Priscilla and others be drowned out by a male choir?

Luke's Gospel bursts into action with God-obedient, Spirit-filled women, exuberantly prophesying the coming of God's Anointed One. With the other Gospel writers, he records those women who come to Jesus, and the presence of women around Jesus during the passion narrative, and as crucial (even if not credited) witnesses to the resurrection. In Luke and Acts, women continue to receive considerable space in the text. One prominent occupier of this space is Luke's male-female pairs.

But what role do the women play in Luke's narrative? After the first chapter, as the kingdom of God is inaugurated and unfolds through the pages of the Gospel and Acts, are the women confined to traditional roles of prayer and service? Do the male-female pairs disappear in Acts, where the central place is taken by male preachers and apostles while women's voices are silenced? Does Luke show women in the early Jesus community involved in roles that stand in contrast to the surrounding society? Or does Luke's account suppress leadership roles of women to those commonly assumed by women within Roman Empire norms? What are the implications for women and men in different cultural contexts, even as Luke and Acts are read today?

A Woman's Place

Paul's declaration in Gal 3:28 ("There is no longer Jew or Greek, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" [RSV]) may have been a rejoinder to the daily morning prayer of Jewish men, "Blessed art thou, O God, for not making me a Gentile, slave, or woman." The prayer affirmed the privileged place of free Jewish males.

As the community gathered before God's presence during NT times, Jewish women could enter no farther than the Court of Women in the temple. At the time of the annual feasts, those who were not required to appear before the Lord at the temple included children, slaves, women, and those who were sick or disabled. Judith Baskin's comment that, while a Gentile could be circumcised and a slave freed, a woman "was condemned by the essential qualities and characteristics of her gender to permanent restriction from fully sharing the privileges and responsibilities of male-defined covenantal Judaism, particularly the highly valued communal pursuits of worship, study, and governance," typifies temple practices of the time, even while more recent studies show wider involvement in religious practices elsewhere.

The temple was a visual spatial representation of centralised sacred hierarchy at the time of Jesus: Gentiles, then Jewish women. Jewish men, priests, chief priests—a hierarchy leading inward toward the heavy curtain separating humanity from divine presence. How do we read Luke's writings in this context of sacred-social ordering?

Rites of Passage

The early chapters of Luke's Gospel are shaped around rites of passage, times when women traditionally occupy a more central role in cultures around the world. While men are custodians of the Law in official religious spaces, women take a more central role in crucial life transitions, managing family harmony and wellbeing.

The Gospel of Luke begins where we would expect to hear news of God's actions—in the official temple space, in fact right in the Holy Place, at the time of prayer, with the congregation praying outside (1:8–10). We can imagine the priests waiting outside the Holy Place, then the Court of Israel full of men praying, farther out the Court of Women, and beyond that the Court of Gentiles. Holy time, holy place, God sends his messenger; and God's message is met by the official religious functionary, Zechariah, with disbelief.

Then the scene shifts away from the religious center of Jerusalem to Nazareth in rural territory, as well as up into the hill country of Judah—to peripheral places, and into women's spaces, and activities. In rapid succession over the first three chapters, Luke conducts us through rites of passage: conception (1:24, 31, 35), two pregnant women greeting each other (1:30ff.), the birth of John (1:57–58), his circumcision and naming (1:59ff.), the birth of Jesus (2:1ff.), his circumcision and naming (2:21), their purification (2:22), and the offering for Jesus as Mary's firstborn (2:23, 27). Then we hear of Jesus at puberty, a twelve-year-old, the year of preparation for entry to adulthood for Jewish youths. Finally, the adult John calls his community to a rite of renewal in baptism, and thus begins the work of Jesus at about thirty years of age, the normal age of marriage for Jewish men.

At the end of the Gospel, the passion narrative takes us back into rites of passage—the death of Jesus, where women are weeping at the crucifixion (23:27), embodying community grief. They are there to see where Jesus is buried, and to bring spices and ointments for the corpse (23:56).

Because women are present at and vitally involved in these rites of passage, at times and places which simultaneously
are not official religious activity but do nonetheless link with religious rites and spaces, women receive a unique and privileged opportunity to observe God’s new initiative and thus bear witness to it. God’s activity does not always occur at, nor is it always recognized at traditional centers of religious activity and power; sometimes it is more peripherally positioned and results in those who are socially marginalized (e.g., the shepherds of 2:8ff.) recognizing God’s action, the new in-breaking of God’s kingdom. Women are the sole witnesses to the resurrection at a time when a woman’s testimony was viewed with skepticism; her reliability was suspect since (like slaves and children) she was subject to someone else. In Luke’s writings, we see God’s actions taking place within existing socio-cultural patterns even as the Gospel challenges or reformulates these.13

Male-Female Pairs

The use of male-female pairs is present throughout Luke’s Gospel.14 Consider, for example, the following list:

- Zechariah (1:5–23, 67–79) and Mary (1:26–38, 46–56), their responses and their songs.
- Simeon (2:25–35) and Anna (2:36–38).15
- The widow of Zarephath (4:25–26) and Naaman the Syrian (4:27) as exemplars.
- The centurion (7:1–10) and the widow of Nain (7:11–17).
- The centurion (7:1–10) and the widow of Nain (7:11–17).
- The centurion (7:1–10) and the widow of Nain (7:11–17). and Jairus’s daughter (8:40–42a, 49–56).
- The faithful woman (7:36–50) and Simon the Pharisee (7:36–50).
- Jesus’s followers (6:12–16 and 8:1–3).
- Men and women are named among those waiting in Jerusalem (1:13–14).
- Menservants and maidservants, sons and daughters, are among the visionaries and dreamers (2:17–18).
- Ananias and Sapphira seek to deceive the leadership and community (5:1–11).
- Both men and women are added to the disciples (5:14).
- Saul persecutes both men and women (8:3, 9:2, 22:4).
- Both men and women are baptized (8:12).
- Aeneas (9:32–35) and Tabitha (9:36–43) are healed.
- Devout women of high standing and leading men of the city oppose Paul (13:50).
- Lydia (16:1–15) and the Philippian jailor (16:23–34) are baptized, together with their households.
- Women and men at Thessalonica join Paul and Silas (17:4).
- Damaris and Dionysius follow Paul at Athens (17:34).
- Priscilla and Aquila (18:1–3, 36).
- Men, women, and children at Tyre (21:5).
- Philip’s daughters and Agabus prophesy (21:9–10).
- Felix and Drusilla (24:24).
- Agrippa and Bernice (25:13, 23; 26:30).
- Beyond these pairs, the stories of other women are also described, including Hellenistic Jewish widows (6:1), Pharaoh’s daughter bringing up Moses (7:21), Mary the mother of John Mark (whose house was a place gathering and hospitality), with Rhoda her maid (12:12–15), and the slave-girl whose spirit of divination was exorcised (16:16–18).19 Ben Witherington III describes five vignettes in Acts of women in various roles within the new community as Luke indicating “how things ought to be” (9:36–42; 12:12–17; 16:12–15, 40; 18:1–3, 24–6; 21:9).20

Jew-Gentile Pairs

- The use of generic male-female duplets in Acts alerts us to another deliberate pattern of pairing particularly present in Acts, which has received less attention: Jews with Gentiles.
- The Gentiles and the people of Israel conspire with the leaders against Jesus (4:27).
- Jews and Gentiles in Iconium believe (14:1).
- Jews and Gentiles also oppose the Gospel in Iconium, and plot with their leaders against the apostles (14:2, 5).
- Paul teaches both Jews and Greeks in the synagogue in Corinth (18:4).
- Jews and Greeks in Asia hear the Word of the Lord (19:10).
- Jews and Greeks are filled with fear at the Name of the Lord (19:17).

Furthermore, Luke’s use of “man” (anēr), rather than the more generic “person” (anthrōpos), in several of the pairings suggests that he is making a point each time of mentioning both men and women.
A fundamental premise of Luke–Acts is radical inclusiveness offered in the new Christ-community. The male-female references in Acts are matched by its Jew-Gentile references. Luke’s Gospel has emphasized this ontological equality for women and men in the newly-inaugurated kingdom; in Acts the boundaries between Jew and Gentile are also exploded. Just as priesthood is no longer restricted to the members of one tribe, but in Christ all become priests of God, so too as the temple veil separating God from humanity is torn apart (Luke 23:45), the light of the risen Christ bursts out through the rent curtain to all who are invited to become part of the new priesthood—not just to Jewish men, but also through the temple courts beyond, to women, and to Gentiles. In short, in Luke–Acts we see the socio-sacred hierarchy progressively dismantled.

The Jerusalem Council

The Acts 15 account of the Jerusalem Council debate is central, both in its textual positioning in the middle of the book of Acts and also thematically. The decision of the council deconstructs socio-sacred ranking. Gentiles are not required to be circumcised (a marker of Jewish identity), but can become full participants in the kingdom, full followers of Christ, as Gentiles. This is the crucial question of the Council. At the same time, belonging to the community is not to be defined by a male rite of entry, but only by baptism, offered equally to women and men (Acts 16:15, 33). Community inclusiveness is retained on all fronts. Full membership and participation in the new covenant is conferred through baptism into Christ; it is not dependent on anatomy or ethnic origins.

Where Do We Go Now?

I suggest four implications from our reading:

First, while we affirm the objective truth of God’s revelation, we also receive it subjectively in our own sin-soaked consciousness and contexts. So it is wise for us to apply the feminists’ call for a “hermeneutics of suspicion” to our own reading of the relevant texts. Recognizing that issues of power are implicit in every situation, in our own reading and our writing, we can ask whose voices are represented and whose voices are silenced. More positively, we can pay attention to the view from the margins and ask what is happening there. How does the world, and God’s activity, look from that perspective? Going further, Richard Bauckham suggests that Luke’s bracketing of Jesus’s ministry with mention of the women among his followers (Luke 8:1–3, 24:10) invites us (and those with whom we read/tell the Gospel narrative) to a gynocentric reading of this Gospel, and therefore also of other texts.

Second, Luke describes faithful disciples as those who hear the words of Jesus and respond, both women and men, Jew and Gentile, slave and free. Thus Christians are defined in relationship first of all to Jesus, the Anointed One whom we follow. Christian women and men should not be designated primarily by family or by paternal or marital relationships. Unlike the surrounding literary culture, Luke’s writings mention a significant number of women by name. In many societies, even today, women are known not by their own names, but by the name of their eldest son. In the Middle East, for example, I lived next door to Umm (“mother of”) Muhammad for three years. I saw her almost daily, but in that time never learned her own name. In the Qur’an, only one woman (Mary the mother of Jesus) is mentioned by name. Such a society confers significance on women through their male kin. In Jesus we receive our own identity, not one that is mediated through the names and identities of others, whether male kin or sexual partners, and we are known by our own names.

Third, while Rabbi Eliezer’s dictum, “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 her obscenity,” was a minority position, access to scholarship for women, though present in particular communities such as the Therapeutrides, was often limited by status, wealth, and daily duties. Despite the social practices and prejudices of his time, Luke repeatedly demonstrates that obedience to Jesus is marked primarily by attentiveness to His Word, for women and for men. Examples include Mary’s (the mother of Jesus) diligent discerning of the meaning of God’s words and actions, and Mary’s (the sister of Martha) deliberate neglect of domestic duties in order to listen to Jesus’s teaching. In countries with low (and gendered) levels of literacy, success in literacy programs is often correlated with people desiring to read God’s Word for themselves. Faithful discipleship calls for making both education and God’s Word available to all people, women and men, in their own language, and for ensuring equal access and encouragement to theological education for all.

Fourth, Luke shows that women (as well as men) are models of and for the Christian community. Women respond to Christ’s call, to be and do, to prayer and service to one another. Even as bakers and sweepers, women image God’s initiative among people (13:20–21, 15:8–10). Imitation requires identification. In those texts where discipleship and the divine nature are communicated with male descriptors and models, women’s propensity for identifying with and following biblical teaching may be constrained. Such constraints can be minimized in by including female and gender-inclusive language, images, and illustrations in preaching and teaching.

Present But Silent?

The question still remains: though Luke and Acts include numerous examples of women holding positions of leadership, why do they speak so rarely? How should we understand the apparent silencing of women in Acts? Is their full participation in the new community reduced simply to presence? Bauckham suggests two possibilities for women in the Jesus movement:
that they should “step outside their accepted social roles” or that they should “discover new possibilities within the socially accepted framework of their lives.” However, as Luke’s writings unfold, the new possibilities offered to women fall far short of the preaching, teaching, healing, and exorcising roles of the male Jewish leaders. While they are demonstrably exercising ministries of the Word and of leadership, they are given no active voice in Luke’s writings, after the first few chapters. Are Priscilla and other women then circumscribed by their “accepted social role”? The central event of Acts, the Jerusalem Council, and what follows it, may offer us an interpretive key.

After tense debate in the Council of apostles and elders, the issue is resolved and circumcision is not imposed on the Gentiles (Acts 15). But then following right after the Council decision (Acts 16:3–4), Paul encounters Timothy and has him circumcised, and then travels with the still-sore youth “from town to town,” delivering to the churches for observance the decision that circumcision was not required. Timothy’s thoughts about the matter are not mentioned.

The proximity of the passages emphasizes the contradiction in word and action. Is Luke then recording for us an example of Paul in what seems to be monumental inconsistency? How do we interpret this narrative sequence? Perhaps what we see at work is a high missionary principle. Christians may choose to live under traditions (not gospel requirements) in order to reach people within those traditions. The apparent contradiction is between Christ’s unconditional salvation, and what it might mean for the messenger to incarnate that Good News in a particular community (1 Cor 9:1–23). Similarly, Paul would later put himself under a vow and the legal requirements for purification according to the Law (Acts 18:18, 21:24). There is freedom to serve in the new community without regard to gender, ethnicity or physical attributes. Nevertheless, obedience to the gospel regulates our freedom, allowing us to become all things to all people, so that by all means we should reach some.

As I wrote this section, I was sitting in Kabul airport, Afghanistan, garbed in flowing black with only face, hands and feet showing, according to local expectations of modesty. Gospel requirements of modesty are read through local perceptions, and gospel freedom is used in the service of those outside the kingdom, for we are slaves to the Good News just as Paul was a slave for the sake of Christ. We read Luke’s affirmation of equal leadership of male and female, Jew and Gentile, for the gospel and its mission in the world, and at the same time Luke’s high regard for the requirements of that ministry as we engage in it, for the sake of others. Luke’s radical inclusion of women and consequent restricted description of their role, analogous to Timothy’s hasty procedure, suggests that preaching the Good News can be facilitated by (but never restricted to) adherence to cultural and traditional norms.

Living Eschatologically—In Pregnant Expectation Of What Is To Come

F. Scott Spencer reminds us of the eschatological context of Jesus’s story of the widow pleading for justice (Luke 18:7–9). With feisty pugnaciousness the widow confronts the family, legal, and cultural factors which constrain her. She is the model for Jesus-followers to engage with their cultural context through prayer and practical action until justice comes and God’s kingdom breaks in.

In Luke’s writings, we can emulate the widow, refusing to be circumscribed by our situation, but living and acting expectantly to see God’s action in all domains of life. This includes recognizing and naming sinful structures and their impact in the lives of women and men, and naming women’s and men’s own sinful actions and attitudes. In naming and confronting sin, we begin to live toward the future of grace.

Serene Jones suggests, “To live in the space of justification—to be a woman absolved and opened to relation—is not to be freed from the constraints of culture and history. It is to live in Christ forever poised on the edge of a promised land: she smells the milk and honey of the new world to come but remembers that the ground beneath her feet remains dry and in need of tilling.”

Reading gender, and Gentiles, in Luke’s writings affirms for us the Good News in Christ—that how we live is shaped by what is now, but it is determined by what is to come.

Notes


2. The appearance and announcement of the angel to Zechariah suggests Judg 13, where the angel appears to Manoah’s wife, the mother of Samson, as well as Gen 16:7–14, with Hagar’s encounter with an angel. Mary’s song (Luke 1:46–55) closely parallels Hannah’s song (1 Sam 2:1–10) and also echoes other songs of thanksgiving for God’s mercy to the singer and to all his people (Miriam in Exod 15:21, Deborah in Judg 5, Judith in Judith 16:1–17). Bauckham notes that (except for Miriam), the woman singing is also the agent through whom God brings salvation. He comments: “What happens in the domestic and familial sphere of the woman transcends that sphere, achieving in God’s purpose, national and even worldwide significance and effect. The combination, in each song in its context, of the individual and the general, the personal and the political, the domestic and the public, is precisely the point of the song.” Richard Bauckham, Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 54, 63.

3. Luke notes twice that the women were not believed by the men (24:11, 22ff.).


5. Judith Reesa Baskin, Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature (London: University Press of New England, 2002), 77. Temple restrictions were more stringent during women’s monthly purification, and also for forty days after the birth of a son, and eighty days after the birth of a daughter (Luke 2:22, Lev 12:2–4); during such times women were not even allowed into the Court of the Gentiles. In light of Baskin’s comments, see Wilson’s helpful discussion of how Luke problematizes gender distinctions, along with outside/insider and able/disabled differentiation. Brittany E. Wilson, Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke—Acts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 261.

7. See Wilson, *Unmanly Men*, ch. 3, for a discussion of how Luke’s description of Zechariah’s silencing is part of reformulating ideals of masculinity in the new community.


9. Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, 49, uses narrative perspective to show this encounter as the central point of the ring/chaotic structure of Luke 1:5–80. At this climactic moment in history and eternity, the presence of the Omnipotent Creator God incarnate in created human form is first announced to the cosmos—through a conversation between two gravid women.

10. See Lev 12. It is the mother who should be ritually cleansed. Hence Luke’s “their purification” is curious: commentators are divided as to whether the inclusion of Joseph or of Jesus is implied. Luke seems to refer to the sacrifice at the conclusion of blood purification (33 days). However, the description of that ritual in Lev 12 is preceded by the circumcision (for which “purification” is a synonym) of the male child at the conclusion of the mother’s ceremonial uncleanness (7 days), which suggests that Jesus may be in focus with Mary here.


13. Witherington, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity*, argues that patriarchy is not rejected; rather, women are asked to reformulate traditional roles in the light of their primary calling as disciples, while at the same time new possibilities for women in social value and roles of service are opened. See also Wilson, *Unmanly Men*, 256–63.

14. Witherington, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity*, 63, 87, noting male-female paradigms in the other Gospels and 1 Cor 7, suggests it may derive from Jesus himself using such male-female pairings.


18. Note the contrast here also with the Jewish synagogue (as well as temple): a group of women could not make a forum for a synagogue gathering, but Paul can begin a church gathering with this group of women (Witherington, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity*, 215).

19. The juxtaposition of Lydia, wealthy trader, with the slave girl, shows that neither slave nor free are outside the kingdom—the second element in the Jewish morning prayer of thanksgiving.


21. Anticipatory notes of Gentile access appear in Luke’s Gospel also. 4:16–30 is a message against ethnocentrism. In 11:29–32 the people of Nineveh and the Queen of the South are a sign to the Jews. And in 17:18, only the Samaritan shows the proper response of thanksgiving to Jesus’s act of healing.

22. For an interesting comparison, see Jaschok and Shui’s discussion about how the activity of female Muslim imams (ahuq) in China may bring into question “the immutability of a ‘celestial patriarchy,’” and its “subtext of a more worldly gender hierarchy.” Maria Jaschok and Jingjun Shui, *The History of Women’s Mosques in Chinese Islam* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), 236.

23. “Where Do We Go Now?” is the title of Nadine Labaki’s evocative film, set in a Lebanese village where the women conspire to stop their (Muslim and Christian) husbands and sons from fighting each other. Their efforts take them into unexpected dimensions of standing in the other person’s shoes, confronting their menfolk with questions of identity and allegiance.


- What are the cultural expectations of, and possibilities for, her as a woman in that situation?
- How much agency does she exercise? Or is she a passive recipient of circumstances?
- Why does Luke include this woman? What point is he making?


26. Named women include Mary (1:27–56, 25–34), Anna (2:36–38), Mary Magdalene (8:2, 24:10), Joanna (8:3, 24:10), Susanna (8:3), Martha and Mary (10:38–42), and Mary mother of James (2:410). Simon’s mother-in-law (4:38–39) and Jairus’s daughter (8:40–42, 49–56) are identified according to male kin; although it may be argued that this is according to order of character appearance in the text. Some other women are left unnamed.


29. Worldwide, women’s literacy is about two-thirds that of men, and this percentage is frequently applicable at individual country levels. See http://www.uis.unesco.org/literacy/Pages/data-release-map-2013.aspx.


32. Gentiles also present in Acts, invited into the Christ-community, are likewise limited in voice and leadership.


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