Female and Male in Four Anointing Stories

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Introduction

[W]omen in general have the sense of the person much more than men have. This means that they have a special mission, which is to reintroduce love, to give back its humanity to a world which remains so glacial when men alone have built it. —Paul Tournier

Paul Tournier, the Swiss psychiatrist, suggests some generalized points of tension with respect to women and men. These generalizations can be applied to the anointing stories in Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 7, and John 12. Each story revolves around a woman who anoints Jesus, male objection, Jesus’ rebuttal of male objectors, and his explanation for why the woman and her action are to be accepted, valued, and appreciated—not rejected. For the sake of this article, we will assume that there were two original versions of the stories: (1) Matthew, Mark, and John, and (2) Luke, in their oral transmission.

E. P. Sanders contends that “these stories probably rest on memories though details have been exchanged and possibly confused.” He supposes the oral and written stages, details from one story may have been transferred and vice versa, with overlapping strands or conflations. In one strand, the anointing is symbolic for the preparation of Jesus’ body for burial, while another strand understands the anointing as an expression of vulnerable gratitude for the forgiveness of sin. In the stories, the authors juxtapose male authorities and disciples and the women who anoint Jesus.

In this article, however, we will argue for a literary approach that treats the four pericopes as whole stories with attention to broad structure, significant literary relationships (comparison, contrast, and purpose), and the author’s point of view, to be embraced by the implied readers. The tension between women and men stands out as a vital component of the anointing stories, which is to be taken seriously by the readers.

This article presupposes that the four stories are genuine stories and need to be read as stories. The relatively new field of literary or narrative criticism suggests a careful reading of the narratives, including setting, plot, characters, dialogue, events, point of view, time, implied authors, and implied readers. To be sure, these pericopes have been studied from perspectives of historical, source, form, and redaction criticism, as well as structuralism. However, such disciplines often atomize and control the text with a specific agenda in mind. Steven Barton notes that such disciplines often deal with the archaeology of the text, but do not pay sufficient attention to the text as it stands. Instead, we will attempt to offer a holistic approach in understanding the individual stories.

Murray Krieger suggests the language of historical “windows” and literary “mirrors,” which function interdependently. “The historical nature of the Bible leads one to treat the story as a window to the event behind the text,” and to relive events with Jesus as part of a community of faith. In the four narratives, the authors invite readers to experience and feel the various points of tension and to be changed when the readers return to their separate worlds. We are indebted to Seymour Chatman for his helpful approach of “story” and “discourse,” which has been further developed by David Rhoads and Donald Michie, Norman Petersen, and Jack Kingsbury, et al.

The anointing paragraphs tell the event (story), while the discourse reflects upon how the stories are told. In support, Meir Sternberg labels narrative as “a functional structure, a means to a communicative end, a transaction between the narrator and the audience on whom he wishes to produce a certain effect by way of certain strategies.” The authors help the readers to relive the event and thereby adopt the author’s point of view in changing thoughts, attitudes, and behavior, which reflect upon both genders.

Comparison, contrast, and purpose

Each of the four accounts uses three major literary relationships—comparison, contrast, and purpose—to narrate each particular story.

Literary and historical context

Matthew, Mark, and John tell of the anointing in the context of passion week—just before Jesus’ crucifixion and burial (comparison). Hostile (male) Jewish leaders are plotting to kill Jesus, in collusion with Judas. In particular, John’s account is the fullest as he narrates Caiaphas’s unwitting prophecy that it is more expedient for one man to die than the nation perish (John 11:49–50). As a result of Caiaphas’s argument/prophecy, the leaders took counsel to put Jesus to death (v. 53). Supreme irony is expressed by the narrator in the use of the verb for “gathered together” (sunagō) in 11:47, 52: the religious leaders gather together the Sanhedrin (v. 47), which is the very means by which Jesus might gather together both the nation and the scattered children of God (v. 52).

Luke’s account, by contrast, takes place earlier during Jesus’ Galilean ministry. Jesus tampers with the religious, racial, and social taboos of Jewish particularism by healing a Gentile centurion’s servant (Luke 7:1–10), interrupting a funeral and touching a coffin, and raising a widow’s only son (vv. 11–17). Then follows the critique of John the Baptist and Jesus and Jesus’ indictment of the present fickle generation (vv. 18–35).
Setting for the anointing

Place: Comparison is evident among Matthew, Mark, and John, who locate the setting as a house in Bethany (near Jerusalem), which is contrasted by Luke's story, locating the meal in the general Galilean area.

Time: Matthew, Mark, and John can be compared in that the anointing occurs during the Passover week, although the specific details vary (before or after the triumphal entry). This contrasts with Luke's narrative, which includes no temporal indicator—and is fitted within Jesus' extensive Galilean ministry.

Host: Matthew and Mark are compared with the identification of Simon the Leper, who hosts the dinner. John specifically names Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in connection with "Bethany, where Lazarus was." The host is not specifically named, but, due to the activity of both Martha and Mary, it can be argued that the dinner was hosted in their home, thereby making them hosts. Luke's host is Simon the Pharisee, who is not named in the earlier part of the story, but is clarified by Jesus' address to Simon (7:40).

Activity: All four gospels can be compared in terms of the physical posture of guests reclining (in Near Eastern fashion). The anointing happens in the context of a dinner. John alone records Martha's serving (diakonein) activity, which can also be compared with her serving role in Luke's account of Jesus' visit to Martha and Mary's home (Luke 10:38–42).

Anointing event

Identity of the anointing woman: The anointing woman is nameless in Matthew, Mark, and Luke—to be contrasted with John's account, which identifies Mary. John's literary style throughout the gospel is to forge inner links between separate events. In John 11:3, the evangelist links the Lazarus story (ch. 11) with Mary's anointing story (ch. 12): "This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured out perfume on the Lord, and wiped his feet with her hair." The woman in Luke 7 is spoken of as a "sinful woman" (7:37—perhaps a prostitute), also noted by Jesus: "this woman" (7:44) with many forgiven sins (7:47).

The fact that a woman anointed Jesus is noteworthy. In a similar way, women were the first to receive and were entrusted with the wonderful witness of the resurrection to the male disciples. None of the eleven disciples was first to the tomb. These women met the criteria of apostleship, even though a woman's witness was not accepted in the legal courts, and rabbinic Judaism reflected prejudicial devaluing of women.

The stories do not reflect that the anointing woman fully understood the messianic significance of the anointing, although the evangelists doubtless understood that the implied readers should feel the significance of the woman's prophetic sign-action in contrast to the twelve male disciples. Amy-Jill Levine depicts the women as "aware, sympathetic and loyal," contrasted with the male disciples, often characterized by "little faith" (oligopistos). Further, "the twelve function primarily to disrupt rather than enhance Jesus' mission." During Jesus' passion, the women serve as disciples in that they "follow" Jesus and recognize that Jesus' mission includes crucifixion, burial, and resurrection on the third day. They also "embark on a journey that may lead to the loss of their own lives for his sake." All four narratives can be compared in that the woman is voiceless; it is men who speak, become indignant, and verbally censure either the woman or Jesus. Further, Luke's story is unique in that it mentions the woman's emotion, her tears (7:38).

Container and value of oil: The four accounts all refer to anointing—the pouring of expensive perfumed oil on Jesus. The container in Matthew, Mark, and Luke is an alabaster flask (alabastros), a "vessel with a rather long neck which was broken off" when the contents were used. John's story contains no mention of the container, but it can be assumed to be a container large enough for a pound of ointment. The jar or flask could not be reclosed; the contents would be completely poured out. Mark says that the woman "broke the jar," an act that shocked the male guests as well as their host in its lavishness and finality.

Verb: Matthew and Mark are compared with respect to the use of the verb "she poured" (katecheen), while Mark alone uses the verb "to break" with the flask, which occurs prior to the pouring. By way of contrast, Luke and John use the verb "anoint" (aleiphein).

Body part anointed: The anointing in Matthew and Mark bears striking contrast to the account in Luke and John. In Matthew and Mark, the woman pours oil onto Jesus' head, and, in Luke and John, Jesus' feet are anointed. Normally, people were anointed on the head rather than the feet. In ancient Israel, a king was anointed by pouring oil on the head. Such anointing on the head often conveyed the image of Israel's ancient monarchy. Perhaps this is the connotation intended by Matthew and Mark.

By contrast, in Luke and John, pouring the expensive nard on Jesus' feet is not a royal or priestly anointing. In John's story, the idea of royalty does not fit, for, in the following narrative, Jesus does not accept the royal acclamation of the crowd. Raymond Brown states, "If John meant to signify the anointing of Jesus as king, then one would have expected the anointing of the head, not of the feet." Luke and John both recount the woman's wiping of Jesus' feet with her hair (comparison). Luke also mentions that she wet his feet with tears and kissed them. Scholars point to the woman's violation of Jewish custom that dictated the covering of women's hair; letting down of a woman's hair could well indicate loose morals. This woman could have been regarded by the men at the dinner as a repugnant social outcast. Even though Mary is no such person, it is stunning that she lets down her hair, an act followed by the climactic statement that "the whole house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." Craig Keener notes, "The meal setting is probably a banquet celebrating Lazurus' resurrection but may also foreshadow the implied meal setting of Jesus' pre-passion washing of his disciples' feet in ch. 13."

The positive life-giving action by the women in these stories stands in stark contrast with the hideous, life-taking, and aggressive posture of the male religious authorities, who plot Jesus' death in the preceding narratives, before and after the actual anointing (Matthew, Mark, and John). Edwyn Hoskyns calls this contrast "a supreme act of ignorant unbelief and a supreme act of intelligent
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faith." While the religious authorities sentence Jesus in order to retain their authority, the woman finds the unique opportunity of pouring out her best for Jesus. In Luke's story, the context depicts the rejection by the male Pharisees and lawyers (7:30) coupled with the indictment of this fickle generation (7:31–35).

Mention of weeping, wiping, hair, kissing feet: Luke and John can also be compared in that both evangelists mention the woman's wiping of Jesus' feet with her hair, while Luke also mentions the wetting of his feet with tears and kissing Jesus' feet. By way of contrast, Matthew and Mark do not mention this activity, since Jesus is anointed on his head with the costly ointment.

Male objections to the anointing

Mark's version says, "Some of those [males] present were saying indignantly to one another, 'Why this waste . . . ?' And they rebuked her harshly." Matthew states that the indignant ones were the twelve disciples. In Luke's story, Simon the Pharisee is identified as the initial critic, rejecting Jesus' prophet status as he says to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner." The reasoning in Simon's silent objection is based on a conditional proposition in which both halves are untrue: "If this man were a prophet [which he is obviously not], then he should also know who and what this sinful woman is [which he obviously does not know]." The implication of this sentence is that, if Jesus were a prophet, he obviously would not let this woman anoint his feet. Later on in the narrative, male objectors raise the accusation of blasphemy for Jesus' announcement of the forgiveness of sins.

John notes that the male objector is Judas Iscariot, and he identifies Judas as the one who would later betray Jesus. Judas says the ointment should have been sold and the money given to the poor. John notes Judas's hypocrisy in his objection. John makes it clear for the implied reader that Judas was not concerned for the poor, but was a thief who often pilfered the community's money bank. The woman's priceless gift of love is contrasted with Judas's selling Jesus' life for thirty pieces of silver.

Ostensible reason for male objected

Matthew, Mark, and John can be compared in that the explanation of their objection is the costly extravagance of oil used, not the anointing itself; the male objectors initially frame the rhetorical question as "Why the waste?" Ostensibly, Matthew, Mark, and John provide the reason for the objection that the costly anointment should have been sold and the money given to the poor (Matthew—a large sum; Mark—ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii; John—ointment sold for three hundred denarii). Luke's story contains a hidden accusation that Jesus is not a prophet.

Jesus’ rebuttal of male objectors

In each account, Jesus snaps back at the male objectors, telling them to "leave her alone." Jesus' retort in Luke 7 is expressed in the direct address, "Simon, I have something to say to you" (7:40). Satoko Yamaguchi says of Jesus' rebuttal, "Let her be' is the strongest liberating support a woman could wish to receive in such a milieu" and Jesus' rebuke virtually strikes at the face of male aggression. John's climactic scene is heightened by the imagery—the sensual fragrance that permeates the whole house. Luke's climax comes in the form of a parable and a rebuke that effectively shuts down the male objector, Simon.

Purpose of the anointing

The intended message of the anointing stories, as explained in Matthew, Mark, and John, is quite different from that in Luke's gospel. Matthew, Mark, and John provide the purpose for the anointing: "to prepare Jesus for burial." In these three accounts, the religious leaders make preparation for Jesus' death while a woman prepares for Jesus' burial. Jesus' statement makes it clear that her act is prophetic and proleptic, anticipating his burial. John implies that Mary has genuine insight into the nature of Jesus' mission, which includes death by crucifixion, burial, and resurrection (John 19:38–40). It is appropriate, therefore, for this woman to give this gift to Jesus. Jesus' time with them will soon draw to a close. The woman has seized the moment (kairós). In contrast to the woman's insight, the male objectors have not perceived the once-in-a-lifetime nature of this moment.

Ronald Thiemann notes that Matthew opens up “the category of ‘disciple’ to those who were not originally among the twelve.” As Elizabeth Fiorenza notes, “In the passion account of Mark’s Gospel three disciples figure prominently: on the one hand, two of the twelve—Judas who betrays Jesus and Peter who denies him—and on the other, the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus.”

Jesus says that the woman's action is to be remembered hand in hand with the proclamation of the gospel. “Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her” (cf. Matt. 26:13, Mark 14:9). There is no such accolade for any other person, male or female, in any of the gospel narratives.

Luke’s story presents a parable coupled with an explanation, teaching that those who are forgiven much will appreciate the release to a far greater degree than the one who is forgiven the smaller debt. The use of the parable at this point presupposes that the woman had been forgiven and experienced faith at some previous time, perhaps through Jesus' preaching the day before. Due to her animated expressions of gratitude, it is hard to imagine that much time elapsed between her faith experience and her lavish display at Simon's home; over time, emotional expressions tend to wane in intensity. According to Craig Blomberg, "Jesus now is simply making that fact public and assuring the woman of the forgiveness which faith brings. It is better, therefore, to interpret v. 47a as implying, 'One can see that her many sins are forgiven, because she loved much,' i.e., was so grateful. In a united manner, the stories reach out to the readers (primary and implied) to learn the lesson that the woman's voiceless
action teaches the community about devotion, gratitude, vulnerability, and prophetic insight. All four gospel writers wish that their readership adopt Jesus’ attitude of sympathy for the vulnerable expression of a woman. The male/female conflict stories cannot be understood apart from interest in the role played by women in the narratives.

Fiorenza notes that “while the stories of Judas and Peter are engraved in the memory of Christians, the story of the woman is virtually forgotten.” The woman in Matthew and Luke loses her name, and in the four stories, the woman’s voice is not heard. However, each time, Jesus notes that this woman is the quintessential faithful disciple.

The authors’ points of view

The anointing stories infuse a dramatic tension in the interplay of female and male characters and Jesus’ response to both genders. Moreover, the interchanges between the female and male characters provide guidelines for the readers as to the meaning of this conflict. The actions recorded reflect differing points of view of each of the four authors as well as differing messages they intend to communicate to their readers. Meir Sternberg labels narrative as “a functional structure, a means to a communicative end, a transaction between the narrator and the audience on whom he wishes to produce a certain effect by way of certain strategies.”

In the four narratives, the authors invite readers into the text-world of the anointing stories, to experience and feel the various points of tension, and, therefore, to be changed when the readers return to their separate worlds. As one scholar has said, “the historical nature of the Bible leads one to treat the story as a window to the event behind the text.”

The gospel writers draw readers into the narrative world of the anointing stories to relive the event and thereby adopt the author’s point of view in changing the reader’s thoughts, attitudes, and behavior. One result may be a change in the reader’s thoughts, attitudes, and behavior toward women and their unique contribution.

Matthew’s point of view

Matthew tells the story from the point of view of changing a reader’s thinking. Throughout the gospel of Matthew, the religious leaders are relentlessly evil, hypocritical, in error, blind, malicious, slanderous, and manipulative. Obviously, he intends that his readers accept, appreciate, value, and empathize with the unique contribution that this unnamed woman makes, in terms of (1) her recognition of Jesus’ kingship (anointing of his head), (2) her prophetic insight and purposeful prophetic symbolism of Jesus’ death and burial, (3) the cost of her gift, and (4) the climactic declaration by Jesus that the woman’s act will be remembered wherever the gospel is proclaimed. Further, in the ensuing narrative, her prophetic action is fulfilled in the reality of Jesus’ burial. Clearly, the narrator adopts the stance of Jesus’ defense of the woman and wishes to draw others into Jesus’ sympathy for her.

Matthew highlights the wonder of the woman’s anointing by contrasting her activity with that of the religious authorities, who are bent upon Jesus’ destruction. They wish to take life, while the woman gives life—even though her act points to Jesus’ burial. Elizabeth Ford states, “The disciples see the ointment, not for what it is, but for what purpose it can serve.” Jesus’ prophetic awareness brings their criticism out into the open (“knowing this,” i.e., their sub-verbal criticism in 26:10). In Matthew’s story, implied readers are to distance themselves not only from the religious authorities, but also from the disciples and Judas, who all have failed to honor the woman and her activity. At the same time, readers are to feel “close” to the woman. The calculated plot of the authorities stands in sharpest contrast with the woman’s unstinting and spontaneous giving to Jesus. Further, in the course of the passion narrative, male disciples recede into the background while women are conspicuously present at the crucifixion and at the open tomb.

Jack Kingsbury argues that the “evaluative point of view” is equivalent to “thinking the things of God” and not “thinking the things of humans.” Through comparison, contrast, and purpose, Matthew guides the implied readers to “think the things of God.”

Mark’s point of view

Mark’s anointing story is sandwiched between the premeditated decision of male religious authorities to put Jesus to death (14:1–2) and the plot with Judas (14:10–11). The “sandwich” is a frequently used literary design in Mark’s gospel. Such arrangement leads the reader to draw comparisons, note contrasts, and discover important purpose statements. As the anointing account unfolds, the implied readers are encouraged to side with Jesus and God and the unnamed woman (comparison) and to distance themselves from the male objectors. The negative portrayal of the male opponents is used as a foil to highlight the “beautiful thing” that this woman has done for the purpose of a proleptic anointing for burial. Her self-denial is parallel to the poor widow who gives all (Mark 12:41–44), who is likewise contrasted with the male scribes who can only take all (12:38–40).

Stephen Barton draws links between this dinner setting and the Last Supper; in each there is a ritual action symbolizing Jesus’ death, reference to Jesus’ body (14:9, 25), and an amen saying.

Through her anointing, she recognizes something of Jesus’ royal person and serves as a prophet of the upcoming burial. She understands the opportunity as “sacred time” (kairos) while the male figures either misunderstand or are ruthlessly hostile: “Her openness and willingness to risk conflict for Jesus’ sake contrasts with the priests’ and scribes’ secrecy and fear and conflict.”

Male aggression is especially evident in Mark’s progression from the silent indignation of “some” of the male guests to an open censure of the woman (v. 5). The verb, “to censure” (embrimasthai), is a strong verb, meaning “to severely warn,” the inceptive imperfect form reflects the beginning of their harsh warning: “They began to severely warn her.” The narrator sug-
gests the point of view that readers would distance themselves from the progressive criticism of the woman by male opponents and sympathize with the woman in her vulnerable condition.

Through her anointing (not through words), an unnamed woman acts as a confessor and prophet of Jesus' death while the males can only misunderstand and criticize; silent indignation leads to verbal censure. In the broader picture of discipleship within Mark, both the poor widow of Mark 12 and the unnamed woman in Mark 14 also "embody the self-denial of followership." Further, the beautiful work that this woman does stands in the sharpest contrast to the hideous deed that Judas does against Jesus. Readers become feeling persons who respond with appreciation for the woman’s deed or disgust for the male opponents. The narrator also draws an implicit contrast between the near distant pronoun “this” (autê) in “this waste” (v. 4) and Jesus’ use of “this” (autê) in “this woman,” a contrast between a thing and a person. Through such comparisons and contrasts, the readers are led to be on the “inside track” as they adopt Mark’s point of view.

Luke’s point of view

Luke emphasizes Jesus' acceptance of Gentiles, women, the poor, and the outcast—in which religious and societal divisions are annulled. Luke's anointing story is encased in his familiar social context of table fellowship of a meal or banquet, which are often contexts of joy, celebration, forgiveness, and acceptance. On three separate occasions, Jesus’ host is a Pharisee. This woman is not “put off” by the imposing presence of all of the males at the banquet. As a social outcast, her person and action also contrast with the socially prominent Pharisees and lawyers who function only within their framework of religious taboos. The woman fits in with other unworthy individuals, in the same chapter, who recognize their need for Jesus’ help—a Gentile Roman centurion, the widow of Nain, and tax collectors. Readers are made aware of the contrasting responses to Jesus in the whole chapter and are guided to feel sympathy for this unnamed sinful woman in her emotional and vulnerable display of gratitude for what Jesus has done for her—he has forgiven her much (7:47).

For Luke's readership, the three figures in the parable of the two debtors clearly correspond with the chief persons at table in Simon’s home. The parable is intended to affirm the woman’s vulnerable expression of gratitude (greater debt) and to expose the unfelling attitude of Jesus’ male critic (lesser debt). The parable presupposes that Jesus has previously forgiven the woman, identified as a “sinner.” Through the parable and his explanation, he honors her lavish display of gratitude for forgiven sin and unmasks the thankless response of his host who offers no customary etiquette (water, kiss of friendship, oil).

Readers are led to feel Luke’s point of view: they sympathize with the woman’s gratitude and vulnerability and they distance themselves from the man’s “cold shoulder.” Luke succeeds in putting the man’s judgmental thoughts about the woman, along with his doubt that Jesus really could forgive sins, in a bad light. D. A. S. Ravens thinks Simon’s initial and unspoken criticism reveals that the “real question, therefore, is whether Jesus had the authority of a prophet to proclaim God’s forgiveness, for in Luke’s understanding, this is indeed what Jesus is—the prophet who proclaims release to the captives and sets at liberty those who are oppressed (4:18).”

Further, the readers are led to adopt Jesus’ inclusive concern for a woman who is marginalized in society and who represents other marginalized people (both women and men). Acceptance of the marginalized is central for Luke. The reader is won over to that point of view in this account through an irony understood by the reader, but not by Simon. Dramatic irony occurs, according to Rhoads, “when there is a discrepancy between what a character blindly thinks to be the case and what the real situation is or between what a character expects to happen, and what actually happens.” In Luke’s account, the author and implied reader share understanding of the woman’s insight and activity, while Simon and his male guests are in the dark about the significance of the woman’s act and Jesus’ divine prerogative of forgiving sins.

John’s point of view

John’s gospel seeks to elicit several responses from the readership. First, the account is reported immediately after the death of Mary’s brother, Lazarus, and amid the ongoing plot to kill Jesus. Readers thus feel the seriousness of the anointing story in terms of life and death. Within the story itself, readers are invited to hear Jesus’ statement fully: “You will not always have me.” As J. Ramsay Michaels points out, readers participate in the shared awareness that Jesus is “returning as the divine Son of God to the Father who sent him, but from the standpoint of Jesus’ disciples death is still death, with all the dread and pain of separation that the word implies.” The readers can sense the pain, and they draw close to Mary in her symbolic role of preparing Jesus’ body for burial.

In addition, readers are guided to sympathize with the extent of Mary’s love for Jesus even in the midst of male aggression and accusation. Mary is grateful for Lazarus’s new life; the context of the dinner is a celebratory supper (12:2). In her humble act of devotion at Jesus’ feet, she pours out her love for him. She senses that the brief window of time with Jesus will soon close. She seizesthe moment to express her self-giving love for Jesus. Michaels says that “her reckless act of pouring out a pint of expensive perfume on Jesus’ feet and wiping them with her hair dramatizes for the readers—and for us—the truth that love is stronger than death.”

Readers are also drawn to Mary with respect to the “signature” of her expensive gift. In the broader context of John’s “Book of Signs” (John 2–12), Mary’s expensive gift is also significant. John makes it clear to the readers that her devotional act is actually a loving preparation for Jesus’ burial. It is a foreshadowing of Jesus’ significant washing of his disciples’ feet that follows in John’s next chapter (13:1–20). While readers draw near to Mary, they also distance themselves from the hideous plot of male authorities and from Judas, the male objector. The skillfully presented plot of John 11:45–57 reflects the insecure and hateful nature of the religious authorities who face the powerful, unmistakable sign of Lazarus’s resurrection. They are even forced to admit that “this man continues to do many signs” (11:47), and yet they are afraid of losing their national status. 66
Alan Culpepper links the story with events in the following chapter: Mary’s gift anticipates Jesus’ washing of the disciples’ feet, and both of the scenes take place in the context of a meal, enveloped within the somber shadow of Jesus’ death. Further, the statements of “serving” and “following” (12:26) are positioned in the context of the mini-parable about the necessity of the grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying if it is to be fruitful (12:24–25). Careful readers take note of the reigning death motif in the two chapters.

In the broader context, Mary’s anointing serves to identify the life of a disciple/servant (female or male). In this account, two women serve Jesus: Mary serves by anointing Jesus’ feet, and Martha is serving the meal. Jesus links “serving” and “following” with the promise that God will honor the one who serves. According to Michaels, “Jesus’ anointing by Mary is needed in John’s Gospel to put the glorious promises of the farewell discourses in a genuinely human context.”

Summary implications

In each of the four narratives, the woman is voiceless. It is men who speak, become ingignant, and verbally censure the woman and Jesus. One might ask, “Are readers to conclude that the woman expressed no emotion or said nothing in the four stories?” Still, in all four stories, the woman’s actions speak volumes and have a more profound effect on the reader than words ever could.

In the four anointing accounts, there are conversations between the author’s world, the text’s role, and the reader’s world. The overall structure of the stories provides a background for the contrasts, comparisons, and purpose statements; these literary relationships are used by the authors to generate narrative wholes, with their intended purposes for the readers. In each story, the authors condition the readers to sympathize, appreciate, and value the woman and her behavior while distancing themselves from the aggressive, hostile, and unfeeling males. While the gender issue is not the primary focus of these stories, nonetheless, the stories do portray the woman in the all-important and life-giving role, in contrast to the roles of men who act with murderous purpose or negative criticism.

The hideous, life-taking, and aggressive posture of the male religious authorities stands in stark contrast with positive, life-giving action by the woman in these stories. While religious authorities, all of them male, condemn Jesus in order to retain their authority, a woman finds the unique opportunity to pour out her best for Jesus. In all four of these stories, Jesus affirms the woman’s act in the face of her male opponents. Jesus’ response to the anointing woman speaks volumes about his liberating love. The four authors send the clear message to their readers that the anointing woman has “a special mission, which is to reintroduce love.”

Notes

4. The implied author is the author who has chosen to reveal himself along with his perspectives, concerns, and values.
5. The implied reader is the person who can detect the original message of the story, with the potential of reliving the story and embracing the author’s point of view.
19. See also the link between Cana in John 2:1–11 with Cana (4:46), Nicodemus (3:1–15, 7:50, 19:39), and Judas (6:71; 12:4; 13:2, 26, 29, 18:2, 3, 5).
27. See 1 Sam. 10:1, 16:13; 1 Kgs. 1:33: 2 Kgs. 9:6.
32. Reference to the prophet motif also occurs in Luke 7:16.
37. The difficult expression in John 12:7, "let her keep it for the day of my burial," is best explained by Brown as "she was keeping it until now to embalm Jesus." Brown, The Gospel According to John, 449.
38. It is also significant that her open and transparent anointing for burial is contrasted with the secretive action of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea.
39. Thiemann, "The Unnamed Woman," 185
40. Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, xiv.
41. Craig L. Blomberg, Interpreting the Parables (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 185.
42. Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, xiv.
44. Osborne, The Hermeneutical Spiral, 154.
48. See Mark 5:21–24a (Jairus); 5:24b–34 (woman); 5:35–43; 6:6–12 (mission); 6:14–29 (Herod); 30 (mission).
49. Barton notes, "What for Traditionsgeschichte is a dislocation, for narrative criticism becomes a literary technique, the observation of which adds new meaning to the story," "Mark as Narrative," 231.
53. See Mark 1:43.
57. 7:36–50, 11:37, 141.
61. David M. Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, Mark as Story (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1999), 60.
66. Charles Homer Gilbin notes that both the copious anointing and the wiping of Jesus’ feet with her hair comprise a prophetic action declaring his burial and his rising incorruptible; “Mary’s Anointing for Jesus’ Burial-Resurrection (John 12, 1–8),” Biblica 73, no. 4 (1992): 564.