

faith spread throughout the civilized world, the strategic role of women became evident. Churches were founded in the homes of women like Lydia of Philippi (Acts 16:14–15). Women emerged as church leaders in Thessalonica (Acts 17:4), Berea (Acts 17:12), Athens (Acts 17:34), and Corinth (Acts 18:1–8). Paul named eleven women in his list of prominent leaders in the church at Rome, including Phoebe, a “servant” (*diakonos*)—leader (*prostatis*) in the church (Rom. 16:1–2).

In a day when women were severely restricted from participating in social life, it is remarkable that Christian women were extensively involved in the life of the early church. In fact, this change in women’s roles in the New Testament churches precipitated much discussion about females in Paul’s letters (1 Cor. 11:2–16, 14:33–36; Eph. 5:26–33; 1 Tim. 2:11–15, 3:1–13).

As God’s ultimate revelation, Jesus’ treatment of women

was determinative. What did Jesus do? Simply this. In a day when women were universally subjugated, denigrated, and mistreated, Jesus affirmed females as persons created in God’s image, equal in worth and equal in responsibility to God (Fen. 1:26–27). Jesus liberated women from slavery to sin and from demeaning social customs, inviting them to work, witness, and serve Christ in the church and in the world (Luke 8:1–3). ■



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Father’s Day c. A.D. 30: Two Daughters Celebrate

Moving beyond “the blood taboo.”

GINGER O’NEIL

In so many ways, my dad showed his love for me. Coming home from his weekly out-of-town business trips, he always had a surprise gift for me in his suitcase. His encouragement accepted no gender limits for me to achieve any goal I would seek as an adult.

Even when I became that adult—a married woman with children—he greeted me with an affectionate, supportive hug whenever or wherever we met.

Such a father-daughter bonding, especially one that would suggest that a woman could be on a par socially and spiritually with men, would not have existed in Jesus’ day.

The Talmud, which ancient women did not have permission to study, states unequivocally that females are spiritual inferiors to men. Until recently, a synagogue prayer recited by men stated thanksgiving for not being born women—or gentiles.

Although ancient Jewish men loved their daughters—and valued them—once menarche occurred father-daughter bonding took a tumble, due primarily to what sociologists, anthropologists, and biblical scholars call the “blood taboo.”

No clearer introduction into an examination of this subject exists in the New Testament than the chapter I refer to as “The Account of the Two Daughters” (Luke 8:40–56). One was the daughter of an official, the other an adult woman Jesus called “daughter.”

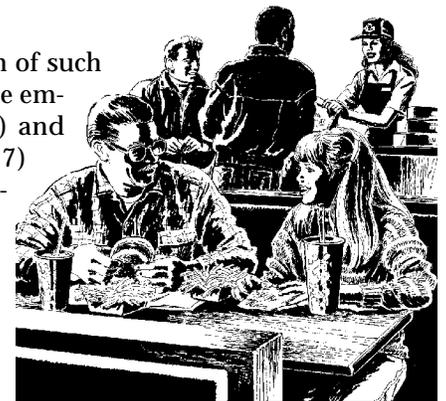
Few readers today of Scripture have an understanding of the stigma attached to female blood flow in menstruation and following childbirth. In Old Testament times, females experiencing this “normal” blood flow were

termed *niddahs*, a term of such foul uncleanness as to be employed by Ezra (9:11) and Ezekiel (16:22, 36:17) when describing the disgraceful condition of the Israelites in their most unrepentant state. (Neither *niddah* nor *menstruant* is used in most Christian translations of the Bible since Christians have little familiarity with the blood taboo dictums.)

Because a *niddah*’s touch defiled any male over thirteen years, she would have to leave her household and go to a compound or hut set aside for *niddahs* until several days after her bleeding stopped.

In many conservative Jewish sects even today, *niddah* segregation exists. A conservative Jewish man avoids any contact with a woman—handshake included—because he doesn’t know if she is a *niddah* and thus contaminating to him. In very ancient times, in some Jewish communities even a *niddah*’s shadow was considered defiling.

Because we understand little or nothing about *niddah* defilement in Jesus’ day, moderns cannot comprehend the cataclysmic implications in Luke, nor can they satisfactori-



A father-daughter bonding suggesting that a woman could be on a par socially and spiritually with men would not have existed in Jesus day.

ly absorb the awesome nature of Messiah Jesus in dealing with bleeding women and raising them to spiritual status with men. Jesus' behavior in the account of the two daughters turned ancient Jewish policy upside down in ways modern women still have yet to understand or act on.

Why are both accounts in Luke 40 interrelated, and of what significance was daughterhood to the men involved—Jesus and the official who loved his daughter so much as to appeal to Jesus?

Simply told, Jesus is on his way to heal the official's daughter when he is approached by a woman in the crowd who seeks healing. Technically she is a *zavoh*, a type of super *niddah*, because her bleeding condition is abnormal. In her case, she has been an outcast for twelve years, approximately one-third of the normal life span of a woman. All this time she has been unable to live in her home because she is defiling to all males over thirteen: husband (who has probably divorced her), father, brother, son.

She performs a frighteningly defiling act, pushing her way up to Jesus and touching the hem of his garment, possibly the tasseled areas of his ritual stole. Surely she believes no one will notice her in that crowd.

But Jesus does notice he has been touched. He feels the power leave him!

His power: Where did it go?

Not to the men in that crowd, but to a *zavoh*, one of the filthiest human beings in the community.

Jesus not only accepts this woman's touch, he calls her *daughter*. As a loving father, he declares her faith has saved her. She need not have any remorse whatsoever about her audacity.

Continuing on his way, he arrives at the official's household, where mourners wail and create a tumult, declaring the girl has died. He takes only three disciples and the child's parents with him into the room because he is going to do a highly irregular thing: he's going to touch that child, and—dead or alive—she is defiling to a man.

As a corpse, she defiles; she may be equally defiling,

however, if she lives. Early on, Luke specifically says she is twelve years old, a significant fact. Twelve is the age for a girl to marry, because menarche is likely. At this age, females are off-limits to men in public.

Being divine, Jesus is of course beyond defilement. Yet he is well aware of the adverse reaction the Pharisees will have to any action such as this one, which confronts well-established custom head-on. He is putting himself and his followers in peril. That being the case, he nevertheless touches the child and tells her to arise. She does, and she is returned to her parents.

Last fall, our newest daughter-in-law announced to my husband and me that she would be retaining her maiden name in legal documents, correspondence, and at work. This decision didn't shock or anger us in ways she might have expected. In a new millennium, the policy of abandoning a family surname for a husband's may be as archaic as a pedal sewing machine.

In a sense, a girl is acknowledging an individuality as a daughter that she has enjoyed for decades—not a new phenomenon when we consider the Icelandic *dottirs* (daughters). In that culture, a daughter's name still includes that of her father.

In this chapter about two daughters, Jesus may be asking us to consider a far more important daughterhood relationship: daughterhood to himself, transcending spousal relationship. As one with the Father in the Trinity, Jesus too can be looked upon as a caring parent, one who offers healing, acceptance, and an empowerment equal to the empowerment of any man on earth. ■



For her book *Merging with Martha in a Microchip Age* (self-published), Ginger O Neil researched the status of women in Christianity and Judaism, centering on sociology, anthropology, geography, and the writings of Jewish women. Her first novel, *A Touching Performance* (Barbour/Heartsong) was published in March.

Veteran of Without

Veteran of Without:
Beneath notice and befriended by Scarcity.
Known to Empty, to Lack,
Who daily dodges Want and sips broth with Silence,
Dared to relinquish meager mite.
And in this wordless act,
Proclaimed the Faithfulness of the One
Whom those with Much
Fear to trust.
And she was called generous.

—Patricia Donohue-Carey