

## WOMEN AND DISCIPLESHIP IN THE GOSPELS

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***Abstract:** Some reading the canonical Gospels, namely, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, are inclined to think that the disciples Jesus called were all men or males because whether it is the names of the apostles or a pronoun used about them, it is either a man's name or masculine gender. It is a situation that tends to lead some Christian churches to prefer having only male ministers or pastors. The author of this paper argues that the notion or idea is a presentation of the first three Gospels but not the Fourth. The Fourth Gospel presents not only men but also women as disciples of Jesus.*

**Key Words:** *Mathētēs*, Follow, Women disciples, Gender

### **Discipleship: Terminology**

In the New Testament, the concept 'disciple' is expressed with the word *mathētēs*, a term that originally meant a 'learner' or 'student' who sat around a teacher. The substantive 'discipleship,' does not occur. Furthermore, the verb *mathētēuō*, that is, 'to make someone into a disciple,' seldom appears. However, *akolouthein* ('to walk behind' or 'to follow') and the phrase *opisō mou* ('behind me') are frequently used in the New Testament as specialised terms for following Jesus.

Meanwhile, the word 'disciple' (i.e., *mathētēs*), occurs 264 times in the New Testament and all of them are found in the Gospels and Acts.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis, therefore, lies in the Gospels in as much as only about 10 per cent of the occurrences are in Acts. The same can be said of the word *akolouthein*, 'to follow after,' which occurs 90 times in the New Testament, and 79 of those occurrences are in the Gospels.<sup>2</sup> The rest are in Acts (4x), 1 Corinthians (1), and Revelation (6x). This

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<sup>1</sup> D. Müller, "μαθητής," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), I: 483-490.

<sup>2</sup> See C. Blendinger, "ἀκολουθέω," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), I: 480-483.

discovery suggests that discipleship is a phenomenon which demonstrates a close association with Jesus himself.

The word ‘disciple,’ especially in the Synoptic tradition, refers particularly to the Twelve. For example, we read in the Gospel of Matthew: “And having called to himself his twelve disciples (*dōdeka mathētas autou*) he gave them authority over unclean spirits to cast them out and to heal every disease and every sickness” (Matt. 10:1); and the Gospel of Mark: “And as he reclined at table in his (i.e., Levi’s) house, many tax-collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples (*tois mathētais autou*); for there were many who followed him” (Mark 2:15). The Gospel of Luke presents a different situation: “And when the day came, he called his disciples (*tous mathētas autou*), and chose from them *twelve*, whom he named apostles” (Luke 6:13).

### Main Characteristics of a Disciple

In the Synoptic tradition, one becomes a disciple when called by Jesus himself. Thus, we read in Mark 1:17, about the call of Simon and his brother Andrew: “And Jesus said to them: ‘Come, follow me [*opisō mou*], and I will make you become fishers of men.’”-Mark 2:14 describes the call of Levi: “And as he (i.e., Jesus) passed by, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the revenue office, and he said to him ‘follow me’ [*akolouthei moi*]. He got up and ‘followed him’ [*ēkolouthēsen auto*].” And then in Matt 4:19, also the calling of Peter and his brother Andrew: “And he says to them: ‘Come, behind me [*opisō mou*], and I will make you fishers of men.’”

The initiative for one becoming a disciple, therefore, lies with Jesus and Jesus alone; that is, apart from him calling, there is no recognisable motive for one to become a disciple and follow him. The Gospels do not have the stories of the call of every disciples but the evidence suggests that whenever the call to follow does not originate from Jesus but from the would-be disciple, there is failure. For example, Luke 9:57-61 points out that some took the initiative to be Jesus’ disciples but failed; (for) they were still bound to their past. Also in Mark 10:17-31 Mark indicates that a rich man (Matthew identifies him as a ‘young man’ (*neaniskos*, Matt 19:22)<sup>3</sup> and Luke as a ‘ruler’ (*archon*,

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<sup>3</sup> It is Matthew alone who, in this story, common to all the first three canonical Gospels, gives the reader a picture of a youth, twice calling him a ‘young man’ (*neaniskos* – vv. 20, 22). It may therefore be argued that in the context of his story, Matthew might be using him to represent

18:18) who wanted to take the initiative to be a disciple of Jesus. When the call to discipleship confronted him, he went away sadly because he could not part with his possessions.

To be a disciple of Jesus also demands a total break with the past. The disciple Jesus calls immediately has to leave his family and vocation (Mark 1:16-20). This is about the call of the first four disciples: Simon and his brother Andrew and James and his brother John. When they were called, they left ‘immediately’ (*euthus*) their vocation (fishing) and their family ‘to follow (Jesus)’ – *ēkolouthēsen auto* (v 18). It was the same with Levi, the revenue officer. When Jesus called him, he got up and followed him, leaving behind his job (Mark 2:14).

Only one who hated his or her own family is eligible to be a disciple of Jesus. Luke states this succinctly: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:26).”

Furthermore, being a disciple means entering into a lifelong relationship with Jesus. In Mark 3:14, the meaning of discipleship is given as “that they be with him” (*hina ōsin met’ autou*). This includes participation in the uncertain life of an itinerant preacher and then also in the suffering and death of the teacher.

In the case of the latter, the teaching of Jesus to the crowds and his disciples at Caesarea Philippi, following Peter’s refusal to accept the mystery of the cross is an example. Seeing that Peter could not make the connection between the Messiah (8:29) or the Son of Man (8:31) and suffering: “If anyone wishes ‘to follow after me’ [*opisō mou akolouthein*], let him deny himself and *take up his cross* and ‘follow me’ [*akoloutheitō moi*].” The disciple is, therefore, not there merely

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wealthy, successful young people (note that in, especially, his Markan source and in Luke the man is of mature years, because he claims to have observed the commandments *since my youth* [Mark 10:20]) whom the Matthean church would like to attract to (or retain in) the way of Christian discipleship, but who, probably, were uninterested in the different value system by which the Christian community lived. Cf. M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 87-505.

to learn from a teacher, but also to share in the teacher's whole life without reservation.<sup>4</sup>

Discipleship is also connected with the mission of proclamation of the Gospel. Thus, according to Mark, Jesus appointed the Twelve "in order that he might send them out to preach" (*hina apostellē autous kērussein* - 3:14). He also gave them power to exorcise: "...and to have authority to cast out demons" (*kai echein eksousian ekballein ta daimonia* - 3:15). This power is not only for casting out demons, but also to heal human infirmities: "Heal the sick ... cleanse lepers ...." (10:8).

The foregoing characterization of the disciple places Jesus at the centre: the disciple does not substitute for or replace Jesus. Rather, he receives from Jesus the power to cast out demons.

A disciple is also equipped only with the bare essentials and he is to remain dependent on the goodwill of the people. An example again is from the gospel according to Mark: "And he strictly ordered them to take nothing on the way except a staff – no bread, no beggar's bag, no money in the belt. But to wear sandals, and not to put on two tunics" (see 6:8-9). The same concept is reiterated in Matt. 10:9-10: "Take no gold, or silver, or copper for your belts; no beggar's bag for the journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or staff; for the worker is worthy of his food."

According to the evangelists then, the disciple's demeanour should thus be a reflection of the gospel itself, which entreats people to permit themselves to be gifted by grace.<sup>5</sup> Thus, it is or will be seen as contradictory if the disciple were to display or demonstrate material independence.

And then also it belongs to discipleship that customary values be radically broken.<sup>6</sup> Again one notes this in Mark 10:41-45, concerning Jesus' advice to those in the group who aspired to or wished for first places and positions. According to Jesus, this is what happens among the gentiles or nations; it is their custom. But it should not be for disciples, his disciples. Discipleship demands a break from customary

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<sup>4</sup> Hans Weder, "Disciple, Discipleship," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), II: 207-210.

<sup>5</sup> Weder, "Disciple, Discipleship," 208.

<sup>6</sup> See Weder, "Disciple, Discipleship," 208.

values and the call of Jesus demands and makes possible this break with customary values and with the past in as much as it gives the disciple a new future.

### **Presence of Women among Jesus' Disciples: the Synoptic Gospels**

In all these illustrations, one thing is clear: the disciple or would-be-disciple is always a man. Does it mean there were no women disciples in the synoptic gospels? In other words, did Jesus not call women too as he did call men? In Luke 8:1-3, women were in the company of Jesus and the Twelve or travelled with them while Jesus was on his journeys or preaching tour. Luke notes that these were women whom Jesus had healed of evil spirits and illnesses. He gives their names as Mary called Magdalene, who had been cured of seven demons, Joana, the wife of Herod's steward Chusa, and Susanna.

Notably, Luke does not call them 'disciples.' But he assigns them some duty: "serving/waiting on them" (*diēkonoun autois* - v 3), that is, on Jesus and the Twelve; and tells of them doing that duty from their own resources. These women were not commissioned to do what they did. Indeed, from the wording of 8:2-3 what they do is borne out of gratitude for being healed.

Outside this Lucan passage, women are also present in the passion and resurrection narrative, where the evangelist portrays them as continuing their benefactions to Jesus even after the men (i.e. the eleven) have faded from the scene (see Luke 23:49, 55—24:11). The evangelist in 24:9 they acted on their initiative (because he does not have them commissioned to go to tell anyone anything) to go to the eleven and report to them about their experience with the men in dazzling white whom they (i.e., the women) saw at the tomb.

But they are disbelieved (24:11) because the men would not count women's reports as of any value.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the Greek term Luke uses to describe the women's report – *lēros* – applies to the wild talk of a

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<sup>7</sup> See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Sacra Pagina, 3; Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 1991), 388; Jane D. Schaberg and Sharon H. Ringe, *Gospel of Luke* (Women's Bible Commentary; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 493-511.

person in delirium, hysterical nonsense. The RSV and NRSV versions translate it as 'idle' talk.

And it is not only Luke who signals the presence of women at Jesus' passion and resurrection. Mark and Matthew also relate stories about women who were present at Jesus' crucifixion and burial. They mention, for example, Mary Magdalene, some 'other Mary' (see Matt. 27:61), the mother of James and Joses, and Salome. These women, they point out, used to follow Jesus and provide for him when he was in Galilee (cf. Mark 15:40-41; Matt 27:55-56), and according to Mark, the same women visited Jesus' tomb in an attempt to complete burial activities interrupted by the Sabbath (Mark 16:1; see also Matt 28:1).

These are the only notices or passages about named women in the first three Gospels where one may want to read woman discipleship in the text. Interestingly, they do not explain anything concerning how Mary Magdalene or any of her companions came to be travelling with Jesus. They do not tell one about any call they received from him; except that, in the case of the women in Luke's story they were healed of diseases and evil spirits, as indicated above, and that when they served or waited on Jesus and his Twelve disciples on their journeys, they were doing that out of gratitude for being healed. Thus, some interpret the passage as an indictment on women, or as part of the male biases in the Gospels.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Woman Disciple: The Gospel of John**

The question then remains: Do the Gospels not have women as disciples? According to John 20:1-18, they do. Significantly, the story is found in the other three Gospels (Matt. 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12). However, the narrations differ in the specifics of the story, for instance, the number of women at the tomb, who greet them while they are there, and how they respond to what they see. But all four agree on one thing: that in the early morning hours of that day when it was still dark, *women went to visit Jesus' tomb*. The account of John is, however, the most detailed.

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<sup>8</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, "The Gospel According to Luke," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 96-151. See also Schaberg and Sharon, "Gospel of Luke," 509.

The story can be divided into two scenes: John 20:1-10 and 20:11-18. The first is ‘Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb,’ and the second is ‘Mary Magdalene and the risen Jesus.’ Now, in the first scene (i.e., 20:1-10, which establishes Mary Magdalene as the first witness) Mary comes to the tomb and sees the stone has been rolled away (20:1). Running, she goes to report the news to Peter and the other disciple, described as ‘the one whom Jesus loved,’ offering the only logical explanation she can think of, that some people have removed Jesus’ body from the tomb and it cannot be found (20:2).

Hearing her report, both Peter and the disciple Jesus loved ran to the tomb (20:3-4). On arrival, they enter the tomb and, although Peter sees, John tells us it is the beloved disciple who sees and *believes* - *eiden kai epistuesen* (‘he saw and *believed*; [20:8]), he says. It is therefore only the response of the beloved disciple to the empty tomb, that is, his seeing and *believing*, which John records because his faith is only an incipient faith, for the story later says that they (i.e, the beloved disciple and Peter) did not yet know about the resurrection (20:9).

The second scene of 20:11-18 opens with Mary alone in the garden, weeping. Like Peter and the beloved disciple before her, she now stoops to look into the tomb. And what she sees are two angels, one at the head, the other at the foot of where Jesus was laid. They ask her: “Woman, why are you weeping?” (*gunai, ti klaieis* – v. 13). This way of addressing Mary Magdalene - as *gunai* - is the same way Jesus addressed his mother Mary at the Cana wedding when she (note that her name is not mentioned) asked him to help the wedding couple with wine since they had run out of wine. Jesus had asked her mother: *ti emoi kai soi, gunai*; (‘what is that to me and you, woman?’ - John 2:4). And Jesus, again, used the same word in addressing her in his final moments while hanging on the cross. He had said to her, seeing her standing there with the beloved disciple: *gunai, ide ho huios sou* (‘woman, look, your son’ ; [19:26]). And, indeed, the risen Jesus uses it to address Mary Magdalene (cf. v. 15).

Mary’s answer to the angels is to recount that Jesus’ body has been removed and she does not know where it is (20:11-13). It is observed here that her response to the angels is very personal. She speaks of

Jesus as “my Lord” (*kurion mou*), not ‘the Lord’ (*ho kurios*), and so demonstrates a response borne of personal grief.

She then turns around and sees Jesus, but “she did not know it was Jesus” (20:14). Now the conversation that follows between Jesus and Mary Magdalene is quite significant to one’s understanding of John’s presentation of Mary as a disciple.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus speaks to Mary, repeating the angels’ question about her weeping, i.e., *ti klaieis*; and then followed it up with an additional question, *tina zēteis* (“whom are you looking for?” - 20:15). This additional question is one of the first words John has the risen Jesus speak (beside the *ti klaieis*, “why are you weeping”). Interestingly, it mirrors the first words Jesus spoke at the beginning of his ministry (1:35-42). In that account, John the Baptist is standing with his disciples when he sees Jesus walk by. He draws the attention of his disciples to Jesus as he identifies him as “the Lamb of God.” The disciples, one of whom is later identified as Andrew the brother of Simon Peter, follows Jesus, who upon noticing them turns around to ask: *ti zēteite* (“what are you looking for?”).

Unlike in the Synoptic Gospels, in John’s Gospel, the mark of discipleship is “to look for Jesus.”<sup>10</sup> Thus after John the Baptist’s witness about himself and Jesus, his disciples go to seek out Jesus to know where he stays. Likewise, Nicodemus, a teacher in Israel, also seeks for Jesus to find out more about him (see John 3:10). The Samaritans also came, seeking to see Jesus at the Samaritan woman’s invitation (John 4:29-30). In John 4:47 (also in 11:3), the royal official and Martha and Mary, respectively, seek out Jesus, albeit to heal their little boy and their brother, respectively. Then in John 12:18-19, the Greek-speaking Jews come to seek Jesus as a teacher.

In the Synoptic Gospels, however, the issue is different. There Jesus recruits or ‘calls’ a faction of ‘apostles’ to help him out with his task of proclaiming a forthcoming ‘kingdom of God’ (or of heaven, that is, of the sky). But, in John, Jesus does not proclaim a forthcoming

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<sup>9</sup> Gail R. O’Day, *Gospel of John* (Women’s Bible Commentary; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 517-530.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 48.



theocracy for Israel. Indeed, there is no talk of ‘the kingdom of God.’ Thus, there is no mention of ‘apostles,’ because, as indicated above, apostles are called by Jesus to be commissioned and to be sent out to proclaim a forthcoming Kingdom and to prepare people for it with healing and exorcisms.<sup>11</sup>

Instead, John’s Gospel has ‘disciples’; and disciples are followers of a teacher. They join up with a teacher in order to learn a way of living. And John’s Jesus is a teacher, indeed, a rabbi. He sets forth a way of living focused on attachment to himself.<sup>12</sup> Thus John has disciples, and not apostles, to come to seek out the teacher, Jesus, or the rabbi, to learn a way of living.<sup>13</sup>

Jesus’ question to John the Baptist’s disciples is, thus, an invitation to discipleship and John having Jesus repeat it here, in chapter 20, in his encounter with Mary Magdalene means establishing continuity between Mary and those first disciples of Jesus.<sup>14</sup> In other words, Jesus’ words to the first people who were seeking him at the beginning of his ministry (1:35-42) and the first person who seeks him after his resurrection (20:1-18) contain the same invitation to discipleship.

Indeed, the author underscores this, that is, the connection between the first disciples and Mary, by having Jesus use the same verb (*zēteō*) and the same conjugation (present indicative active) for his questions to both parties (i.e., *ti sēteite* - 1:38, and *tina zēteis* - 20:15]). And not only that! He also has both groups, that is, the first disciples and Mary, answer Jesus, addressing him with the same Hebrew word, *Rabbouni* or *Rabbi*, which John translates as ‘Teacher’ (see 20:16; 1:38). Thus, when Jesus turns around and calls ‘Mary,’ she answers, ‘*Rabbouni*’ (“my master/teacher”); and when he turns around and asks the first disciples who were following him “what are you seeking for?” they too answered *Rabbi* (“my master/teacher”)... *pou meneis*.

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<sup>11</sup> See Malina and Rohrbaugh, *The Gospel of John*, 48.

<sup>12</sup> See Malina and Rohrbaugh, *The Gospel of John*, 49.

<sup>13</sup> Malina and Rohrbaugh, *The Gospel of John*, 48.

<sup>14</sup> O’Day, *Gospel of John*, 517-530. See also Brittany E. Wilson, *Mary Magdalene and her Interpreters* (Women’s Bible Commentary; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 531-535.

After asking Mary not to hold on to him or touch him (v. 17), Jesus then gives her a directive to go and announce to his brothers that he ascends to their father and his father, their God and his God. Mary then goes away to announce to the others: “I have seen the Lord” (*heōraka ton kurion* - 20:18).

Her announcement sounds like the announcement of one of the first disciples in John 1:35-42, i.e., Andrew, to his brother Simon. *heurēkamen ton Messian* (‘we have found the Messiah’), he tells Peter when he saw him after he and the other disciple had returned from Jesus’ house (1:41). Though the verbs are from two different words, i.e., *heurisko* and *horaō*, in the ears of the Greek listeners/hearers the sound may be similar and so their usage here may not be coincidental. It may be part of the rhetoric of John; besides, they are both in the perfect indicative active conjugation. Thus, one has Mary, at the end of the narrative, just as the first disciples at the beginning of the narrative, joyfully go to announce the presence of Jesus to others. A kind of an envelope figure? A reversal? Or both?

## Conclusion

As the evidence above shows, it is not impossible to say that there is no gender limitation in the way the first three Gospels present the issue of discipleship. Their presentation suggests that discipleship was a preserve of men and Jesus called only men to be disciples. But this is not the case in the Fourth Gospel. According to John, discipleship was not restricted to men. The role he accords Mary Magdalene in chapter 20 of his work amply demonstrates that women too were disciples. Mary was the first person to seek Jesus when he was resurrected and she also was the first to announce the message to others. To be a disciple was to seek for Jesus and those who at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry became disciples sought for him and spoke about him to others. Mary thus becomes the first disciple of the risen Jesus.

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