



# A realistic reading as a feminist tool: The Prodigal Son as a case study

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The parables of Jesus have historically been attributed with a plethora of interpretations. The first hearers of the parables of Jesus had native (emic) knowledge of the social realities embedded in the parables told by Jesus, that is, cultural scripts present in the parables that might not be apparent to modern readers. Because of this, the modern reader of a parable might not be aware of all the different cultural scripts in a given parable, especially if these scripts are not specifically mentioned or explained by the gospel narrators. Using the parable of the Prodigal Son as an example, this study argues that there are voices in the parable most probably heard by its first hearers that modern hearers might not be aware of. These 'muted' voices not heard by modern readers of the parables often include the voices of women and other minority figures. In this study, a case is made for the possible value that a 'realistic reading' of familial parables could bring to the interpretation of the parables.

**Contribution:** It is suggested that this reading can contribute to feminist biblical scholarship's deconstruction and reconstruction of gender paradigms of Christian theology if the voices of women are 'exhumed' from or 'unhidden' within, patriarchal and androcentric texts.

**Keywords:** historical Jesus; first-century Mediterranean; feminism; social-scientific criticism; equality; realistic reading; early Jesus movement; parables; Prodigal Son; women.

## Introduction: Feminism and biblical scholarship<sup>1</sup>

In the past, scholars such as Schüssler Fiorenza (1994:15) and Schottroff (1995:xv) have drawn attention to the need and importance of biblical scholarship to focus more on women in the interpretation of biblical texts. Often feminist scholars are not taken seriously and have been ignored in mainstream biblical scholarship and historical Jesus research (Jacobs 2001:81; Walters 2020:468). Given this need for feminist biblical scholarship and women-focussed interpretations, this study believes that a 'realistic' reading of the parables can be a valuable tool in feminist studies of the New Testament. Therefore, in this article, the value of a 'realistic' reading of parables to 'unhide' the roles that women played in the first-century Mediterranean society, using the parable of the Prodigal Son as a case study, will be investigated.

## A 'realistic' way of reading parables

Parables invite interpretation. Modern biblical features, such as headings<sup>2</sup> at the beginning of pericopes or narratives and parables, provide readers with specific perspectives before they even start reading. The reader is prompted before even engaging with the first words (e.g. in the parable of the Prodigal Son) to view the narrative in a certain way and with a certain outcome. In so doing, other figures and characters in the text become secondary (Levine 2014:30; Scott 1989:4).

Furthermore, most modern readers, when reading biblical texts do not take into account the native knowledge that first-century hearers commanded. The Graeco-Roman world, for example, had clear spaces associated with the different genders. These gendered spaces were social, conceptual, virtual and physical 'built spaces', so to speak. All spaces were gendered, with clear

1.Social-scientific criticism is considered by many scholars to be an effective way to combat anachronism and ethnocentrism in the reading of ancient texts by pointing out the differences and similarities of a person's own culture and the culture of those present in foreign writings (Craffert 2009:130; Malina 1993:12). However, a researcher, in my case a white man, from a critical-realistic point of view, must not forget that he or she can never be removed from the research process, thereby introducing a possible, if not certain, bias. Context plays a crucial role in socio-scientific research as the researcher always has a stake or agenda in the research being done (Carroll 2000:14–15; Elliott 1993:107–109).

2.Scott (1989:4) suggests changing the headings of biblical pericopes/narratives and parables to merely contain the first words used in the Greek version of the text. In this way, for example, the parable of the Prodigal Son will be 'A man had two sons', giving the parable a more holistic and familial title.

borders between *oikos* [household] and *polis* [city], between private and public, nature and culture and male and female. The dominant, idealistic male view<sup>3</sup> in the first-century Mediterranean society was that the space associated with a woman was the *oikos* (Trümper 2012:290–291). Texts such as 1 Timothy 5:14 and Titus 2:3–5, therefore, appeal to the traditional roles of women as taking care of household affairs, raising children and submitting to their husbands (Ferguson 1987:58; Saller 2003:190). Demosthenes (*Neaer*:122), as early as 384 BCE, clearly emphasises the importance of a woman being linked to the household by recounting the words of Apollodorus:

For this is what living with a woman as one's wife means – to have children by her and to introduce the sons to the members of the clan and of the deme, and to betroth the daughters to husbands as one's own. Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives to bear us legitimate children and to be *faithful guardians of our households*. (Demosthenes 2015:928, emphasis added)

The typical first-century Mediterranean Jewish man found his identity in 'outward' living, away from the *oikos* and, for all intents and purposes, was present at home merely to eat and sleep (Neyrey 1998:212; Van Eck 2007:89), while the typical first-century Jewish woman occupied and was concerned with the 'inward' space of the *oikos*, that is, tending to the children, preparing meals and manufacturing clothes (Malina & Neyrey 1991:43). Therefore, the word *oikos* in the parables would most likely have evoked some of these images and divisions in the mind of the first-century hearer. These are important contexts that modern readers and interpreters often disregard or are merely unaware of.

The parables were not told to modern audiences but to the first-century rural audience of Jesus. Not acknowledging this dynamic can lead to possible ethnocentrism and anachronism. The reader and interpreter of the parables should first ask how the intended audience of Jesus, most likely from rural Galilee, would have interpreted the parables (Crossan 2012:47; Van Eck 2016:11). This is, of course, if one is interested in reading the parables in their historical setting and not in their literal settings in the gospels.

Social identity theory can also aid in understanding how some, or parts of some, of Jesus' parables could be understood as authentic memories of Jesus. Social identity theory postulates that memory is not an individual but a social trait. It is also where group members find identity. This collective memory is rooted in the belief that there is no objective understanding of time and space but rather that all knowledge is subjective and fluid (Olick 2006:10; Van Eck 2011:202). Because memory is also dependent on the group and social experience, there can be 'no individual memory without

3. It should be noted that a comprehensive understanding of gender and space is seemingly impossible from texts alone as the vast majority of ancient texts are male authored and, therefore, lack the voices and perspectives of women (Trümper 2012:291). Although the voices and perspectives of women were mostly unrepresented in texts that they, themselves, authored, it should be noted that by examining current sources it can be inferred that the extent of the confinement and concealment of women in the first-century Mediterranean households are often exaggerated (Meyers 2003:68). Therefore, women were most possibly not as confined to these gendered spaces even though male authored texts portray very clear division of spaces and places.

social experience nor is there any collective memory without individuals participating in communal life' (Olick 1999:346). However, for the purposes of this study, Aguilar (2005:60) gives the most helpful definition of collective memory whereby he describes it as 'a single authoritative narrative, consisting of social memories, that is, all memories of a specific event or chain of events in the past, even when contradictory'. Collective memory creates a shared history, which can be understood as a collective or cultural identity (Olick 2006:6). Therefore, 'memory is central, if not *the* central, medium through which identities are constituted' (Olick & Robbins 1998:133, own emphasis added). This makes the context in which the collective memory takes place all the more important.

Social identity theory also assists in the further understanding of first-century society, seeing that the first-century Mediterranean was a dyadic<sup>4</sup> society with strong group embeddedness and directedness towards the family and group traditions. The oral tradition of the parables where transmitted through collective memory. Social identity theory also draws significant attention to the importance of the social context and conditions of the first hearers of the parables of Jesus (Van Eck 2011:201–205).

Moreover, the social world of the first-century Mediterranean undoubtedly influenced Jesus' own values and (Oakman 2008:)

[H]is fundamental interests and loyalties were shaped within and orientated within the village. The interpretation of Jesus' parables must start with what is known typically about peasant values and expectations. Indeed, many of the parables themselves urge this starting point, assuming as they do knowledge of the Palestinian countryside under the early Roman Empire. (pp. 172–173)

Jesus' audience also lived in what anthropologists call a high-context society. This means that the knowledge shared in conversation, or in writing, with Jesus' audience in first-century Galilee would have been culturally and socially understood to contain certain details (e.g. cultural conventions and shared cultural knowledge) that most modern readers would not be aware of. The audience of Jesus could 'fill in the gaps' and 'read between the lines'. The narrators of the parables, therefore, expect that the reader is familiar with the social context to which the author refers (Elliott 1993:11). This is an important distinction to understand and one that a 'realistic' reading helps to bring to the foreground.

4. All people in the first-century Mediterranean society were considered dyadic. A dyadic person is 'always in relation with and connected to at least one other social unit, usually a group' (Malina 2002:38). They had no concept of the individualistic person as we have today (Malina 2002:38). Malina (2002:35) considers it a possible anachronism to refer to the inhabitants of the first-century Mediterranean society with the word 'person', seeing that the most elementary and 'smallest' social unit they would have known and understood would have been the dyadic 'person' (Malina 2002:38). The most important connection for the dyadic person would have been their primary relationships, groups and family. These primary relationships, which can be identified as a person's kinship group, were seen as crucial to any success in life. The success that a person achieves is, however, dependent on certain rules and order that must be maintained. The most important of these is the basic values of honour and shame (Malina 1993:30). Because of the 'dyadic person' and strong group embeddedness, a man could not be held responsible for his own actions when alone with a pre-menstrual woman. Willpower was a trait that the group possessed, not the dyadic individual (Malina 2002:43). Therefore, it was widely considered that adultery could not be committed against a woman but rather against her immediate male guardian as a woman was seen as the property of her husband or father (Loader 2013:47).

It is key to focus on what a 'realistic' reading of the parables entails before looking at a case study from the parable of the Prodigal Son. Van Eck (2019:1–2) identifies two important pillars of a realistic reading of parables:

Firstly, a realistic reading of the parables takes as point of departure that the parables are stories *drawn from nature or common life*, that is, stories to be read against the backdrop of the social realia (cultural scripts of sociocultural features) invoked by a given parable. From this perspective, the parables of Jesus are stories about shepherds attending flocks of sheep and not stories about Jesus looking for lost sinners (Lk 15:4–6), day labourers being hired to work in a vineyard and not God who invites gentiles to become part of his kingdom (Mt 20:1–15) and servants whose debts are released, and not God who forgives abundantly. (Mt 18:23–33)

In the same way, Kloppenborg (2014:490) suggests that, sometimes, within parables 'a vineyard or a shepherd ... is just a vineyard or a shepherd'.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the socio-cultural background of the parable becomes critically important.

Secondly, a 'realistic' reading of a parable focuses on the strangeness or vividness of certain details and how the first hearers of the parables would have interpreted or understood these details, which is typical of high-context societies (Elliott 1993:11; Van Eck 2019:2):

In interpreting the parables one should assume that the first audiences of Jesus' parables, most probably the peasantry in Galilee, already had cultural competence in these ancient practices, and had native (emic) knowledge of the social realia referred to in the parables. (Van Eck 2016:20)

This also describes why the gospel narrators do not explain the societal context in which the parables occur. Therefore, the parables of Jesus were not 'earthly stories with heavenly meanings, but earthly stories with heavy meanings' (Herzog 1994:3).

## The Prodigal Son as a case study

Van Eck (2016:43) suggests that 'social-scientific criticism in combination with realistic reading offer the relevant reading scenarios to interpret the social realia evoked by the narrative world of the parable'. This way of reading can, for instance, draw attention to the role or rather apparent absence of women in the parable of the Prodigal Son – something that modern interpretations have seldom done. Within family structures, mothers often assumed the roles of reconcilers and mediators and stepped in on matters of conflict concerning marriage and inheritance rights. The son, who abandons his household, is also valuable to the mother as he would be able to secure her place in the household.<sup>6</sup> In this way, when the parable is told, the rural

5.Scholars, such as Wierzbicka (2001:302), disagree with this view and do not see reading the parables within their first-century Mediterranean context as conflicting with reading them as stories concerning God and God's kingdom. For Wierzbicka, both are seen as equally valid.

6.A son had a critical role to play in the household because apart from his relationship with his father and with his own wife, he was his mother's most important and sometimes her only, defender and ally. It is because of this dynamic that the most important relationship a wife can have is with her son (Malina 1993:128).

audience would have experienced both the father *and the mother* as being damaged, not just the father (Rohrbaugh 1997:141–152).

Traditionally, this parable has been interpreted from the experience of the father or the two sons. However, the house to which the son returns and the feast that is held after his return were spaces occupied and, to some extent, governed by women. Also, the presence of a mother in the parable is implied in the very first verse of the parable, Luke 15:11: 'there was a man who had two sons'. Giving birth to a son was an important event for a wife, as it was only by giving birth to a male descendant that she would, after her marriage to her husband, be welcomed into the household from the periphery and be accepted as a member of the family. Mortality rates were extremely high amongst women in the first century. Women often died in childbirth and seldom lived past the age of 35 years. Because of this high death rate, the population barely replenished itself. It was, therefore, unlikely for a widowed or divorced man to remain unmarried. Remarriage, which was frequently and widely practised, was expected in the first-century Mediterranean society. Therefore, although the implied mother in Luke 15:1 could have possibly died in childbirth, the father would most likely have remarried and a woman would still have occupied the house, assuming the role of a mother (Instone-Brewer 2002:124; Loader 2012:102; Stambaugh & Balch 1986:84; Treggiari 2003:175).

Women were typically in charge of the affairs of the household, including the management of slaves. This typical familial arrangement saw men spend most of their time outside of the house being busy with political, social and economic affairs leaving women, most notably the man's wife, to 'run' the estate away from public eyes (Loader 2012:12). Philo believed this arrangement to be divinely ordained (Philo, *Hypoth.* 7.14; see Yonge 2013:744) and natural (Philo, *Spec.* 3.169–170; see Yonge 2013:611). This might explain why the father, son and older brother's narrative arcs play out outside of the house in the parable. The father greets his son outside of the house (Lk 15:20: ...καὶ δραμῶν ἐπέπεσεν ἐπὶ τὸν τράχηλον αὐτοῦ), the older brother is working outside in the fields (Lk 15:25: ...Ἦν δὲ ὁ υἱὸς αὐτοῦ ὁ πρεσβύτερος ἐν ἀγρῷ) and when the older brother approaches the house (Lk 15:25: ...ἤγγισεν τῇ οἰκίᾳ), the father then exits the house to meet the older brother (Lk 15:28: ...ὁ δὲ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ ἐξελθὼν παρεκάλει αὐτόν). Although all these pivotal moments occur away from the traditional spaces that women would have occupied, first-century hearers would most likely have understood the parable to have women actively present as the house (which is frequently mentioned) would surely evoke images of women.

## Women, feasts and food

Houses were not only the places that contained and 'confined' women; they were also spaces where women had some sense of authority or power and could exercise a certain



amount of influence.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the parable, the narrative is directed towards the house and, therefore, directed at the physical space of women. In the parable the son returns to his household (Lk 15:20), there is a command to slaughter the fatted calf (Lk 15:23) and a feast is held (Lk 15:25). Women would also often manage the estate, which would include the planning and implementation of feasts, such as the one that is held in celebration of the returning son. Both the parable of the Leaven (Mt 13:33; Lk 13:20–21)<sup>8</sup> and the parable of the Friend at Midnight (Lk 11:5–8) provide examples of the active role of women in preparing food.

Women were seen as the practical servers and preparers of food in a family, often portraying the role of hostess (see, e.g., Lk 10:40). This prompts Crossan (1993:404) to picture Jesus as not only becoming a servant when hosting but indeed a female, noting that ‘long before Jesus was host, he was hostess’. Levine (1994:22), when reflecting on the roles of women in Q, stresses the importance of the roles that women played in the preparation of food and feasts. The lack of women’s voices in the ancient and biblical texts merely points to how their ‘contribution to the community was either not recognised or undervalued’ by the authors of the texts.<sup>9</sup> Women were extremely important in the preparation of feasts and, because of their roles in preparing food and handling the equipment necessary to create the different dishes (courses), had a direct responsibility to enforce dietary and purity laws (Kraemer 1992:143). Furthermore, not acknowledging the ritualistic worth of women also strips them of a point of honour (Neusner 1984):

For all the evidence of this period takes for granted that women prepared meals. Accordingly, women gained a central role in the correct observance of the rules governing cultic cleanliness ... It follows that women now enjoyed the power to secure sanctification. (p. 59)

This placed women in a vital position when preparing meals and feasts. However (Levine 1994):

[I]t is not clear that this role was positively recognised by the men in their community, nor is it clear that the women themselves appreciated the centrality of their role. But the possibility of both must remain open. (p. 23)

7.The primary domain of a woman in the Jewish and Roman world was the household. As such it was also her primary sphere of influence, with some sources proposing that a woman had even more influence than a man in the household. The household was therefore also the domain of a woman’s leadership. This was no different in the emerging Jesus movement. Although texts such as Colossians 3:18, Ephesians 5:22–24 and 1 Peter 3:1–6 portray the ideal women as being modest and submissive, women had much more autonomy and agency, even managing the estate and slaves in bigger, more successful households. It was not strange for widows to not remarry and continue to run the estate by themselves. In fact, this phenomenon gained even more popularity seeing that the early Jesus movement promoted the idea of a woman remaining unmarried after a divorce or becoming a widow. Even in poorer families, women could be seen working alongside their husbands, slaves and children (Ferguson 1987:58; Instone-Brewer 2002:5–6; Knust 2011:64; Loader 2012:12, 2013:32–33; Osiek 1998:300, 2019:508; Saller 2003:190; Vearncombe 2020:50–51).

8.The parable of the woman making bread (Mt 13:33; Lk 13:20–21; Q 13:20–21) provides an example of the active role of women in preparing food for many people. In the parable, the woman uses three measures of flour, equal to approximately 39.4 kg. This would produce enough bread to feed 100 people and was most likely baked for a joyful village occasion or communal feast (Park 2019:52–53).

9.It is notable that ‘most ordinary people had no strong need to write or even read in order to express their religious feelings or find out about the divine world. Visiting a shrine or uttering a prayer did not require one to read, nor did looking after the household *lralium* or attending a festival’ (Harris 1991:220). Word of mouth was the most important means of education and communication (Harris 1991:220; see also Botha 1992:202). Moreover, the narrators of the parables often violated the integrity of the original, oral parables of Jesus (Tolbert 1979:115).

This indeed seems to be the case in the parable of the Prodigal Son. In the parable the focus is not to value the daily work of women, it is merely accepted that women prepare food and men eat. The very first verse of the parable (‘a certain man had two sons’) predisposes the audience to dismiss the roles of women in the story. As Levine (1994:26) aptly notes, to ‘provide food is a sign of honor. And ... the honor belongs to men’.

The tasks that women performed in the household might have even contributed to the distinctive image of the kingdom of God, as Park (2019) notes when referring to the linguistic feature of metonymy<sup>10</sup> in Q:

Q’s metonymies of women’s daily lives bring a dramatic metaphorical change into the traditional concept of the kingdom of God. These domestic, and generally peaceful, images supplant the masculinist image of the kingdom of God ... domestic space – traditionally deemed marginal or secondary to a male public sphere and representative of women’s submission to male rule – become the scene of God’s reign. Moreover, these metonymies, especially of women’s daily work of feeding and caring, create the image of God as a warm and intimate parent. (pp. 45–48, emphasis added)

For Park (2019:48), the first-century followers of Jesus would have associated the kingdom of God and most probably the images that the parable of the Prodigal Son evokes, with ‘the rhythms and warmth of home life through the vivid metonymy of the daily life of ordinary women’. All these elements add to the value of women not only in the household but also to the honour and shame dynamic, the observance of dietary laws and cultic cleanliness.

## Mothers in the household

Rohrbaugh (1997:147), in referring to Josephus (*Ant.* 15.7.29), mentions that women would often play an active role in issues of inheritance and the reconciliation of family members.<sup>11</sup> In the same vein, Osiek (2008:333), when acknowledging the problem of identifying strong mother figures in texts authored by males, concludes that ‘if ancient societies were as complex as modern ones, elements of matrifocal culture must be there somewhere’.

Although in almost all cases excluded by the authors of ancient texts, strong mother figures in the first-century Mediterranean society would have commanded a certain level of respect and obedience in their family and would often occupy a central role in the household. Families with

10.’Metaphor is a pragmatic strategy used by speakers to convey to hearers something new that cannot easily be said or understood otherwise or to give an old concept a novel, witty or amusing package, whereas metonymy is a pragmatic strategy used by speakers to convey to hearers something new about something already well known. Using metaphors, speakers tell you more than what they actually say; using metonyms, they tell you more while saying less. From the point of view of the hearer, metaphor is a strategy used to extract new information from old words, whereas metonymy is a strategy used to extract more information from fewer words’ (Nerlich & Clarke 2001:252).

11.Josephus (*Ant.* 15.7.29) mentions the power that certain women had over their husbands. When recounting the role of women in the court of Herod the Great, he notes that ‘when the women, by kind words, and liberal presents, had gained his affections over to them, he was by degrees overcome’ and ‘though Herod should have all the success he could wish for, and should return again, he could not contradict his wife, in what she desired’.

high status based on ascribed honour, possibly such as the family of the prodigal,<sup>12</sup> allowed the women in their household more social freedom. Based on what is known about elite Roman women, these women often relied on their own status and not on the protection of a man (Pitt-Rivers 1966:65–71).

Although women's lives did not play out only within the confines of their houses, a woman was considered to have more influence in the household than a man (Ferguson 1987:58). It would be a mistake to believe that the roles of women were only confined to activities and responsibilities in the household, and that they were permanently concealed or hidden away. Archaeological evidence of Syro-Palestinian architecture (Meyers 2003):

[C]learly shows that women participated fully in crafts, daily household labours and management, and therefore had a much higher degree of recognition and responsibility than one might infer from literary sources alone. (p. 68)

Furthermore, assemblies, such as those of the early Jesus movement in the first century, were commonly held in houses and homes where women generally had autonomy to speak freely (Barton 1986:229–231).

The *BGU III 846* papyrus, a letter written between 127 and 126 BCE concerning a prodigal son, describes how the son begs to be reconciled with his mother (*μήτηρ*, δ[ι]αλάγητί μοι, emphasis added) after having exhausted his resources. The son admits to his mother that he has learnt his lesson and confesses: 'I know that I have sinned'<sup>13</sup> (*οἶδα ὅτι ἡμάρτηκα*, emphasis added) (Kloppenborg 2008:190). In some ways, Luke 15:18 echoes the structure of *BGU III 846*, with the son first calling to his parent (in the case of Lk 15:18, it is the father), followed by a confession of sin (*πάτερ, ἡμάρτων εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ ἐνώπιόν σου*, emphasis added). Even though there might not be a direct connection between the papyrus and the biblical parable, the text provides an interesting alternative, helping the reader to glimpse a different perspective present in the first century that is sometimes missed by a modern reader.

## Women as central, textually absent, figures

This article invites modern, twenty-first century readers and interpreters to imagine anew how a first-century hearer would have visualised the setting of the parable of the Prodigal Son, given the cultural information and cultural scripts constructed above. Based on the described cultural scripts, it is possible to imagine that the father most likely spent time with his wife in the house during the absence of

12. The father in the parable of the Prodigal Son is the master of a sizeable estate. He had enough resources to hire servants (Lk 15:17), present a feast in honour of his son's return (Lk 15:23) and owned enough land that, in the narrative, the eldest son returns from the field, doubtlessly owned by the father (Lk 15:25). These possessions and property contribute to the ascribed honour of the sons but more importantly the women in the household, including any possible daughters not mentioned in the text. Notably, ascribed honour would be ascribed to both genders (Malina 1993:33; Rohrbaugh 2020:74).

13. Own translation.

his son, and that the wife played an active role in the father's change of heart, which might have happened before he was 'filled with compassion' in Luke 15:20. This prompts the father to act in a very dishonourable<sup>14</sup> and even dangerous way when approaching his son. In using a 'realistic' reading of the parable, not only does the role of the mother, and even the women's roles during the feast and preparations, come to the foreground but also the effect that they most likely had on the father and the returning son.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, the Prodigal Son does not return to a feast his father has readied for him but to one that *women* had carefully prepared. Neither does he return to his father's arms but to the arms that *his mother* has prepared for him. In this way, a 'realistic' reading of parables can bring certain details and voices to light that might not have been 'seen' or 'heard' in traditional readings.

## Conclusion: A reconstruction of gender paradigms?

The teachings of Jesus provided a space for equality and safety for marginalised groups, including women.<sup>16</sup> The problem, however, persists that women are still not read as present in texts where the first hearers and intended audience would have understood women to be present.

Additionally, although it is not predisposed to do so, a 'realistic' reading of the parables as a methodology can inform other methodologies, such as feminist criticism. A 'realistic' reading thus not only provides a valuable and fresh way of reading and understanding a text from the possible vantage point of the first-century audience but can also supply other disciplines with valuable, and often new, perspectives that can be used to further the understanding and interpretation of biblical texts well beyond the 'confines' of

14. The behaviour of the father, when he runs to meet his son, would have cost him his dignity in the first-century Mediterranean society. Because they were remote figures of power, it would be considered a shock and dishonourable behaviour to run, unless it was in the case of an emergency. Moreover, the father might have had to lift up his robes and expose his legs in order to run to his son. This was not only a dishonourable and shameful act but would have been judged harshly by his community and his social standing would be effected and perhaps be compromised (Buttrick 2012:203; Hultgren 2000:78; Schottroff 2006:142; Scott 1989:70, 75; Snodgrass 2008:126). Therefore, the father in the parable subverts the patriarchal system of his day by not acting the way that was expected of him in his time. In this way, Jesus envisions a totally new idea of a family (Van Eck 2016:35).

15. Bailey (1976:181) notes that the father most likely expected his son to fail and either be dead or be living the life of a beggar.

16. Women play important roles as anointers, outsiders and followers of Jesus in many gospel narratives and in the traditions of the gospel authors. The woman anointing Jesus' feet in Mark 14:3–9, Matthew 26:6–13, John 12:1–8 and Luke 7:36–50, probably a prostitute, would have been breaking purity laws and entering a space that she would not have been welcome in. By allowing her to wash his feet, Jesus is also taking the impurity of the woman upon himself. In this way, he becomes guilty by association (Corley 2002:90; Spencer 2004:113; Loader 2012:344). In all the gospel accounts, Jesus does not behave as a typical male would in the 1st-century Mediterranean world. He commands the critics to leave the woman alone. He does not turn the woman away, even at the behest of the men who surrounded him (Loader 2012:346). Jesus also breaks the norms of his time in associating with outsiders, including women, by not approaching a woman on the grounds of her sexual behaviour. A prime example is found in the genealogy of Matthew (Mt 1:1–17) that not only includes women, a very strange feature for the time, but also includes women who would have been seen as doubtful in character because of their sexual exploits or status as a foreigner. Women who were outsiders could threaten the security of the gens and clan (Bauckham 2002:17–28). The inclusion of women in the genealogy is most probably a tradition that originated with Jesus himself; therefore, in Jesus' view, 'the women's sexuality is not a basis for discrimination against them or against having a sacred place in the divine ordering of human history' (Loader 2012:350).

biblical scholarship. This includes, but is not limited to, feminist criticism.

A realistic reading of the parables can thus provide a way of 'hearing' the voices and presence of women who have been 'buried' and 'hidden' by the authors of the texts, thereby, 'exhuming' or 'unhiding' the valuable roles women played in the time of Jesus.

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C.D.d.T. is the sole author of this research article.

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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