

9. WOMEN AT THE BEGINNING OF CHRISTIANITY

We now come to the New Testament to survey the descriptions and contributions of women as well as the rulings on men and women in the Church. We shall start with a survey of important women in the narratives about Jesus and the early Church, that is, the Gospels and Acts, with additional references in the epistles to the women mentioned in these books. It is important to remember that for all practical purposes the events and the people in the Gospels belong to the Old Testament life--they are Jews living under the Law and with the customs that were there from the beginning of Israel's national experience. So we shall see many things in these stories that merely carry forward what we have already discussed. But the point is that even though these passages are in the New Testament, they still require the same interpretative methods as those in the Old Testament, for we in the Church do not worship in the Temple with laws of purification and animal sacrifices, and neither are we barred from the congregation if we have some kind of disease (unless, of course, it is contagious).

Women in the Gospels

Mary

Biblical Data

What better place is there to start than with Mary, the mother of Jesus. She is mentioned in Matthew 1; 2; 12:46; Luke 1; 2; John 2:1-11; 19:25; and Acts 1:14. It

goes without saying that no woman has been honored more than Mary, and probably very few men in the faith have been honored as much either. We shall have to divide the discussion between what the Bible says about Mary, and then what the Church has taught about her. The task of discussing Mary is difficult, because the Bible says so little, and tradition, which is largely conflicting and unreliable, says so much. But in general I think it is safe to say at the outset that the Roman tradition makes more of Mary than is warranted, and the Protestant tradition makes less of her than it should. Somewhere there must be a balance.

An analysis of the name “Mary” may be helpful since several women in the Bible have this name. The name in the Greek New Testament is spelled *Mariam*, which is equivalent to the Hebrew *Miryam*, first made famous with the sister of Moses; it is also spelled *Maria*, the Grecized form of *Miryam*. Josephus spells the name *Mariamme*. The etymology and the meaning of the name is uncertain.

Mary was probably of the tribe of Judah and the line of David. The text does not tell us this; both genealogies trace Joseph, Mary’s husband, back to David. But in the annunciation the message declares that the child born to Mary would inherit the throne of his father David. This would not be said if it was only that Mary was to be married to a man in the line of David. The difficulty is that she went to see her cousin (kinswoman) Elizabeth “of the daughters of Aaron”(Luke 1:5, 36). If this kinship was by blood, Mary would be from Levi; if by marriage, then she could be of Judah. Of course, she could have been both, for priests did not have to marry within their tribe.

The Bible does not say who her parents were. The second-century *Protoevangelium of James* says they were Joachim and Anna. A tradition that early, from the time that people were still alive who knew the family and the places, seems to be reliable. At any rate, there are a number of churches that were built very early and named after St. Anna or Anne.

As a virgin girl, probably very young, Mary gave birth to Jesus, the Messiah, in a miraculous birth, and Elisabeth spontaneously and profoundly gave her the title, “Mother of the Lord.” Later Mary was to be married to Joseph the carpenter and apparently have four sons--James, Joses, Judas, and Simon, and several daughters who are not named (Matt. 13:55, 56). I say apparently because the Roman tradition argues that these brothers of Jesus were either Joseph’s sons from a previous

marriage, or they were actually cousins. As we shall see, the Roman tradition says that Mary was born of a virgin, remained a virgin all her life, and gave birth to Jesus in a supernatural virgin birth in which she remained a virgin through the birth process and experienced no pain. The support for some of these ideas come from the words of Mary herself, "How can this be since I do not know a man." The argument used is that the verb is the Greek present tense, stressing continual action--I am not knowing. From this it is concluded that Mary probably had taken a vow of perpetual virginity, so that the marriage to Joseph, a much older man, was never sexually consummated, and never intended to be. Well, it is doubtful that such a weight of dogma can be derived from Luke 1:34. The evidence of the Bible points in another direction. Matthew 1:24-25 says that Joseph married her but did not know her until she had given birth to a son. That would not have been said if she remained a perpetual virgin.

Her choice by God to be the mother of the Incarnate Son is almost as mysterious as her conception by the Holy Spirit. Mary was from the humblest family, and it was in such an environment that God prepared his Son to labor and to minister. In that sense her choice was fitting. But we must also remember that this supernatural birth had been prophesied in Isaiah 7:14; accordingly, God had prepared Mary for this occasion as well. She was a devout, pious young woman, so that one could easily see that the LORD was with her (Luke 1:28). But what is amazing is her simple submission to the plan of God; there is no word of doubt or troubled response. She was not skeptical or credulous. She willingly yielded her body to God with the simple resolution, "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to your word." In the miraculous birth the Holy Spirit by gentle operation took Deity and humanity and fused them together into our Lord's two natures within Mary's womb.

Mary was no doubt an exemplary young Jewish girl, devout and innocent in so many ways. The tendency in some theological circles is to make her response to the annunciation a great act of faith that made the incarnation possible--that without her consent the incarnation would not have occurred. While there is something to the value of her consent, this conclusion is expressed too strongly. It does not seem from the account that the plan of God was hanging in the balances until she agreed. The Angel of the LORD appeared to her and announced what was going to happen. She wondered how this might be. And so the Angel told her that the Holy Spirit would come upon her. When she heard all this she responded with her words of submission. The words of the Angel do not present an offer to be accepted or rejected. They match the great annunciations in the Old Testament where the LORD announced a

birth was about to take place. And besides, the LORD knew very well the kind of person Mary was, which is why **he chose her** to give birth to the Lord Jesus. So without taking anything away from Mary's faith and submission to the will of God, it was not a situation which was left up to her to decide, and she was not about to decide otherwise anyway. When the LORD sends his angel and declares this is what God is going to do for you and with you--well, what else can you say but "Let it be as you say."

Then Mary went to visit Elizabeth for a while. The salutation of her kinswoman was inspired by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:41-45). And this blessing inspired Mary to express her joy and praise in song, in words that have come to be known as the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55). It expresses her deep faith and personal joy as well as her faith in the Messianic fulfillment. Her worship was for the Lord who had exalted her and given her joy. But she addressed the Lord as "God, my Savior," indicating both her humility and her joy at the prospect of both her own personal salvation as well as that of the nation (we shall return to the later conflicting church tradition of her sinlessness).

In the winter of 5/4 B.C. Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem to register for the census, and while there Jesus was born. The interpretation of the text has always said that the child was born in a **stable** because there was no room in the **inn**. It is unlikely that a little village like Bethlehem would have had an inn. The word used, and the early traditions about the event, give the interpretation that it was a cave. We know from archaeology that people built rooms on the front of caves; people would sleep in these rooms, and the animals would be kept in the back of the cave where they would be safe and warm. If family members had returned to Bethlehem, the sleeping areas in all the houses would have been crowded, but there was room in the back of the cave where the mangers (feeding troughs) were. While this paints a humble scene, it would also be a merciful one. Would Mary have wanted to have the baby in a crowded room where people slept next to each other, or back in the privacy and warmth of the stable area?

The time of the birth of Jesus can be calculated fairly accurately from what we know. We know that Herod the Great died in March or April, 4 B.C. So Jesus had to have been born before that, but not too far before, because the event had to fit in the census of Caesar Augustus, and the time when Quirinius was governor of Syria. The birth took place in either December, 5 B.C. or January 4 B.C. (Yes, shepherds

are in the fields all year round). The wise men had to have arrived almost immediately because they went to the palace to Herod the Great. They could not have come two years later as some argue because Herod died right away. Herod ordered all the babies under two killed because he did not know when the child had actually been born, and the wise men had been traveling for months. So the wise men came to Bethlehem and worshiped the child. Herod was enraged when they did not come back and order the killing of the infants. He must have died within days or weeks after this decree. But Joseph and Mary with the child Jesus escaped and went to Egypt for a while. They returned when they heard that Archelaus was reigning in his father's place. But he also was a ruthless king; and so they returned to their home town of Nazareth.

Not only did Mary bring Jesus into the world, but she also was his mother for about 30 years (he was born in 5/4 B.C., and started his public ministry in the fall of 29 A.D., and died April 3, 33 A.D.¹). She gave him life, a home, teaching, and a Godly influence. But such attachment would bring sorrow. In fact, when she had brought the baby Jesus to the temple old Simeon said to her, "A sword shall pierce your heart." This was fulfilled when she had to watch her son die on a cross; but it actually began when Jesus began to fulfill his mission and pull away from her. At the Feast of Passover when he was 12, Mary came looking for him: "Your father and I have sought you." But he said: "Do you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" Young as he was he knew of his unique relation to God; and he expected Mary to realize what that meant. Likewise at Cana at the wedding years later his "Woman, what have I to do with you? My hour has not yet come" was a reminder to Mary not to give undue interference in his mediatorial work. Later, his mother and brothers came to find him. But when he was told they were outside, he said, "Who is my mother, by brother, and my sister, except those who do my will?" He was making a point, and not being cruel to his mother. Here Jesus indicated that Mary's blessedness consisted not in her being the mother of the Lord, but in believing in him and his God-given mission. In the argument of Matthew we have Jesus' invitation to people in chapter 11, and their total rejection of him in chapter 12, even accusing him of doing his works by Satan (which is blaspheming the Spirit). And so the point he was making is that he came to his own, but his own received him not, but to those who

¹ There is no time to discuss all the details of the chronology of Jesus' ministry. We know John began his ministry in the 15th year of the emperor Tiberius, or 29 A.D. Jesus would have been baptized that summer. Then in his ministry there were four Passovers he attended in Jerusalem, the last being his death. So that would put the crucifixion at 33 A.D.

believed he gave the right to be children of God; in other words, his true family was not made up of Jewish relatives, but those who believed in him. Then in chapter 13 he began teaching in parables.

But as stated above, the deepest wound the sword made in Mary's heart was when she had to watch Jesus die on the cross. But there Jesus showed tender compassion for Mary, and was fully able to see that she was taken care of as he gave her to John. Jesus commended Mary to John: "Your mother." A tremendous truth must have dawned upon Mary, that this man who hung on the cross was not simply her son; that before the world came into existence he was there. He was her Lord and her God. In fact, far from being her son, she was now his child in the faith.

Mary is listed with the gathered apostles in the Book of Acts. But she is not listed first as some traditions would have it, but last, as if she were now less significant than they. Mary was present in the Upper Room not as an object of worship, but as a worshiper of Jesus Christ, and not as a queen or a lady holding authority over the apostles, but one of a number of faithful followers of Jesus. She was, however, highly favored and honored above others, for she was the mother of the Lord.

There is no veneration of Mary in the New Testament. She is to be honored, "blessed among women." And, because of the prophecy of the "seed of the woman" in Genesis 3 and Galatians 4, she remains in biblical tradition as the antithesis to Eve in the garden. Just as Eve was the mother of the seed, the human race, so Mary is the mother of the Seed, Christ Jesus, the second Adam; by Eve's disobedience to the Word of the LORD sin entered the world, so by Mary's obedience (submission to the annunciation), the sin-bearer came into the world.

Church Tradition

It was not long before Mary was granted higher status in the Church. Even in early archaeological evidence at Nazareth "Hail Mary" is carved into one of the stones from the **third century** (in the museum under the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth). Early traditions expanded greatly about Mary's virtue and spirituality. For a detailed discussion of this material, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition, A History of the Development of Doctrine, Volume 3, The Growth of Medieval Theology, 600-1300* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp.

160-175. The following section includes some of the facts that he has gathered and documented.

Very early the Church was interested in how God could assume a man from the sinful mass of the human race and remain without sin. So a new attention was given to the significance of Mary, in fact, a cult to the Virgin began to grow. It had links to the earlier, pre-Christian pagan fertility cults which included ideas about a virgin who would give birth to a god and be known as the mother of God. Mary also was recognized as the one who conquered worldly wisdom through the miracle of the virgin birth, as well as the one who conquered the false teachings of heretics. Her virginity satisfied the quest for purity and spirituality; her maternity realized the privilege of a mother, but not any mother, the one who would give birth to the Lord. But the maternity, it was thought, was not only without human father, but without pain, and without loss of her virginity. The interest in Mary began to develop lengthy descriptions of her merits, privileges, and prerogatives, all of which were taken to mean that as the mother of God (based on the ancient fertility beliefs) she was unique among all human beings.

Gradually this unique status led to titles being conferred upon her. Poets and theologians vied with one another in elaborating distinctive appellations for the Virgin. She was the “standard-bearer of piety” whose life of prayer the faithful imitated. She was a model because she was “courageous in her resolution, temperate in her silence, prudent in her questioning, and righteous in her confession.” As the Queen of angels, the ruling Lady of the world, and the mother of him who purifies the world, she was given titles like “Mother of truth,” “Mother and Daughter of humility,” “Mother of Christians,” “Mother of peace,” “Most merciful Lady, and even “City of God.” The fact that a creature had become the mother of her creator brought names like “the fountain from which the living fountain flows, the origin of the beginning.” Therefore she was to be venerated and admired more than any other women, and even called “the radiant glory of the world, the purest maid of earth.” The glory of her name filled the earth.

Two of the names given to Mary involved the subtle use of language. One was “Mary, the star of the sea [*Maria maris stella*],” a name that was said to have been given her from heaven. It came from the prophecy in Numbers that said a star would come forth from Jacob. Based on nautical experience, it was popular to think of Mary as the star guiding the ship of faith. It seems to come from Jerome’s etymology

of her name as “a drop of water from the sea (*stilla maris*). This etymology was taken over by Isidore of Seville, but in the process “drop” (*stilla*) became “star” (*stella*). So in the ninth century a hymn appeared hailing Mary as the star of the sea, and gradually in poetry and homily she became known as the lodestar of voyagers through life.

The other unusual title was based on the similarity between “virgin” (*virgo*) and “rod” (*virga*). The miracle by which the rod of Aaron had sprouted became a type of the virgin birth, and the prophecy that a rod would come forth from the root of Jesse and a flower from his root were fulfilled in the virgin birth--who was the rod and the flower. The idea was in the East as well as in the West, but the Latin wordplay made it more appealing in the West.

The most important title though had to do with her virginity and maternity, hence “Virgin Mother.” No one else had the fertility of motherhood and the purity of virginity combined. She was a virgin in her beliefs, a virgin in the way she conceived, and a virgin in the way she gave birth and remained a virgin--a fertile virgin and a chaste child-bearer. Not only did she give birth without shame or pain, she remained a mother without corruption. The prophecy of Ezekiel 44:1-2 was taken to apply to Mary; it says, “this gate shall remain shut, for the LORD, the God of Israel, has entered it.” This proved to many that she had to remain a virgin after the birth of Jesus.

One corollary of this doctrine of the virgin birth was the emphasis on celibacy in the priesthood as well as on virginity. The reasoning was that because Christ’s body grew in the virgin’s womb, and Mary became the symbol of the Church, ministers must remain celibate. Christ not only remained a virgin himself, but chose a virgin in which to be born--so by whom then does he want his body, the Church, to be governed? And then, Christian virgin women shared in Mary’s victory over the ancient foe’s victory over Eve. Virginity and celibacy were viewed as the purest form of life. And another title was given to Mary, “Queen of virgins.” But to balance this out, it was also recognized that it was her maternal office, not her virginity, that gave her a special place in the economy of salvation. Moreover, Mary was the epitome of humility, which is why the angel addressed her as “full of grace.” The humility of Mary was necessary to keep her other qualities from filling her with pride; thus her humility was part of her holy and sinless life.

The idea that Mary was free of original sin was not unanimously accepted in the Middle Ages. But it was widely held, even by those who did not accept the teaching of the immaculate conception (i.e., that Mary was herself virgin born), “that it was fitting for the Queen of virgins, by a singular privilege of sanctity, to lead a life that was free of sin.” It was the pious thing to believe that Mary did not have any sin of her own. Thus, a special immunity had been conferred on her, and so she was full of grace.

Many of these ideas had been expressed earlier here and there; but what sets this period apart was the growing emphasis on the office of Mary as Mediatrix. The term grew up in the Eastern Church, but was used in the Latin near the end of the eighth century, but did not receive widespread acceptance until the eleventh or twelfth centuries. It had a twofold emphasis: she was the way by which the Savior came to us in the incarnation and the redemption, and, she was also the one through whom we ascend to the one who descended through her for us. We have access through her to the Son, who through her was given to us, so that he might take us up to himself. This was a way of speaking about her role in the incarnation and therefore the redemption of the Son. It was fully recognized that it would have been impossible for the redemption of the human race to have taken place unless the Son of God had been born of a virgin. Thus she became the “gate of Paradise, which restored God to the world and opened heaven for us.” By her participation she has filled heaven with the saved and emptied hell of those who would have been condemned if it were not for her. It was her assent to the word and will of God that made the incarnation and redemption possible. But she not only made salvation possible, she caused the angels to be restored and renewed in their strength, and she was instrumental in bringing into existence the royal priesthood spoken of by the apostle.

Passages of Scriptures were then focused on Mary. The oracle in Genesis 3 was read “she shall crush your head” (rather than the seed of the woman crushing the serpent’s head) and taken to mean Mary would be the victor. She was therefore “the sanctuary of the universal propitiation, the cause of the general reconciliation, the vessel and the temple of the life and the salvation of all men.” These words of Anselm about the virgins’ place in the history of salvation, set in prayers as so much language about her was, can only mean that she is the mediatrix, the one through whom we have received mercy, and the one through whom we have received Jesus (Bernard).

As mediatrix, then, Mary was the second Eve, just as Christ was the second

Adam. As it had been through a woman that the curse of sin and death had come upon the world, it would be through a woman that blessing would be restored to the world. The special value of Mary was conferred a special eminence to her namesake, Mary Magdalene, for as through Mary the curse of Eve had been removed and Paradise was opened to us, through the Magdalene the shame of female sex has been undone and the splendor of the resurrection realized. Mary Magdalene was then celebrated as the blessed bride of God, a type of the Church that had been drawn out of the pagan world to the source of grace. But the canceling of the curse of Eve took place in the birth of Jesus, because Mary had no pain that was the result of the curse. She not only cast out the bondage and pain of her mother Eve, but she also exalted the status of woman. Eve had been the instrument of folly; but through Mary wisdom once again been mediated to the human race.

The title of mediatrix also applied to Mary's ongoing role as intercessor between Christ and mankind. It was the memory of Mary's mercies that prompted people to turn to Mary to find salvation through Christ. She had been chosen by the LORD for the special task of pleading for the cause of men before her Son. So she was the "Mother of the Kingdom of Heaven, the Mother of God, the only refuge in every need." She was addressed as the one who could bring cleansing and healing to the sinner and who could bring help in time of temptation.

This all caused some question, then, about the relation of Mary and Christ. Generally, it was stated that whatever was set forth as praise to the mother was also in praise to the Son, and that it pleased the Son for Mary to be praised for she had been exalted by the Son. Thus, the portrayal of the coronation of Mary became common by the twelfth century, depicting her at the right hand of the Son. Later painters showed Mary being crowned by the trinity. She was therefore exalted as second to God, and given authority over all things. Through her Son she had been exalted so that there is nothing in heaven and earth that is not subject to the Virgin. Therefore, it was concluded, she should receive our praise, for there is nothing equal to Mary and nothing greater than Mary save God. Veneration and praise, using the *Te Deum*, was then directed to Mary. Prayers were often prayed to "My good Lord and my good Lady," appealing to them both, Son and Mother.

It was natural, then, that the festival of her nativity became the beginning of all the festivals of the New Testament, and the origin of all festivals. As with any saint, it became popular to attribute miracles to Mary. A few were said to have been done

in her lifetime, but most afterward. Relics of her miraculous life were collected at places like Chartres. Along with the veneration of Mary through such things was the commemoration of her nativity through the *Ave Maria*, the cultic repetition of which became the sign of true piety.

Because some folks were taking these ideas to the extreme, arguing for example that the Virgin was created in heaven, attention had to be given to the birth of Mary. Two doctrines were formed, the first being the Immaculate Conception (established in 1854), and the other the Assumption of Mary (1950). August 15 became the day to celebrate her assumption from the world and entrance into heaven. Ephesians 4 then was adapted to Mary, who ascended on high and through whom the gifts were given to mankind. Mary's assumption had elevated her above all angels and archangels--and even all the merits of the saints were surpassed by those of this woman. In her human nature was raised to a position superior to that of all immortal spirits. This all gave rise to speculation as to whether Mary suffered pain and died, or had already been raised as the first fruit of the resurrection. There are, by the way, three traditional sights of the grave of Mary, one in Jerusalem, one in Galilee, and one in Ephesus--evidence she was considered to have died, but uncertainty as to where. But in her life, never, for even a moment, did she suffer interruption of her beatific vision of God. She was said to be more precious than any, more holy than all. The traditions of the Church increasingly attributed to Mary many of the features of the person and work of Christ the Redeemer. Much of the teaching and traditions in the Church served as the inspiration for women down through history, for they had nothing, and yet they had to endure this life and remain pure. But the teachings about Mary, for which there is little biblical support, reveal how involved and entrenched the doctrines are. They are so much woven into the fabric of the Roman church that nothing will ever change them--unless she is officially name co-redemptrix.

Elisabeth

Her story is in Luke 1:5-80. She came of an honored priestly line and was the wife of a priest, Zacharias. She became the mother of John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Christ.

Elisabeth was a godly woman; she and her husband were righteous before the LORD, obeying the commandments. But they were childless. They prayed for years,

and finally in their older age they were amazed with pregnancy. When John was born, the father hailed his birth with a glorifying song that announced that God had given him to be the prophet of the Highest.

But Elisabeth was a privileged woman in another way: she was the first to confess Jesus in the flesh. When she was six months pregnant Mary came to visit her. Both mother and child were affected by the Holy Spirit, and Elisabeth gave Mary the honorable title, “the Mother of my Lord.” In the light of the amazing births unfolding, and the angelic announcements, Elisabeth knew the Messiah had come, and she confessed him. It was this Spirit-filled greeting that prompted Mary to respond with her song, the *Magnificat*.

Anna

According to Luke 2:36-38 Anna was the woman who prophesied in the temple and proclaimed Jesus when Mary brought him to the temple. Anna was renowned as a prophetess, one who frequently announced the word of the Lord--God spoke through her. She was of great age, probably 100 or even older; she had been married for seven years, and then remained a widow for 84 years. She had grown old in the service of the sanctuary, and having now seen, with Simeon, the salvation of God, was ready to depart. She had seen so much; if we rehearse the events in Jerusalem and in the temple itself from 75 B.C. to 5 B.C., we can see how she of all people would have longed for the coming of a righteous king, a holy priest, a time of peace and justice. What a transitional period for her life to cover, from the last of the Hasmonean kings, to the reign of Herod, and in it the wars and the murders in the palaces and temple.

As a widow she lived a simple, if not desolate life. Her whole life was bound up in the service of the Lord, for she never sought the comfort and care of marriage after death ravaged her home. She was there night and day in attendance of the services. And through fasting and prayer she had developed the spiritual discipline such service required.

Then, one day the miracle happened; she heard old Simeon exult in the presence of Jesus, the infant. Not only did Anna pray and praise, but she went out to proclaim the glad tidings to all who shared her hope in the coming of the Messiah. She was in effect a missionary; she was one of the godly remnant that waited through the years

of Israel's dark times before the Messiah (i.e., Christ) came and looked for the Dayspring from on High. Anna remains a sample of a faithful woman's abiding and expectant faith throughout a long life. When she saw the child, she would have understood why God allowed her to live so long.

Mary Magdalene

Mary Magdalene is one of the most devout women in the New Testament period. She is referred to in Matthew 27:56, 61; 28:1; Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1-19; Luke 8:2; 24:10; John 19:25; 20:1-18. There is much talk about this Mary today, primarily because of the current fictitious account of her marriage to Jesus and the birth of children that led to a line of kings in Europe. The sad part of it is that many people think that these ideas are historical fact.

Mary was from the town of Magdala, a place which the Talmud says had an unsavory reputation, and because of harlotry there had been destroyed. The little town, very little town, was on the northwestern shores of Galilee, north of Tiberias and south of Capernaum.

Mary Magdalene was introduced in the Gospel of Luke right after the story of the sinful woman. This juxtaposition of accounts, plus the notoriety of her home town, has led people to the conclusion that she had been a prostitute. But there is not a shred of direct evidence for that. The Church started establishing Magdalen Houses (beginning in Naples in 1324) for the rescue of fallen women. The Great Masters portrayed her as a courtesan with a voluptuous figure. All that we can say from Scripture is that Jesus cast seven demons out of her, but the idea that she was a prostitute is baseless. Today the idea of her having been a prostitute is even being played down in Roman texts.

In eight of the fourteen passages where she shows up she is listed with other women--but she always heads the list. This would indicate that she was the prominent female among those rendering service to Christ. In five places where she is mentioned alone, it is in conjunction with the resurrection of Jesus. Many have concluded that no woman superseded Mary in her devotion to our Lord.

We do not know what form her demonic bondage took--depression, epilepsy,

nervousness, or worse. But Jesus rescued her from this troubling plight, and she followed Him. Luke links Mary with Joanna and Susanna and many others among those that Jesus healed of evil spirits and infirmities. These women became generous in their service and devotion to Jesus. Mary left her home in Magdala to follow him. In the Bible we never read of Jesus or his disciples asking for money, but funds would have been necessary to live. Much of it came from Mary and other women like her who had been richly blessed by the Lord.

In the dark days of Jesus' death and burial, Mary was there. Mary is among those who followed Jesus and still ministered to him as he made that last trip. She was there at the mockery of a trial, in Pilate's Hall; she saw and heard them clamor for his crucifixion. And she was one of the sorrowing group that stood nearby the cross to comfort Jesus by their presence as he died.

Even in death she was there. Mary remained sitting over against the sepulcher, watching, until Joseph had laid the Lord's body away. And on the morning of the resurrection, she was there in the garden. What a great honor God conferred on this faithful woman, allowing her to be the first witness of the resurrection--she actually was used to catechize the disciples. In the garden on resurrection morning we have the interchange between Jesus and Mary, and what a marvelous story of revelation it is. Mary did not actually recognize Jesus until he said "Mary." She thought he was the gardener. (We may make a connection with the first garden, when as a result of sin Adam was cast out to work the ground--life under the curse; but the assumption that this man in the garden now was just another person living under the curse was corrected with one word, "Mary"). With this one word from the risen Christ she fell at his feet. Then he commissioned her to be the first herald of his resurrection: "Go . . . and say unto them I ascend to my Father."

In thinking about Mary Magdalene we are struck by how much of a change God can bring in the life of a person, especially one ensnared by the evil one. But we are also impressed by how much a woman like this can do for Christ. It is a lesson in devotion.

Joanna

Joanna was the wife of Chuza, the house-steward of Herod the Tetrach (not Herod the Great; Luke 8:1-3; 23:55; 24:10). Along with Mary Magdalene and Susanna, Joanna was healed of evil spirits and infirmities. She was a woman of the upper class; but when she was restored to full health, she gave her loyal service to Christ. She was one of the traveling company who went before Jesus to arrange hospitality for Jesus and the band of men.

Chuza was steward or guardian of all that Herod had. No doubt Chuza and Joanna were among the members of court when Herod imparted his beliefs about the ministry of Jesus, whom he thought was John come back from the dead--he had murdered John the Baptist, you may recall. As Joanna became one of the followers of Jesus, it was natural for her to speak about him in Herod's household (Matt. 14:2); indeed, Herod would hear it from several sides, for his foster brother Manaen was a teacher in the Church (Acts 13:1). Tradition has it, though, that Chuza lost his place in court because of his wife's conversion to Christianity.

Joanna was a generous supporter of Jesus with her substance. But she was also a devoted worshiper of him. She was there at the cross among the women who stayed close by; and no doubt she was among the small company that prepared spices and ointments for his burial. Joanna was also among the women who came to the tomb on resurrection morning, but to their amazement found the tomb empty, for the living Lord was no longer among the dead. So Joanna was among the last at the death, and the first at the resurrection to witness to the central points of the Gospel.

Martha and Mary of Bethany

Martha and Mary and Lazarus were very close friends and followers of Jesus. And Jesus often stayed with them in Bethany when he went up to Jerusalem, for Bethany is just over the top of the hill (Mount of Olives) from the holy city. Jesus did not stay with them the night of his Passover supper because the religious laws required that the devout spend the night in Jerusalem--Bethany was just outside the city limits.

Martha is known as the more practical one of the two sisters of Lazarus. Luke 10:38-41, John 11; and 12:1-3 give us information about this Godly woman who also served the Lord with great devotion.

Martha and her sister must have been important figures in the village of Bethany, for the place is referred to as “the village of Mary and her sister Martha.” The house to which Jesus often went is referred to as Martha’s house, and this may allude to the fact that she was the one who ran it, if not owned it. Martha is usually seen busy with practical matters of service, and Mary is seen at the feet of Jesus. But Martha had a gift and love for serving Jesus and the saints in the practical things of life. But Martha was also found at the feet of Jesus as well, listening to his teachings so carefully. This is amazing because in the Jewish world disciples--men--would sit at the feet of the master and listen. But Jesus allowed women that privilege.

Martha, as one might expect from her personality and from her sister’s, was guilty of complaining about her sister. She became distracted, irritated that Mary left her to serve alone, and so she complained to Jesus: “Don’t you care . . . ?” In her complaint she included Jesus in her rebuke. But in the reply we see an affectionate rebuke by Jesus: “Martha, Martha.” He reminded Martha that she was careful and troubled about many things but that one thing was needful--the good way that Mary had chosen. Mark adds that Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus.

The sickness and death of Lazarus brought Jesus back to Bethany. Martha, in her usual direct manner, rebuked Jesus mildly: “If you had been here, Lazarus would not have died.” Jesus immediately healed her crushed spirit by assuring her that her brother would rise again. “I am the resurrection and the life” astounded her; and so he challenged her, saying, “Do you believe this?” We then receive from Martha one of the most beautiful confessions of faith in the Gospels: “Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Messiah, the Son of God, who should come into the world.” Her fears about the condition of Lazarus were soon put aside as he rose from the dead.

The last we read of Martha is at the supper given for the raised Lazarus. Mary sat at Jesus’ feet and anointed them; and Martha, still serving, did not offer a word of objection. One time she was over distracted by obligations and cares; but now she simply served the Lord in her capacity and let others serve him in their capacities. What a lesson for Christians to learn.

Peter’s Wife

From Matthew 8:14-18; Mark 1:29-34; and Luke 4:38-41; we read of Peter’s

(unnamed) wife. And from 1 Corinthians 9:5 we may conclude that she accompanied her husband on some of his journeys, caring for his needs. When the apostle came to write his epistles and in them describe the ideal wife and ideal womanhood, he may very well have had a sympathetic, discreet, and understanding woman as his wife for his inspiration.

Peter's Mother-in-law

Peter and Andrew had a home in Capernaum, probably their father's legacy to them. It was the home that the mother of Peter's wife shared after the death of her husband. She is best known as the woman healed by Jesus: when fever (malaria likely) brought her to death's door, Peter told Jesus, and Jesus came and touched her and she was healed. He took her by the hand in a personal touch, and she rose up immediately. The reality of this dramatic moment is captured in the fact that she began immediately to minister to all who were there. The incident reflects a closely knit family, including the mother-in-law, who loved the Lord, and were loved by him.

The Woman with the Issue of Blood

The account is of a woman who must have been weakened and discouraged after twelve years of the issue of blood, which rendered her ceremonially unclean for the temple (see Matthew 9:20-22; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48). She was not only ill and unable to enter the temple; she would not have had children in this condition either. Her "uncleanness," as well as society's view of her, probably led her to approach Jesus in the manner she did--she touched the hem of his garment, and she was healed. But he knew that power had gone out of him.

Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" Of course, the disciples were amazed at the question since the crowd was great. But he knew the touch of faith. And the woman confessed all to him, that she had touched him. To her, he said, "Daughter, be of good comfort, your faith has saved you, go in peace." Here then is a woman who was "unclean," but her faith was strong. She knew that if she could get to Jesus, He could cure her. But she was afraid since her condition might put him off.

The theology behind this is interesting. Leviticus made it clear that the

“unclean” could not come in contact with the holiness of God. The English word “unclean” is about the best we can do for the Hebrew word; but it does not have the same connotations as the English gloss “unclean.” It simply means the person is not in the perfect, created order and therefore not to be in the presence of the holy God. And Haggai made it clear that that which is unclean cannot become clean by touching clean or holy garments or utensils. But this is the HOLY ONE of Israel. As God in the flesh, he could not be made unclean. So the instant there was contact, she was made clean in his presence. Thus it must be. And this is a little glimpse of the hope of glory, for when we all enter into his presence, we shall be made whole. What the Law prohibited (preventing the unclean from entering) Jesus provided (the supernatural deliverance from this mortal body).

Jairus’ Daughter

The previous miracle is actually a miracle within a miracle, for Jesus was on his way to this little girl when the woman touched him (Matthew 9:18-25; Mark 5:21-43; Luke 8:41-56). Jairus was the ruler of the synagogue; he was a just and righteous man who sent for Jesus when his twelve year old girl was at the point of death. There was not a moment to lose--but Jesus was diverted, and did not hurry to the house.

The little girl died. When Jesus got to the house all the professional mourners were there with their noise and confusion. Jesus made them all leave the room. His words to the grief-stricken parents and to the crowd were so authoritative: “Fear not, only believe,” and “The little girl is not dead, but asleep.” Of course, this was met with a certain amount of scorn. But in Jesus mind “sleeping” was the apt description of someone who is dead, for he can awaken them.

But in the chamber the Lord once again revealed that he was from above, and that he indeed was the resurrection and the life. Already the little girl had heard the call, “Come up here”; but now she would hear the voice of the One who would command both worlds: “Little girl, arise.” No lengthened process was required once he spoke and once he touched her. Luke, the physician, says that her spirit came again . . . and her parents were astonished. The people began to see that this was no ordinary prophet, but this was the Giver of life.

So a woman with an issue of blood for twelve years, and a young girl who had

only lived twelve years, now were made whole and brought into the Kingdom by the miraculous intervention of our Lord.

The Syro-Phoenician Woman

This account is found in Matthew 15:21-28 and Mark 2:24-30. She was one of the few remaining descendants of the ancient Phoenician or Canaanite people (Mark calls her a Greek, the normal term for Gentiles as distinguished from Jews in Mark). The Phoenician-Canaanite people had largely disappeared through the many wars of the region, but some remained (and there is even some evidence of connections to some of the people of Lebanon today). One common view today, obviously from liberal sources, says that this woman converted Jesus from being a racist. That idea is not what the passage is about at all.

She is portrayed as a mother suffering unspeakable grief over the demonic control of her daughter. She came to Jesus, determined to find help from him. Jesus at the time was in the region, both to escape the crowds in Galilee and of course to rescue this woman. And the woman knew her history and his identity, so she called him the “Son of David.” That label would acknowledge ancient wounds, the wars between Israel and the Canaanites. She knew he was heir to the throne in Jerusalem; and she knows that she is an accursed Canaanite--in the Jews’ opinion. So she was crying out for some mercy from him.

At first reading the story seems strange. Jesus tells her that he was sent to Israel, to the lost sheep of Israel, apparently testing her faith by appealing to the ancient divisions between Israelites and Canaanites. But her response shows humility and resolution: “Even the dogs eat from the crumbs that fall from the Master’s table.” She knew the Jews thought they were dogs; but she was willing to take what she could get--if the Jews did not want Jesus’ works, she did.

So, although Jesus had at first addressed the woman in an austere, traditional way, his coolness made the final favor sweeter. “O woman, great is your faith; be it unto you as you will.” Jesus gave her the chance to leave, defeated and rejected by his challenging statement; but she knew that he was able to heal her daughter, and she would be satisfied with the crumbs, not the whole loaf of bread.

Several times in Jesus' ministry he answered questions in a way that seemed to put a stumblingblock in the way of the person. Some of them went away sad; but this woman went home to meet her daughter made whole. She was persistent in her faith in Christ.

The Widow with Two Mites

Mark (12:41-44) and Luke (21:1-4) record the incident of the widow giving her mites. The time was the festival event of Jerusalem; the Temple would be filled with worshipers, and they all would be making their token offerings in the receptacles by the wall. In the midst of it all, this widow quietly put in her two mites. Jesus, in His omniscience and His wisdom, observed that because she gave her all, "this poor widow has cast in more than they all." What a rebuke of the pious Pharisees and Scribes who tithed to the letter. But in proportion to what she had, she gave more, for it was all she had.

The passage shows us several things. It shows us how the Lord evaluates giving, that the proportion of the sacrifice and not the amount is what impresses God. It also shows that it was given to God and would count, no matter how the Scribes and Priests squandered the money on their own wasteful living. But it also shows humble devotion in a widow, one of the down-and-outs in the society (one whose house the Pharisees devoured). This woman then becomes the sample for all time of proper giving to the Lord.

The Sinner Woman

The story takes place in the house of Simon in the town of Nain (Luke 7:36-50). The woman was a prostitute, her sins were many. But she had heard that Jesus was there; and had he not said that harlots would enter the kingdom before the self-righteous Pharisees? So she came into the gathering, uninvited, and threw herself at Jesus' feet. She anointed his feet from an alabaster box she had brought, and she dried his feet with her hair. And he accepted her devotion.

The host of the house, Simon, was incensed over the whole matter. But Jesus rebuked him with a little story, asking which would be most thankful, the one to whom

much was forgiven, or the other. The beginning of his lesson is powerfully subtle: “Simon, I have somewhat to say to you.” And then he rebuked Simon, saying, “I entered your house, but you did not give me . . . but this woman . . .” The point was that Simon was the one who was not thankful and devoted because He was not receiving grace from Jesus as she was about to. To her he announced, “Your sins have been forgiven.” This, as we would expect, created quite a stir, for only God can forgive sins. She was a sample of the true Gospel: her faith had saved her, and her faith expressed itself in her love for Jesus.

The Woman in Samaria (John 4)

Jesus revealed more to this woman than to most people with whom he spoke. It came when Jesus and his disciples were traveling through Samaria -- something the Jews would not normally do, for the Samaritans were looked down on in society. Jews would have crossed the Jordan and gone down the other side. But not only did Jesus go through Samaria, he talked with a woman, a Samaritan woman at that. It began with the request for water, and turned into the discussion of living water which Jesus could supply. It would culminate in his disclosure to her when she mentioned the coming Messiah, “I who speak to you am he.”

But along the way the omniscient Lord uncovered her sin. He knew all about this woman in Samaria, and so when He told her to call her husband and she acknowledged she did not have one, He corrected her that she had had five husbands and the one she was with now was not her husband. From this she could run to the village and declare that here was the Messiah, One who told her everything that she did. She was an ignorant woman, a sinner, a Samaritan; but Christ revealed himself to her as the Messiah, and changed her life.

The disciples upon returning were amazed that this all took place. But the passage reveals that this too was part of the mission of Jesus, for “the Father was seeking worshipers”--those who would worship in Spirit and in Truth, and not necessarily on one mountain or another. Jesus often turned to the sinners, the outcasts, the poor, the widows, the strangers; for the Jews, especially the religious leaders, were too self-righteous to respond to the call. It is another passage of the grace of God.

The Woman Taken in Adultery

John 8:1-11 (a textually problematic passage) records how the religious leaders brought a woman taken in the very act of adultery; they wanted to see if he would agree with the Law of Moses and say she should be put to death. There are some things about the passage that suggest they are simply setting him up with a tricky question again. Where was the man? The Law said that both the man and the woman taken in adultery were to be put to death; but if she was caught in the act there should have been a man too.

But Jesus stooped down and began writing with His finger in the ground. This action, as you might expect, has prompted many suggestions. It may be, however, that the symbolism of the act was more important than what He wrote. They had come quoting Moses; and he as a Jew was bound under that law. But the Commandments were given to Moses by God, who wrote them with his “finger.” Perhaps Jesus is once again claiming to be the authority who could condemn and who could forgive.

And then Jesus gave his response: “Whoever among you is without (this particular) sin, let him cast the first stone.” The only One present that day who was without sin did not cast a stone, even though He was the only one who could. There had to be two witnesses, though, before death could be brought. But none of the witnesses stayed, for they were not without sin. Whatever the writing was, and however each one took his words, they were all convicted in their hearts.

Jesus forgave the woman, but would not condone her sin. Rather, she was to go and sin no more. Here was a case of a woman being used for sex by men, brought to condemnation by men who were guilty of the same sin, but forgiven by the Lord who saved her. The passage also shows us what it means to be saved -- “Be no longer a sinner.”

This episode should teach us to be slow to condemn the actions of others, especially when we must first condemn ourselves for doing the same or similar things; and, it shows us that we now should declare to every sinner the forgiveness which condemns not. The Lawgiver is the Redeemer.

The Daughters of Philip (Acts 21:8,9)

The text simply mentions that Philip, the deacon (Acts 6:3), had four daughters, virgins, who prophesied. We know little about them. They apparently had chosen not to marry for the time being; they may have accompanied their father on his ministry; their mother probably shared in their spiritual formation since the family was so used by God. They did not have what we would call the office of a prophet, not in the classical sense of the Old Testament prophets who often wrote Scripture; but they did communicate the Word from God in a fresh and meaningful way, demonstrating the reality of the faith.

Rhoda (Acts 12:1-19)

Here was a young servant girl who had the great privilege of declaring to the disciples that God had answered their prayer--and all she was told for this was that she was mad. She would experience what they would find in their life's ministry, that when they told people Jesus is alive, they would often be met with scorn.

Rhoda was the domestic servant of Mary the mother of Mark. James had already been put to death, and Peter had been captured and taken to prison. The saints gathered at the large home of Mary to pray for his release from Herod. And, while they prayed, an angel came and loosed Peter from prison; when he found himself outside, he came to the house where the saints had gathered.

It was Rhoda who heard the knock at the door. She was so excited to see Peter through the latch-hole that she left the door locked and ran to tell the rest of them, "It's Peter." They laughed her to scorn. Of course it could not be Peter; that is why they were here praying, because he was in prison. If it was Peter they wouldn't be praying. But Rhoda insisted Peter was at the door; and knowing Peter he was probably pounding the door soundly. Now their answer was more theological: "O, it's his angel." Well, they were not praying for his angel to be set free. Finally, they believed the little servant girl, and opened the door--and it was Peter! The text says that they were dumbfounded. Obviously, their faith needed to grow (although we too are often surprised when God actually answers some of our prayers).

It is a shame that our faith is often like their faith. Someone has said that if the

Lord wants to surprise his people he only has to give them an answer to prayer. No sooner do they receive an answer than they say, “Who would have thought?” Peter must have commended Rhoda for her service, and for her persistent report to them that it was as they had prayed. And her name is preserved in Holy Scripture for her part in telling the people what God had done.

Salome (Mt. 14:6-11; Mk. 6:22-28)

The name “Salome” is a derivative from the name “Solomon.” This woman was not very wise, though; she was the daughter of Herodias by her first husband, Herod Philip, also a son of Herod the Great. It was through Herodias’ unlawful marriage to Herod Antipas that drew the rebukes of John. And it was through the sensual dancing of Salome before the king, her step-father, that the head of John the Baptist was taken.

The king’s request for her to dance was a major request, for such would not have been common practice. It was a compliment that merited the highest reward. In this story, Herod’s unbounded love (lust) for Salome led him also to a rash vow. Only this time the daughter was not killed, but the prophet of the Lord who had dared criticize the marriage of Herodias. The evil heart of one woman planned the evil dance of another, drawing the evil vow from the king, and God’s greatest prophet died. Power in the hands of corrupt people poses a major threat to righteousness, as Proverbs says again and again. But ultimately the Church will prevail by God’s power.

Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11)

The early Church was thriving by the power of the Holy Spirit. They met in homes, day by day; they broke bread, they prayed, they fellowshiped, and they continued in the apostolic teachings. In Acts 4 we read how powerfully the Spirit of God worked in the people--they shared what they had so that they had all things in common. One notable example was Barnabas, who was filled with the Holy Spirit and sold all his possessions and gave them to the apostles for the work. Here is one solid proof of the filling of the Spirit--magnanimous giving.

The contrast to all that is in chapter 5 in the story of Ananias and his wife

Sapphira, who did not turn out to be the jewel she was named to be. Their inspiration was satanic and not divine: “Why has Satan filled your heart?” The term “fill” is an expression for “control,” as in the equation in Ephesians, “Be not filled with wine . . . but be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Satan controlled this early couple in the Church and they concocted a scheme to gain acclaim. They sold a portion of land and brought some of the money, and passed it off as the total among in order to gain praise as super saints. Peter made it clear: they did not have to give anything, and they would have been better off had they given nothing. But they lied to the Spirit of God and appropriated something that they had no right to, the appearance of Spirit-filled righteousness. Thus, they were both killed.

It is a good thing that God only judges people like this in the beginning days of each dispensation (Achan in Joshua, the man picking up sticks on the Sabbath day, etc.). But it is meant to be a warning that God takes no delight in hypocrisy, that is, the attempt to appear righteous when we are not. Peter gave the woman the chance to escape, but when she insisted on the same story that her (recent) husband had given, she was condemned before the Church.

Lydia (Acts 16:12-15; 40; Phil. 1:1-10)

Lydia was a prominent business woman who lived in Thyatira which was one of the Greek colonies. The city was known for its purple dyes; and Lydia was a business woman engaged in selling this product. She was a devout woman, worshipping according to her Jewish faith.

She responded to the faith in Christ when Paul came and spoke in the small gathering of the synagogue. Her conversion was declared by a public confession of her faith through the waters of baptism. Thus, Lydia, and then others who followed her, became Paul’s first European convert(s). Lydia would become the forerunner of a great host of saints to enter the faith that had begun in Israel. Lydia’s sincere conversion was then evidenced by her willingness to give missionaries the hospitality of her home. She not only sold her dyes, she served the LORD.

Dorcas (Acts 9:36-43)

Dorcas was among the numerous disciples of the early Church, called “a certain disciple.” Since she lived in Joppa she must have been an early convert of Philip the evangelist. Her conversion was the source of her generous and charitable acts.

But Dorcas passed away; and her death must have been a blow to the small but growing community of saints. It was Peter who raised her from the dead. He was nearby; he came in response to their request and, after the example of Christ, knelt down and prayed. When he felt that his request had been heard, he said, “Tabitha, arise.” Dorcas sat up; and Peter presented her alive to the believers. The miracle certainly inspired the community in their beginning faith; and since she was well-known in the town for her charitable deeds, the news of her restoration to life would have spread rapidly. But rather than dwell in such popularity, she returned to her ways of serving the Lord.

Priscilla

Priscilla (Acts 18:2, 18, 26; Romans 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19) is the woman who was foremost in service. We shall be looking at her share in ministry a little more later on; but here we shall simply survey the material.

Priscilla and her husband were Jews of Asia Minor, and as such were expelled by Claudius from Rome. In Corinth they became life-long friends of Paul.

Priscilla and Aquila, or sometimes as it is said, Aquila and his wife Priscilla, seem to embody that ancient teaching of the two becoming one. They seemed to have a stable and happy marriage in which they worked together in all things. That Priscilla is mentioned first cannot be overlooked, for in that culture that surely would have given her prominence. The fact that there are Greek manuscripts that reverse the order shows that Priscilla should be listed first (for scribes would try to change that order).

When Paul met them they were firmly founded in the faith. They were drenched in Old Testament Scriptures and had found the promised Messiah in their Lord Jesus, the Christ. Thus, they were able to enter into Paul’s ministry. They shared also the tent trade with Paul, and must have had many hours of marvelous conversations as they worked together with their hands.

Priscilla and Aquila were also involved in discipleship. They heard the young Apollos, the great Alexandrian divine who knew only the baptism of John. But this woman and her husband invested the time in him so that he grew in the faith.

And finally, we read that the Church met in their home. They were the ones responsible for providing the place of meeting and forming the church in their city. They truly are an example of Godly lay-persons in the life of the Church, leaving their mark on the ministry.

Conclusion

There are many other women mentioned or alluded to in these books, but these are the prominent ones. It is clear that women played a significant role in the ministry of Christ and the apostles, moreso than what would have been normally the custom in the first century.