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Jesus Awakened a Loyal Following Among Women

By His gentle manner and kindly spirit Jesus won the hearts of many women to the gospel.

By WALTER F. SPECHT

THE SUPREME EXAMPLE of Mary of Bethany's¹ devotion to Jesus was her anointing of Him at a feast in Bethany a few days before the crucifixion. While the guests were reclining at the table, Mary came in with "a pound² of costly ointment of pure nard,"³ broke the alabaster flask containing the perfume, and poured it on Christ's head. This was more than an act of courtesy and respect.⁴ One writer suggests: "The breaking of the flask was perhaps the expression of the whole-heartedness of her devotion. Having served this purpose it would never be used again."⁵ The act of pouring the perfume on Christ's head was perhaps in recognition of His royalty as the Messiah.

According to the Gospel of John, Mary "anointed the feet of Jesus"⁶ with very expensive perfume,⁷ valued, according to Mark, at "more than three hundred denarii." A denarius was apparently an average day's pay for a laborer in the vineyards.⁸ It was a great personal sacrifice for Mary, undoubtedly expressive of her supreme devotion to Jesus.

Worthy of note also was Mary's use of her tresses to wipe His feet.⁹ In the eyes of the Jews this was a shocking act, since respectable women kept their hair bound and covered. Mary's behavior suggested that she was a woman of loose morals. (The hair of a woman suspected of adultery was let down by the priest.)¹⁰ But Jesus could read the motives of her heart and saw her gesture as an expression of deep gratitude for His kindness and affection. "She has done a beautiful thing to me," He declared (Matt. 26:10; * Mark 14:6). And He predicted that wherever the gospel story would be told in future generations, her act of love would be remembered.

One of the striking differences between Jesus and the Jewish rabbis of His day was in His acceptance of women as followers.¹¹ Such a course of action was cer-

tainly unprecedented in the first century.¹² According to Luke's Gospel, as Jesus traveled about through the cities and villages proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, He was accompanied by two groups: the 12 disciples, and a band of Galilean women (Luke 8:1-3). Not only are these women represented as itinerating with Him but are said to have used their means to support Him and His followers. Moule has rightly observed:

"It is difficult enough for anyone, even a consummate master of imaginative writing, to create a picture of a deeply pure, good person moving about in an impure environment, without making him a prig or a prude or a sort of 'plaster saint.' How comes it that through all the Gospel traditions without exception, there comes a remarkably firmly-drawn portrait of an attractive young man moving freely about among women of all sorts, including the decidedly disreputable, without a trace of sentimentality, unnaturalness, or prudery, and yet at every point, maintaining a simple integrity of character?"¹³

The identity and marital status of most of the women in the group with Jesus are not revealed. Only three of them are named: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna. In addition to these Luke refers to "many others." Since *gunē* in Greek can mean "wife," as well as "woman," and in view of the Palestinian custom of early marriages for women, William E. Phipps argues that these women must have been married.¹⁴ He further suggests that some of them probably were the wives of the 12 disciples, but there is no evidence for this.

Luke informs us that some of these women had been healed "of evil spirits and infirmities" (Luke 8:2). Among these was Mary Magdalene. Not only did the women accompany Jesus and His disciples on their preaching tour, they also showed their love and devotion by using their financial resources in supporting this band of missionaries (verse 3¹⁵; compare Mark 15:41).

By accepting support from women Jesus departed from rabbinical teaching. It seems to have been an accepted rule that a rabbi must not be waited on by a woman.¹⁶ But Jesus disregarded such rules. One writer conjectures that the seamless tunic, "woven from top to bottom" (John 19:23, 24), "may well have been the gift of one of . . . [the] affluent women."¹⁷

Women at Golgotha and the Tomb

The Galilean women eventually followed Jesus on His last journey to Jerusalem, and remained loyal to Him to the very end (Matt. 27:55, 56; Mark 15:40, 41; Luke 23:49-56). At Golgotha "the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance," and at the risk of their lives witnessed the terrible death of their Lord. They observed Joseph of Arimathea remove the body of Jesus from the cross and place it in a new rock-hewn tomb (Luke 23:50-24:1).

Sunday morning they found the tomb empty, but were told by two angels that Jesus was alive. Thus they were eyewitnesses to the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (1 Cor. 15:1-4). They were the first to receive the message of the resurrection. They were chosen over the 12 apostles to be among the first witnesses.¹⁸

The angels reminded the women of what Jesus had predicted in Galilee regarding His betrayal, death by crucifixion, and resurrection. In the light of these words they were able to interpret the empty tomb "to the eleven and

* Bible references in this article are taken from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.



Sunday morning Mary Magdalene discovered the tomb empty and heard that Jesus had risen. She, not the apostles, was privileged to be among the first to witness of Christ's resurrection and to report the good news.

to all the rest" (Luke 24:8, 9). Thus they became the first heralds of the resurrection.

In the light of Jesus' words recorded in John 6:44, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him," we may well ask, Were these faithful women self-appointed disciples of Jesus? Or, can it be said of them as truly as of the 12: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide" (John 15:16)? Certainly without our Lord's gracious call they could hardly have accompanied Jesus in His ministry as they did.¹⁹

But if Jesus was a champion of women, and even allowed them to accompany Him on His mission, why did He not choose one or more women as apostles?

To choose a woman as an apostle would have been unwise in view of the social and cultural environment of the first century. According to the book of Acts, one of the chief functions of the 12 was to be that of witnessing to Jesus Christ and His resurrection.²⁰ In a society where women were not allowed to bear public testimony, it would not have been prudent for Jesus to have chosen women for such a mission. This does not mean that our Lord was opposed to the testimony of women, but such testimony might have been easily dismissed because of Jewish prejudice. It was far more vital at this juncture to get a hearing for the testimony of His apostles concerning Christ than to carry on a crusade for the equality of women.

Theologically, one can see in the selection of the 12 apostles the nucleus of a new Israel.²¹ Their selection was a symbolic act showing the continuity of Jesus' disciples with ancient Israel.²² Just as the 12 sons of Jacob became the representatives of God's people in Old Testament times, so the 12 apostles are representatives of the reborn people of God. Their appointment looks backward to the old Israel, as well as forward to the new Messianic community.²³

The latter becomes evident when one considers the eschatological role Jesus predicted concerning them: "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt. 19:28; cf. Luke 22:30). Since in this prophetic role they correspond to the 12 patriarchs, it is natural that they would be men.²⁴

Summary and Conclusion

In contrast to the rabbis, Jesus used many illustrations from the life experiences of women. He obviously did not regard them as second-rate human beings but in every respect as equal to men. When questioned regarding divorce, He set forth God's ideal of marriage as an inviolable lifelong union of a man and a woman. He plainly condemned the trivial procedure by which men in His day divorced their wives. Marriage called for fidelity on the part of both partners, and He recognized no double standard of sexual morality.

Jesus' own relation with women, and His treatment of them as equals, was revolutionary in His time. He freely associated with, and presented His message to, both men and women. Women were treated in every sense as on the same level with men.

He treated His own mother with respect and deference, and was concerned about providing for her future even

as He hung on the cross. He departed from Jewish conventions and rules of propriety by conversing with women and teaching them publicly and privately. Many of His miracles were performed on behalf of women. More than once He risked ceremonial defilement to minister to them. Among His special friends were such women as Martha and Mary of Bethany. He graciously accepted Mary's affectionate act of anointing, and described it as a beautiful expression of love.

Although He did not designate women as apostles, He did accept a group of Galilean women as followers, permitting them to accompany Him in His mission and accepting their financial support. While Jesus accepted the devotion and love of women, His association with them was always on a high spiritual plane.

Thus by His style of life, in opposition to the age in which He lived, and by His open acceptance of women and His respect for their personalities, Jesus definitely championed women's right to honor and dignity. □

Concluded

REFERENCES

¹ The problem of identifying the various women named "Mary" in the Gospels is a difficult one, and beyond the scope of this article. Is Mary of Bethany to be identified with Mary Magdalene and the sinful woman of Luke 7:37 ff? See the discussion in the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible*

Commentary, volume 5, pages 764-767, and the article on "Mary" in the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*, pages 689-691.

² The Greek for "pound," *litra*, is evidently the equivalent of the Latin *libra*, consisting of about 12 ounces.

³ *Muron* means "ointment" or "perfume." *Nardos* is evidently a transliteration of *nrd* (cf., S. of Sol. 1:12; 4:13, where the LXX has *nardos*), and refers here to the oil extracted from the root of the nard plant. The origin and meaning of the adjective *pistikos* is uncertain. Several plausible suggestions have been offered: (a.) that it is equivalent to *πιστες*, meaning "genuine" (see Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, xii.43 [26]); (b.) that it is to be derived from *pinō* ("drink"), and means "liquid" (Liddell-Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 1408); (c.) that it is a scribal corruption of *spikatos* (Latin, *spicatum*), the name of an unguent; (d.) that it is a transliteration of *pysthaq* which denotes the pistachio nut, the oil of which was used for perfumes.

⁴ See Luke 7:46; Ps. 23:5; William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, pp. 492 ff.

⁵ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, p. 415.

⁶ There is no reason to think that the Gospel accounts are mutually exclusive. She could well have poured the ointment on both Jesus' head and His feet. Ellen White in *The Desire of Ages* declares: "Breaking her box of ointment, she poured its contents upon the head and feet of Jesus; then, as she knelt weeping, moistening them with her tears, she wiped His feet with her long, flowing hair."—Page 559.

⁷ It has been suggested that the nard came from an herb grown in the high pasture land of the Himalayas. This would explain its great cost (Madeleine J. and J. Lane Miller, *Encyclopedia of Bible Life*, p. 204).

⁸ Matt. 22:2, 9-13.

⁹ John 12:3; cf. Luke 7:37 ff.

¹⁰ Sotah 1:5, Danby ed., pp. 293 ff.

¹¹ Rudolph Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, p. 61.

¹² Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, pp. 375 ff.

¹³ C. F. D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament*, p. 63.

¹⁴ William E. Phipps, *Was Jesus Married?* p. 101.

¹⁵ The imperfect tense of *diakonoun* suggests that the ministering of these women was a continuous act. Although some good MSS read *antō*, "to him," the preferred reading is *antois*, "to them." See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on The Greek New Testament*, p. 144.

¹⁶ Claude G. Montefiore, *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings*, pp. 217 ff.

¹⁷ Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female*, p. 97; Johannes Leipoldt, *Jesus und die Frauen*, p. 32.

¹⁸ Cranfield, *op. cit.*, p. 464.

¹⁹ Leipoldt, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

²⁰ Acts 1:8, 21, 22; 2:32; 3:15; 4:33; 5:32; 10:39-42; 13:30, 31.

²¹ M. E. Thrall, *The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood*, p. 94.

²² George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 109.

²³ Karl Heinrich Rengstorff, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. II, p. 326.

²⁴ World Council of Churches, *Concerning the Ordination of Women* (Geneva, 1964), p. 9.

For the Younger Set

Domie's Adventures—8

He Saved a Woman's Life

By Dominador U. Gonzales
As told to
ELLA RUTH ELKINS

(Last week: Domie, who had become seriously ill, was taken home to die. His mother and sisters prayed for his recovery and conversion. Domie gave his heart to the Lord and was healed. A few months later he was baptized and decided to become a minister. To earn money he entered the colporteur work.)

DURING THE summer Domie was assigned to do colporteur work in Malaybalay, Bukidnon, Philippines. His work was full of rewards and surprises. And one of these surprises came when he met a woman holding a small child in her arms. Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

Instantly he asked, "What happened, ma'am?"

She didn't answer the question; she faintly smiled. After a bit she asked, "Anything I can do for you, gentleman?"

Domie then started displaying his folders that showed what was in the books he was selling. As he

finished, the lady nodded and without hesitation signed the order. Domie explained to her that he would deliver the books after about 10 days, then he left.

When Domie returned with the books the woman was all smiles. She said, "You know, Mr. Gonzales, when you came to my door that first time, you saved my life. Because shortly before you knocked at my door I had made up my mind to commit suicide, and your knock interrupted my plans! Thank God, you came! I really don't know what kind of books these are that you are selling, but I promise to read them all."

After Domie left her home, he could not forget her, and the following Sabbath afternoon he paid her a visit. He offered her a series of Bible studies, which she gladly accepted. The third Sabbath afternoon her husband joined them in their study, his breath smelling of alcohol.

When the time came for Domie to go away to school, he asked one of the members from a nearby church to continue the studies.

The years passed swiftly for Domie. Finishing his ministerial course in Manila, and his year of internship, he was assigned as a district pastor in Bukidnon.

As he was about to enter the church on his first Sabbath in the district, a couple, all smiles and with nine children following them, greeted Domie, saying, "Pastor, do you recognize us? This tall girl beside me was the child I was holding that time when I was about to commit suicide. You know, I could not bear to see my husband always coming

home drunk. I was determined to kill myself, including this eldest child. But, Pastor, you came as an angel sent from above. Praise the Lord, you followed me up! Now my husband is the elder of the church and I was the church treasurer last year. And of our nine children, four of them are already baptized!"

At this point the husband smiled and said, "Pastor, thank God you saved our home!"

And the wife quickly added, "And you saved my life, too!"

Domie was grateful to the Lord for this unusual experience. Yes, God had led in mysterious ways.

To be continued

