Jesus and Women in Matthew

By Jane Kopas

"The Canaanite woman who seeks a cure for her daughter is not put off by the apparent rebuff of Jesus (15:21-28). Since she is not only a foreigner but also a woman, the nature of their dialogue is remarkable.... It is not only the gentiles but mothers and daughters and other marginalized people or outsiders who get a special hearing from Jesus. Not only do they receive a special hearing, but they seem to hear and see the possibilities in his mission beyond what others see."

WHEN we first survey the examples of women in Matthew's Gospel, they do not seem particularly significant. The women usually appear as background personalities or in association with men. With a few notable exceptions, they do not have speaking roles and often appear as figures in a tableau. They play virtually no role in the five discourses Matthew arranges to carry the weight of Jesus' teaching—the Sermon on the Mount, the Missionary Discourse, the Discourse on the Parables, the Discourse on the Church, and the Discourse on the Last Things. These speeches take up seven chapters of the Gospel, but they contain only a few references to women.

One might reasonably conclude from this that Matthew expresses a cautious and traditional view of women who have little importance in the church or the life of Jesus. Yet a closer examination of the roles they do play reveals a somewhat more complex picture. It is one in which Matthew struggles to incorporate women moving from the periphery to greater public involvement and from being victims and survivors to being disciples and leaders.

One key to Matthew's interpretation of women may be their status as insiders who are "outsiders." They share in the Jewish tradition and

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1 The expression is borrowed from Mary Jo Weaver, New Catholic Women (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), who describes sisters as "inside outsiders." They visibly belong to the church but are excluded from recognition in its history and participation in the key areas of its public power.

heritage, but they are usually not recognized in the same way as men. Nor do they participate in the key areas of public power which would enable them to help shape the tradition and make its values for women visible. Another factor in Matthew's interpretation, related to the above, is their initial status as victims and survivors. This is especially evident in the genealogy. The women often experience danger, loss of relationships, and damage to their reputations, and yet they manage to prevail over the most
trying circumstances and contribute to the future of Israel in the process. In a move that parallels their role in the history of Israel, Matthew's Gospel shows the way that "outside" insiders begin to make a contribution to the future of the church.

The complex status of women is evident from the beginning when Matthew presents a genealogy of Jesus (1:1-17). Surprisingly, the genealogy contains four references to women. Since lineage is usually remembered through the patriarchal roles, the inclusion of women, especially the particular women chosen, represents a deviation.

*The Jerome Biblical Commentary* observes there is no evident reason the women are included and no common thread among them except that, with the possible exception of Bathsheba, they are foreigners.2 The relation of Jesus' ancestry to the women as women and to the women as Gentiles, however, may provide another clue to their importance. They are "outsiders" not only as Gentiles but also as women. They are victims by their relationship with men or by their status in society. Nevertheless, they manage to turn that into triumph which is not only personal but which enhances their community.

The four women mentioned in the genealogy (excluding Mary), are Tamar (Gen. 38), Rahab (Josh. 2), Ruth (Ruth 1), and Bathsheba (II Sam. 11) who is mentioned but not named. Posing as a prostitute, the widowed Tamar gets her father-in-law to impregnate her unwittingly because he has not fulfilled his responsibility to provide her a husband. The prostitute Rahab harbors the spies of Joshua to assure their safety and the safety of her own family in the face of an imminent battle. The widow Ruth seeks out Boaz in the hope that he will marry her to save her from both widowhood and being a foreigner. The "adulteress" Bathsheba, whose husband's death is ordered by David after she conceives his child, provides for her future (and Israel's) by seeing that her son, Solomon, succeeds David to the throne. Each of these "outsiders" and "victims" of society finds a way both to survive and to participate in the salvation of others.

While Matthew does not explicitly develop this commonality, it offers a basis for recognizing that women have a heritage of influence and action in relation to the Kingdom of God even when their power is

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2 *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, vol. II, Joseph Fitzmyer and Raymond Brown, eds. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 66. Brown in *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 71-74, offers several additional suggestions. The women were sinners, foreshadowing the role of Jesus as savior; there was something extraordinary in their union with their partners; they played an important role in God's plan.

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limited both as women and as outsiders. Each of these "outsiders" moved in a world where men doubly dictated the terms of power. Men dominated both as men and as keepers of the religious tradition. Each of the women finds a way to deal with this dominance and to benefit others, Tamar and Bathsheba their offspring, Rahab her family, Ruth her mother-in-law.

Mary's role in the genealogy places her in a more prominent insider position. She is a woman, but not a foreigner. More importantly, unlike Luke's Gospel, which traces the lineage to Joseph, Matthew's Gospel traces it to Mary. The genealogy does not describe her as the wife of Joseph. Instead, he is described as her husband, placing her in the more central role and underscoring her heritage in the history of the women of Israel. Like them, she is a key figure in the process of salvation.
The genealogy prompts readers to consider their own sense of connectedness with the history of women. Do we have an awareness of this history? Are we sensitive to the breadth of influences that have shaped society and the roles of women? Are there aspects of our own being that we have failed to own or that we undervalue because of a lack of awareness?

These questions may be carried over into Matthew's treatment of women in the infancy narrative which follows the genealogy. The references to mothers here suggest an influence and concern beyond their own offspring. The Gospel, both in the genealogy and in the infancy narrative, treats the mother as one who is decisive, strong, and historically significant. The infancy account presents two women who commit themselves unswervingly to their offspring and their people. Mary, the mother of Jesus, exposed to danger, receives the Magi, flees to Egypt, and returns to Nazareth (chap. 2). Rachel, witnessing the slaughter of her children, becomes the model for those who must live with tragedy and loss (2:18). In different ways, each is a victim of hatred, yet each is a survivor. While the events described in these passages may not stand up well to historical scrutiny, it is interesting that Matthew includes them. The inclusion not only links Jesus to Moses and the Hebrew Scriptures, it also demonstrates women's role in the tradition and their place in the emerging Christian tradition.

II

There is no mention of women again until chapter 5 in the Sermon on the Mount (5:27-32). While women are mentioned merely as an example, the example is significant because it involves a cultural criticism of the status of women. When the Gospel presents Jesus' discussion of divorce and adultery, the dignity of women (and perhaps even their rights) is clearly implied. Jesus says that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully commits adultery in his heart. Clearly the entire discussion of the collected sayings is geared toward the relation of action and faith. But, at the same time, it undeniably insists that women are not to be regarded as objects to be discarded at will.

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When Jesus discusses divorce in the same discourse (5:31-32), he says that a man who divorces his wife is responsible for putting her into a compromising situation, and that his relationship to her continues beyond any unilateral decision of his own. This is not as surprising as a parallel statement in Mark's Gospel. Mark states that if a man divorces his wife and marries another, he commits adultery, but also if she divorces him and marries another, she commits adultery (Mk. 10:10-12). These intimations of equality pave the way for a more pervasive equality. They also invite the hearer to consider unexamined forms of violence, sexism, and racism that underlie the need for conversion.

A later reference in the Gospel deals with a similar situation in which sexual prejudice is dissolved in light of an ultimate equality. The Saducees, questioning Jesus about life after death in order to discredit belief in the resurrection, receive an added lesson (22:23-33). When asked to whom a widow, childless after seven marriages will be married in heaven, Jesus replies that they do not understand the Scriptures or the power of God. The social and economic power of men and the derivative identity of women fall into new perspective in light of the Kingdom of God. "At the resurrection men and women do not marry; no, they are like the angels in heaven." That is to say, not only ideas about heaven but also the unexamined ideas about the roles of women and men must become subject to the new vision of the reign of God. Women no longer receive their identity from their subordination to men.

A set of cures of women provides interesting connective material between the Sermon on the Mount and the Missionary Discourse. They are the cures of Peter's mother-in-law (8:14-15), the woman with a
hemorrhage (9:20-22), and the daughter of an official (9:18-19; 23-26). The females in each of these cures act decisively and promptly. Peter's mother-in-law leaves her bed and waits on the disciples. The woman with a hemorrhage reaches out to touch Jesus' cloak. The daughter of the official raised from a death-like state stands right up. The readiness of these women to act for or in response to their cures sets the stage for their movement into active ministry. The cures provide a link between the recognition of the equality of women in the Sermon on the Mount and the entry of the women into the demanding life of discipleship.

III

The speech material in chapter 10 on the instruction of the apostles, like the Sermon on the Mount, also contains only one reference to women. It takes the form of an example, but again, it is a significant one. The allegiance to Jesus that is required by discipleship makes the same demands on women and men. "I have come to set son against father, daughter against mother, daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law" (10:35). And further, "No one who prefers father or mother to me is worthy of me. No one who prefers son or daughter to me is worthy of me" (10:37).3

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3 Scripture quotations are taken from The New Jerusalem Bible.

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Women and men are challenged to the same rigors of discipleship. There is no distinction between the kinds of responses that are expected of either sex. This passage may well reflect what the early Christian community encountered in living out their commitment to Jesus as it suggests the kind of attitude required during persecution. Another passage which follows a little later, however, indicates the kind of situation Jesus himself had to deal with.

At the end of the chapter 12, the mother and brothers of Jesus are looking for him (12:46-50). One might assume that they deserve special attention because of their relationship to him. But the Gospel shows Jesus taking the opportunity to make a point about what constitutes a special relationship to God. He cautions the hearers that his mother and brothers and sisters are those who do the will of God, not those who claim a special relationship through kinship or privilege. Neither being a relative, a citizen of the same country, or member of a dominant sex gives a person special access. Being a true listener who hears and responds makes it possible to be in the circle of Jesus' friends.

Each of the Synoptic Gospels that deals with this incident makes it clear that a person's importance is based neither on sex nor on blood relationship but on the ability to respond to God as Jesus responds. Union and companionship with him derive from doing the will of God as he does.

This sort of relationship and discipleship provokes us to ask whether we assume privileges. On the other hand, do we assume a particular action is more characteristic of the other sex? Do we neglect to fulfill our potential, burying some of our talents because we do not see the possibilities for service present in differing situations?

IV

As one moves to the next major discourse in Matthew's Gospel, the Discourse on the Parables, one again finds only a single reference to women. But what is amazing is that there is even one in this particular context. The use of a woman as an example here is extraordinary for it presents the image of a woman as
an apt expression for the Kingdom of God. The parable of the yeast (13:31-32) appears also in Luke's Gospel. Both state that the Kingdom of Heaven is like the yeast a woman mixes with flour, making a bakerwoman's action a model for the action of God.

The introduction of female imagery for God is not new to the Scriptures. The Hebrew Bible includes a variety of female metaphors for God, especially as signs of God's faithfulness, nurturance, and compassion. What gives this example a special boldness is its reference to the power and presence of God. Here, God does not simply receive certain attributes traditionally associated with "femininity." God is depicted as a female with the ability to bring about a transforming effect by action and not by gentle influence alone.

The section on the parables concludes with a story of Jesus' return to his home town and with his subsequent rejection (13:53-58). His

neighbors ask where he got his wisdom and whether he doesn't come from the same humble origins as they. "Is not his mother the woman called Mary...? His sisters, too, are they not all here with us?" We have, then, the outcome of Jesus' attempts to teach through the parables of ordinariness. It isn't just the experience and example of women they reject. It is the identification of God's power within ordinary circumstances of life, whether they are the experience of women or the actions of a humble carpenter.

In some sense, it is at this point that Jesus, who by his status as a Jewish male is an "insider," becomes an inside "outsider." His rejection by his own townspeople forces him to the periphery where he offers himself as companion to all other marginalized people. The poor, the ill, the immigrant, and women, share with him the experience of not being heard. They stand as those whose experience and history can tell of the presence and power of God if it is not neglected and overlooked.

V

The next passage that includes a woman picks up and extends the theme of the woman who is outsider and foreigner, yet it adds a new dimension of the outsider instructing the insider. The Canaanite woman who seeks a cure for her daughter is not put off by the apparent rebuff of Jesus (15:21-28). Since she is not only a foreigner but also a woman, the nature of their dialogue is remarkable. When he says he cannot give to dogs what is meant for the children of Israel, she convinces him that even the dogs are a part of God's household.

While the main theme of the passage seems to be the extension of Jesus' salvation, the context and concrete circumstances of the setting are equally important. It is not only the gentiles but mothers and daughters and other marginalized people or outsiders who get a special hearing from Jesus. Not only do they receive a special hearing, but they seem to hear and see the possibilities in his mission beyond what others see. Yet the encounters between Jesus and women in Matthew's Gospel occur not in the main teaching sections but in the narrative material between them.

The next section of teaching material illustrates this point. The Discourse on the Church (chap. 18) gives some practical advice about relations between human beings, but none of the illustrations involves a woman. Even the structure of the Gospel shows that women are outsiders by the minimal role they play in shaping the teaching of the Law. At the same time, they are entering more fully into the visible life of the emerging religious tradition. One can only conclude that the process of women's assuming a role in
the Christian community involved a certain amount of ambivalence and inconsistency.

The reserve about fully addressing women as equals is evident in the recurrence of a discussion on divorce (19:1-9). Here Jesus challenges only men to examine their attitudes toward their wives, while women are not referred to or addressed. Any exceptions in the social fabric such as women divorcing their husbands is not a matter of concern, perhaps because Matthew's audience, unlike Mark's, were Jewish Christians.

On the other hand, women in the company of Jesus fall prey to the same misunderstandings of his message as men. The mother of the sons of Zebedee makes the kind of request for privileged position that is characteristic of the male followers of Jesus (20:20-23). It seems that the sons have put her up to asking Jesus if they might sit at his side in the kingdom since he directs his response to them and not to her. Yet he does not rebuke her, as he sometimes does the disciples when they ask for special treatment. Instead, he says that what occurs in the kingdom is not his to give and chooses to rebuke all the disciples together.

The role of the mother in this exchange is not that of a major player. She is in some sense an instrument for her sons' desires. Yet while the hearer knows what her sons think and what the other male disciples think, we do not know what she thinks. That she learns something is evident in her later appearance at the crucifixion.

What Matthew shows Jesus trying to teach all his followers in the Last Discourse is preparedness for the coming of God by living life in a certain way. Women are given a prominent role in the need for preparedness in two ways. They are part of a major parable, the Wedding Attendants (25:1-13), in which they represent humanity as a whole. All the same, they are just as subject to being caught unaware as men (24:40-41). These passages set the stage for the account of the passion which follows shortly after.

The use of women in the final discourse before the passion enables them to take their appropriate place as responsible agents, not merely victims or survivors. They are to be as prepared as men. They are to be ready to assume the full dimensions of discipleship, including suffering and the ability to interpret Jesus' death.

VI

Matthew's account of the passion and death of Jesus includes the appearance of a number of women. For the most part their presence and action stands in sharp contrast to that of the men. These include the anointing at Bethany by a nameless woman, the maidservant's identification of Peter as a follower of Jesus, the warning of Pilate's wife, the women following Jesus to the cross, and the presence of the two Marys at the tomb after the burial.

The anointing of Jesus at Bethany also appears in Mark's and John's Gospels with differing circumstances. Some of the men who were there criticized her or did not understand the meaning of her action. Matthew's recording of Jesus' reaction suggests that only she and Jesus knew the true meaning of the gesture (26:1-13). While the others were baffled, Jesus and the woman saw it as connected with his messiahship of suffering. She, a woman, recognized what the others did not.

Peter's encounter with the maidservant in the courtyard before his denial shows a woman naming his
identity when he could not (26:69-

75). Her insistence that he was a follower of Jesus put him in a position where he could prove his discipleship, and he failed the test. Her role as a truth-sayer stands in sharp contrast to his as a truth-denier.

The incident where Pilate's wife warns him not to condemn Jesus appears only in Matthew's Gospel (27:19). She, in a rather incidental way, offers the only protest to his death in the passion. Only one woman, a gentile, speaks out on his behalf. Again, an outsider with little or no connection with Jesus offers a special testimony to him, and she is not heard until well after the fact.

These three women, two of whom barely have any connection with Jesus, offer eloquent witness to the possibility of outsiders recognizing what he is about. None has a significant role in the Christian community, and even the one who does lacks a prominent voice. Yet it does not prevent them from knowing and acting. Can it be that they, more than the others, have the capacity to receive his message?

Matthew's Gospel states there were many women who followed Jesus to the cross, although it identifies three-Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. It states further that these were women who bad followed Jesus from Galilee and who had looked after him. As part of his entourage, they must have known what it meant to be accepted as part of an inner circle while yet in some sense still being outsiders because they were women, because they came from Galilee, and because they were part of a growing religious sect that stood outside the mainstream.

Yet they learned their lessons of discipleship well in that they remained faithful until the end. When the men had deserted Jesus, had failed to understand their own weaknesses, had refused to speak out in his defense either by word or action, the women had their experience as victims and survivors to draw on. They could remain with him to the cross, knowing there are some things worse than death.

The last picture we are left with after the death of Jesus is that of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary sitting in watch opposite the sepulchre (27:61). Their visible presence as opposed to those who have fled gives final testimony to the willingness to wait when all else has failed. To mourn for what might have been is the ultimate act of faith when no further action is possible. It is to be poised on the threshold of the breaking in of God's transforming power.

Such is the possibility that the women of Matthew's Gospel bring to light. Have we ever experienced what it means to be an outsider, especially among those we call our community? Can we learn from these women how to draw meaning from the experience and work for the inclusion of those who are marginalized?

When the same two Marys return after the Sabbath, they are unprepared for the empty tomb and the appearance of Jesus. But they are prepared to continue to be faithful. Their status as outsiders become insiders is still precarious. In some sense, it can be of value because that is what enables them to hear and understand his importance for the
marginalized. But the real challenge for them and for women and men today is to assume, recognize, and promote equality among the disciples without losing sensitivity to the experience and insights of outsiders. If that is so, they will be no longer victims or mere survivors but active bearers of the fullness of the kingdom.

One needs to be careful not to idealize the women in the Gospels. On the one hand, it is true that they often grasp what the men do not, they are faithful to Jesus to a heroic degree, and they provide excellent examples of Jesus' prophetic stance. But we cannot overlook the vengeful Herodias, the manipulating mother of Zebedee's sons, the foolish and unprepared bridesmaids.

The issue is not whether the women around Jesus were models of perfection. It is that they were truly participants in the founding of the Christian community as insiders (who never quite lost their status as outsiders) and that their experience and history enable them to make a unique contribution to the understanding of the Christian message.