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**UNDERSTANDING DISCIPLESHIP IN MARK' S GOSPEL:
WOMEN AS SUBALTERN ALTERNATIVES**

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ABSTRACT

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The way and strategy in which the gospel of Mark teaches discipleship goes beyond the inner circle of the Twelve Disciples. Mark chooses to depict true discipleship through the “Minor Characters,” especially the women followers, who were neither specifically called nor named in the narratives. These minor characters usually exhibit true disciples when the Twelve would not. In fact, it was the women who, unlike the Disciples, did not betray and followed Jesus to the cross and the first to visit the empty tomb. They understood what is demanded of a disciple and the cost of discipleship better than the Twelve. Where the Twelve misunderstood and falter, the women comprehended and remained firm. However, at the end of the gospel the women failed in that they chose to remain silent out of fear after visiting the empty tomb. This shows that women too were fallible as humans, but restorable. The essay is a look at discipleship in Mark from a subaltern perspective. The approach is chosen because it enables the reader to see the egalitarianism envisaged by the Markan community in which everyone serves as equal partner in ministry.



Introduction

Discipleship is an important theme in the gospel of Mark. Like the other gospels, Mark's narrative dwells on the twelve disciples – chosen, called and who became the main characters. However, the way Mark opted to present true discipleship, in contrast to the other gospels, is not through the Twelve, but through the lesser known players in his narrative who are known as “Minor Characters,” who often exhibit better discernment of the words, deeds and person of Christ in their following Jesus. These people are the ones who accepted Jesus' general call to discipleship and followed with faith.

The author of Mark creatively used his “minor characters,” especially the women, to display the true meaning of discipleship. Though these characters remain mostly anonymous, yet their comprehension of following Jesus and the resultant response and the dedication demonstrated through their deeds and devotion exhibit the kind of discipleship which Jesus demanded but which the Twelve often lacked.

The essay will take a subaltern approach to highlight how the writer twisted the theme of discipleship and gives priority to the subaltern women who were in the periphery of the Roman political system and Jewish social stratification.

1. SUBALTERN IN MARK'S GOSPEL

1.1. Subaltern Historiography

In the Second half of the 20th century there was powerful and consistent resistance from the people of the voiceless groups to redefine the historical writings which were written by the elites. Gradually the historiography, which formerly was shaped by the supporters of the ruling class mixed up with their vested interest, became people-centered.¹ In India, these voiceless and suppressed groups of people may be classified into three social groups, viz. tribal and low-caste agricultural labourers, and sharecroppers; land holding peasants and labourers in plantations, mines and industries.² These are the marginalized, the subaltern, who live in the periphery and fringes of the mainstream society; and who continue to live without their voices being heard or are suppressed by the dominant groups and systems. They formed “a relatively autonomous political domain with specific features and collective mentalities,” a world “distinct from the domain of the elite politicians.”³ There is, therefore, the need to deconstruct and reread history and texts from the lens of these groups of people.

Deconstruction here then means deconstruction of history and re-reading it from a subaltern perspective.⁴ This is a reading history and texts and rediscovering the many voices

¹ C.I. David Joy, “The Social and Religious Origins of the Gospel of Mark and its Hermeneutical Implications: A Postcolonial Critique,” *BTF* 33/1 (2001): 1-24

² Sumit Sarkar, “The Condition and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Co-operation, c. 1905-22, in *Subaltern Studies III: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (ed. R. Guha Delhi: OUP, 1989), 273.

³ Sarkar, “The Condition and Nature of Subaltern Militancy,” 273.

⁴ Joy, “The Social and Religious Origins of the Gospel of Mark,” 12.



that have lain suppressed throughout history. Thus, Subaltern studies necessarily create an alternative space for the people whose voices were silenced by the dominant discourse. A space is created for the re-reading of texts to accommodate the subaltern voices and interpretations. Such a re-reading is a reconstruction that reconsiders and combines the people's orality with the religious-cultural text, making it a historical methodology.⁵ Thus, the religious and political legitimization of power would be challenged by the victims of that power in the light of their alienation and subjugation.⁶ As Sathianathan Clarke puts it:

...viewing the Bible through the eyes and ears of the Subaltern will require starting from the domestic, the local, and the particular and then working one's way upward to the various dynamics of relationalities. Starting with the local and the particular affirms that power operates in the multiplex relations of everyday life in which common people are engrossed. The agency of power moves beyond state and multinational apparatuses; rather it includes all "micro-mechanisms" that effect and are effected by local Subaltern communities.⁷

And it is with such a perspective that the Gospel of Mark may be approached as a "contextually relevant exercise" is inevitable for an Indian reading of the Gospel.⁸ Such an exercise requires the understanding of the world in which the text evolved, making it relevant and meaningful to the stress and aspirations of the subalterns – the Dalits, the Tribals, Adivasis and Women.

1.2. Subalternity in Mark

Richard Horsley in his *Hearing the whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel* (2001) asserts that the Gospel is a historical narrative of a part of the larger history of the people of Israel that is known in historical records and not just a biography of Jesus; and that the movement spearheaded by Jesus was a renewal movement that began and spread in and around the region of Galilee.⁹ This new movement and the whole narrative of the Gospel was a resistance, opposition and re-telling of history from the perspective of the people, the subaltern; with its memory of exodus from slavery in Egypt and the great prophets of resistance such as Moses and Elijah.¹⁰

The situation in which the Gospel of Mark is written came within the context of Roman Imperialism and colonization; heavy taxation; and in which the corrupt high priesthood under which the Galileans and Judeans among whom Jesus led his movement were situated.¹¹ Naturally, under such a situation there is bound to be subalternity where the common masses are exploited by the few ruling classes, leaving the people helpless at the

⁵Vanlalchhuanawma, "Methodological Issues in the Study of History of Christianity" in *Methodological Issues in Theological Research: An Exploration* (Serampore: SATHRI, 2013), 215.

⁶ C.I. David Joy, "Mark 5:1-20: A Postcolonial Subaltern Reading," *BTF* 37/2 (2005): 26-39.

⁷Sathianathan Clarke, "Viewing the Bible through the Eyes and Ears of the Subalterns in India" *BI* 3/1

⁸Joy, "The Social and Religious Origins of the Gospel of Mark." 12.

⁹ Richard A. Horsley, *Hearing the whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 23.

¹⁰Horsley, *Hearing the whole Story*, 35.

¹¹Horsley, *Hearing the whole Story*, 36.



political, religious and economic level. The so called “stability claim” of the Romans ironically created for Jesus and the subaltern groups an atmosphere where there was neither justice nor equality in the day-to-day affairs of the society.¹² Under such circumstances, the common people, the peasants languished and were drained of their village-based resources to the urban elites. Joy asserts that Mark’s gospel appears to be a reformulation of the social and religious struggles of the early fragments of the Jesus movement and their ideological and doctrinal affirmations are reflected in the words of Mark.¹³

Thus, Mark’s story gives voice to a subjected people in that they identify themselves with Mark’s story of Jesus spearheading a movement of revitalized, autonomous, egalitarian community life over against Roman and Roman appointed rulers.¹⁴ Thus, the new hybrid communities of Jesus’ followers variously ignore, challenge, and transform the structures of power and wealth, whether Herodian, Judean, or Imperial.¹⁵

Furthermore, the Markan Jesus is often portrayed as making himself an excluded member and part of the marginalized. Jesus is frequently portrayed as an “outsider” (1:45; 5:17; 8:23; 11:19; 12:8; 15:22). He fits none of the prevailing social categories and throughout his ministry faces misunderstanding, hardness and rejection.¹⁶ The Markan Jesus calls disciples to join this new community, to engage in a discipleship of service to those with less power and status than themselves, and to endure persecution by political authorities who reject God’s rule. Most of all, disciples are called to trust the power of God for good.¹⁷

Within the very same circle of the Jesus movement, the minor characters continued to have little existence. Women had to face the double burden of ostracization, alienation, and excruciating abject poverty under Jewish honour/shame, clean/unclean social order and the looming shadow of the Roman Empire. However, Mark did not shy away from demonstrating how the women disciples would not deter and continued to follow Jesus, understanding fully what discipleship entails - the demand and costs, and the promises.

2. Discipleship in Mark

Some of the keywords in the Gospel that has to do with discipleship are καλεῖν (*kalein*) or προσκαλεῖν (*proskalein*) to call/summon; ἀκολουθεῖν (*akolouthein*) to follow, ἀπισσω (*apiso*) behind and ὁδός (*hodos*) the way/road. However, the term *discipleship* appears nowhere in the Bible, while the noun μαθητής (*mathētes*)(disciple) occurs 264 times in the

¹²Joy, “Mark 5:1-20,” 32.

¹³Joy, *Mark and Its Subalterns: A Hermeneutical Paradigm for a Postcolonial Context* (London: Equinox, 2008), 94.

¹⁴Horsley, *Hearing the whole Story*, 52.

¹⁵Keith Dyer, “The Empire of God, The Postcolonial Jesus and Postapocalyptic Mark,” in *Colonial Contexts and Postcolonial Theologies: Postcolonialism and Religions*, ed. Brett M.G. and J. Havea, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 82.

¹⁶James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 18.

¹⁷Joanna Dewey, “Women in the Gospel of Mark,” *WW* 26/1 (2006):22-29.



New Testament, in Acts and the Gospel, and 48 times in Mark. The teachings on discipleship are to be found most explicitly on Jesus and disciples' (*The Way* to Jerusalem (8:27 – 10:52). Maqh`tej refers to total attachment to someone in discipleship. It also designates someone who is committed to the teachings and ethos of a city or state; to the doctrines of a philosophical school, or to a teacher, religious figure or great thinker who lived either in the distant past or was a contemporary of the adherent.¹⁸

2.1. Nature of Discipleship in Mark

The uniqueness of Markan discipleship may be summed up in the phrase “to take up one’s cross” ((8:34). This is the principle which lays down all the demands and cost of following the call of Jesus. In Mark, what the “call” and “following” Jesus entails clearly is that it involves giving up or leaving behind possessions, lifestyles, even family.¹⁹ It is the call to self-denial. It was a higher standard of discipleship: to renounce the self, lose one’s life, be the least, and be a slave or servant to others.²⁰

The metaphor, taking up one’s cross, is a symbol of ultimate self-denial.²¹ Marvin Meyer makes this point clear:

Mark presents the theme of suffering linked not only to Jesus, the suffering Christ and son of God as son of man, but also to discipleship and the suffering followers of Jesus...Mark’s theology and Christology are no abstractions. Mark’s theology and Christology are closely connected to following Jesus and living the life of discipleship—suffering discipleship.²²

However, the sense of self-denial and suffering in Mark has to be understood in its socio-political milieu. Joanna Dewey indicates that the sense of self for a first century audience was different, as they had little idea of any individual identity; and to take up one’s cross is to be interpreted in the context of persecution.²³ She continues:

In Mark to become a disciple is to renounce one’s kinship group and join a new community of fictive kinship group around Jesus. And since to reject kin is to reject the basic social-political-economic structure of ancient, it is not surprising that rejection of kin and persecution should occur together. Societies do not tend to support those who break their rules.²⁴

¹⁸David R. Bauer, “Disciple, Discipleship,” in *NIB* 2: 128-131.

¹⁹Sean Kalleher, “Discipleship in Mark’s Gospel” [Accessed 23 April 2024] Online: http://kelse.net/wp_re/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/DiscipleshipInMark.pdf. 2.

²⁰ David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as a Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 89.

²¹Dexter Maben, “Mark,” in *South Asia Bible Commentary*, ed. Brian Wintle, (Rajasthan: Open Door Publications, Pvt. Ltd., 2015), 1307.

²² Marvin Meyer, “Taking up the Cross and following Jesus,” *CTJ* 37 (2002): 230-38.

²³ Joanna Dewey, “Let Them Renounce Themselves and Take up their Cross: A Feminist Reading of Mark 8:34 in Mark’s Social and Narrative World.” In *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001): 14-23. Dewey explains that the idea of renouncing as renouncing one’s kinship is confirmed by the sayings in Q, as in Luke’s rendition in 14:26-27. Similarly, *The Gospel of Thomas* has the same idea of renunciation of kins in *Gos. Thom.* 55; also 101).

²⁴ Dewey, “Let Them Renounce Themselves,” 34.



Consequently, to take up one's cross to the crowd and the disciples would necessarily mean willingness to offer one's life as a sacrifice, just as Jesus did. Here Jesus prophetically points to the cross he would literally bear and the disciples would carry literally or metaphorically.²⁵ Yet, E. Best hinted that martyrdom is not necessarily the goal of "to follow" or to "come after Jesus".²⁶ In fact, "Taking up the cross" means to follow the way of being with others that may lead to suffering and death. Suffering is not an end in itself, but the consequence of a life-praxis of solidarity with the outcast of society.²⁷ Suffering or the cross in Mark's teaching on discipleship then is not what a modern reader understands by self-denial and renunciation. It is rather an exhortation to remain faithful to Jesus even in the face of persecution, even execution, by political authorities,²⁸ as was understood in the then culture.

Again, discipleship entails servanthood (9:33-37; 10:35-45). A disciple is a servant, pursuing the life of the cross and hence rejecting status, exclusivism and the treasures of this world.²⁹ In Mark 10:35-44 where James and John came to Jesus asking to be seated on his left and right; Jesus told the disciples that greatness consists not in authority but service. Two words *διάκονος* (service) and *δοῦλος* (slave) (vv. 43, 44) are used. The use of *service* here denotes service of a personal nature, freely offered to others.³⁰

2.2. The Twelve's Incomprehensiveness of Discipleship

Markan portrayal of the Twelve disciples as to their understanding of and adherence to discipleship, though initially favourable, gradually became negative. In 1:16-20, they immediately obeyed Jesus' call. In 6: 7-13 they were sent out and were successful in preaching, healing and exorcism. However, as the story continues, they gradually fail increasingly. The incomprehension became more intense with the narrative of the three boat scenes 4:35-41; 6: 45-52; 8:14-21. For instance, in the first boat scene after Jesus calmed the storm, they ask, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" After they have seen Jesus healing and having received private instructions, they still wonder. They showed the same amazement and misunderstanding in the other two scenes as well. The Twelve's misunderstanding of Jesus became more intense in the Passion Narrative in the scene of betrayal by Judas (14:10, 11), and climaxed with the desertion at Gethsemane (14: 50) and Peter's denial (14:66 – 72) at the High Priest's Courtyard.

²⁵ Danny W. Davis, *Discipleship According to the Gospel of Mark: An Inductive Study*. n.p. [Accessed 25 March 2024] Online: <https://www.scribd.com/doc/114526200/Discipleship-According-to-the-Gospel-of-Mark-An-Inductive-Study>.

²⁶ Ernest Best, *Mark: The Gospel as a Story* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983; Repr. 1988), 92.

²⁷ Mark S. Medley, "Emancipatory Solidarity: The Redemptive Significance of Jesus in Mark," *PRSt* 21/1 (1994): 5-22.

²⁸ Dewey, "Let Them Renounce Themselves," 36.

²⁹ M.J. Wilkins, "Discipleship," *DOJG*: 182-189.

³⁰ Best, *Mark: The Gospel as a Story*, 89.



The reason for such a portrayal of the Twelve in this manner has often been attributed to the polemic nature of the Gospel reflecting the conflict between apostolic establishment and the laity within the Markan community. This view is proposed by scholars like T.J. Weeden, W.H. Kelber, J.D. Crossan and M.A. Tolbert. Crossan sees it as a real anti-Jerusalem dispute against the relatives of Jesus, similar to the problem between Paul and Peter at Antioch.³¹

However, this stance is repudiated by a majority of scholars who rather see some pedagogical purposes. Kingsbury stresses that there are two sides to the portrayal – commitment on the one hand and incomprehension on the other. And at the end the latter prevailed. Ben Witherington II also sees no polemic intent against the disciples. He believes that Mark's sharp criticism of their failures and incomprehension serve as a foil to Jesus and his faithfulness to the end.³² Thus, rather than any polemical purpose Mark's characterization serves an identification purpose for the reader/s.

Commenting on Robert C. Tannehill's analysis of the role of the disciples ("Disciples in Mark") Joel F. Williams writes that it highlights how Mark uses "characterization" to influence the reader. Positive characterizations are meant to be identified with by the readers, whereas negative characterizations are to be disassociated from.³³

Thus, it may be assumed that the negative portrayal of the disciples, though not totally, in Mark may be attributed to the writer's frankness on the matter and how one should or should not conduct oneself in following Jesus. Rather than a polemic, it seems to serve a pedagogical purpose. The Twelve responded to the call to discipleship and were successful at emulating their master's act of healing and teaching. However, as they gradually continue to fail and miserably, as Witherington says, Mark tells the stories of the minor characters serve as a sort of counterbalance to the failure of the Twelve.³⁴

3. WOMEN MINOR CHARACTERS AND DISCIPLESHIP

3.1. Women as Minor Characters

Minor characters are those who do not belong to the inner circle of the Jesus movement. They are typically those in the crowd (ὄχλος) who followed Jesus in response to the general call of Jesus. They followed Jesus, walked with him in faith and poignantly demonstrated their devotion to him. And these minor characters more often than not exhibit better discipleship traits than the Twelve. The uniqueness of Markan discipleship according to Malbon is that it is not just about the disciples but also regarding other Markan characters who meet the

³¹ J.D. Crossan, "A Form for Absence: The Markan Creation of Gospel." *Semeia* 12, (1978): 41-55

³² Ben Witherington II, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 55.

³³ Joel F. Williams, *Other Followers of Jesus: Minor Characters as Major Figures in Mark's Gospel* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 87.

³⁴ Ben Witherington II, *The Gospel of Mark*, 55.



demands of following Jesus.³⁵ These crossed boundaries and chose to follow Jesus and adhere to his teachings while remaining within the crowd.

Among these minor characters were the women followers of Jesus including the woman with the flow of blood (5:21-43), the Syrophenician woman (7:24-30), the widow donating to the temple (12:41-44), the woman who anoints Jesus (14:3-9), and the women at the crucifixion (16:40, 41). Though they remain mostly anonymous, they understood who Jesus was and what he could do. They displayed devotion and served him. They stood by his side when all else deserted him during his passion. It was the women who first went to visit Jesus' tomb. Thus, even though they were never key players in the narrative of Mark, it was the women who remained loyal disciples even through their weaknesses

3.2. Women Responded to the Call to Discipleship

Women are hardly visible in the earlier part of Mark's gospel until 15:40. Hisako Kinukawadi argues that right from the beginning of Jesus' ministry to his death Mark portrays women with Jesus but almost all of their interactions and conversations with Jesus were invisible. And that Markan generic words indicating the wider circle of followers such as "those who were around him" (4:1) and "the crowd" must actually mean male and female.³⁶ Marla Selvidge also agrees and says that the primary problem is not the androcentric culture of Mark but with a 1900-year-old androcentric approach to the text and inconsideration of readers to ignore women as disciples in Mark until recently, because we have not had scholars that recognized their vital importance within the narrative world of Mark.³⁷

Elizabeth S. Fiorenza, argues from pre-Markan tradition pronouncement story of Mark 3:31-35. She says that the narrative context of vv.31-34 where Jesus says, "Anyone who does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother," clearly included women among the followers of Jesus.³⁸ Francis J. Maloney also notes that "women feature as the main protagonists in a series of miracle stories, all of which come from Mark's Gospel, originally, and has generally been retold by Matthew and Luke."³⁹ Witherington II has no hesitation in calling the women followers, disciples and writes:

The women are portrayed as disciples particularly in Mark 14 (the anonymous anointer), 15:40-43 (they followed him in Galilee), and Mark 16 (having been last at the cross, they are first at the tomb), the only negative thing said about their discipleship is at 16:7-8... As the

³⁵ Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "Fallible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark," *Semeia* 28 (1983): 29-48.

³⁶ Hisako Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 92.

³⁷ Marla J. Salvidge, "And those who followed Feared (Mark 10:32)," *CBQ* 45 (1983): 396-400

³⁸ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 147.

³⁹ Francis J. Maloney, *Woman First among the Faithful: A New Testament Study* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), 8.



men become worse and worse examples of following Jesus, the women replaced them as images of what disciples ought to do and be.⁴⁰

Similarly, Horsley states, “Not only were women among the crowds and wider circles of disciples following Jesus in Mark’s story, but they played significant roles in the leadership of the community behind the Gospel.”⁴¹ However, he also warns of looking too much into the matter to the point of “constructing” a liberative Jesus (or Mark) which is unhistorical.⁴²

The presence of women among the followers of Jesus is not something out of the ordinary even though it has been presented against a very negative reconstruction of Greco-Palestine society against women. Women following Jesus and dining with him was neither “revolutionary” nor “liberative”. As Kathleen Corley suggests, this only “reflects the newer presence of women in the wider Greco-Roman context of clubs, philosophical societies and newer religious groups. The presence of women on the road with Jesus may also be an indication of a social constituency of which Jesus was a part.”⁴³

Thus, we may summarize that the call for discipleship, which was extended to everyone was responded to by the women as well. These women disciples were following and ministering to Jesus, and were faithful and committed to him. Their role, though not explicitly highlighted in the Markan narrative, is no less important than their male counterparts. But one needs to be careful of over-emphasizing their roles to the point of being unhistorical.

3.3. Women Demonstrating Discipleship Traits

3.3.1. *Faith and Healing*

An important element in following Jesus is faith. One area where Jesus often chided the Twelve was their lack of faith even though they have been with him for some time in his ministry. In the calming of the storm we see Jesus saying to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still not faith?” (4:40). In other places he tells them to have faith (11:22; 16:14).

However, such an important and crucial faith is demonstrated by women suppliants who came to Jesus for help. The healing of the anonymous haemorrhaging woman (5:21-43) came within the story of the healing of Jairus’ daughter. But before the story finishes, the narrative shifts focus on the hemorrhaging woman. Only then the narration moves back to Jairus’ daughter - an intercalation of one episode to another.⁴⁴

⁴⁰Witherington II, *The Gospel of Mark*, 54.

⁴¹Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, 203.

⁴²Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, 205.

⁴³Kathleen Corley, *Women and the Historical Jesus: Feminist Myths of Christian Origins* (Oregon: Polebridge Press, 2002), 2.

⁴⁴Williams, *Other Followers*, 112. Through the use of intercalation i.e. inserting an episode within another to show the similarities and differences between two episodes, the writer or narrator enhances the characterization of each individual. In this case is seen the extreme need of both Jairus, whose daughter was dying and the



The haemorrhaging woman was commended for her faith by Jesus saying, “Your faith has saved you.” Through the “risk of faith” she is now released from the bondage of her ailment and isolation.⁴⁵ The passage illustrates the importance of women as models of discipleship by virtue of faith and truth.⁴⁶ It was “bold faith” and “active faith” that healed her and earned her the honour of being called “Daughter.”⁴⁷

The haemorrhaging woman was bound, tormented and isolated mentally, physically and financially from her social and religious interaction because of her condition. She was left impoverished and drained of all her resources. She no longer had anyone to turn to. But with a leap of faith she dared to seek and touch the cloak of Jesus. Her faith healed her, and it seems most likely that this is what Jesus wants the people and even the disciples to understand by seeking her out of the crowd. Here is a lesson for the subaltern that with faith, there is hope of restoration and salvation from their pitiable conditions.

3.3.2. *Women as Instruments of Barrier Breaking*

The story of the Syrophenician woman (7:24-30) is representative of women who are instruments of barrier breaking. This woman represents all non-Israelites who want to participate in the renewing power of the kingdom of God manifested in Jesus and the renewal of Israel as well.⁴⁸ The incident happened in a Gentile territory in the region of Tyre, a non-Jewish city where the Jews were the colonized and possibly exploited. Markan narrative might have wanted to expose the religioethnic tensions existing then.⁴⁹ However, though the woman belongs to the oppressing and colonizing community, here, because of her dire for her daughter who was demon possessed, she dared to get her role reversed and come to a Jew for help. Horsley writes:

In the flow of Mark’s story, therefore, the Syrophenician woman, the utterly marginal poor, single-parent mother of a demon possessed daughter, is the representative non-Israelite who secures the participation of and position of non-Israelite peoples, particularly Greek-speaking people, in the movement of the fulfillment of Israel, in the kingdom of God.⁵⁰

Even though she was initially turned down by Jesus on the ground that the Jews are the first to receive the fruit of the kingdom.⁵¹ Perplexing though the motive behind Jesus’

woman who had bled for twelve years. The dissimilarity however, is that Jairus publicly expresses his need while the woman seeks healing in secret. At the end both needs are met.

⁴⁵Herman Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power: A socio-Political Reading of Mark’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 121.

⁴⁶Ryan Turner, “Women as Model Disciples in the Gospel of Mark,” *Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry*, n.p. [Accessed 18 April 2024], Online: carm.org/women-as-model-disciples-in-mark.

⁴⁷Malbon, “Fallible Followers,” 36.

⁴⁸Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, 212.

⁴⁹Joy, *Mark and its Subalterns*, 153.

⁵⁰Horsley, *Hearing the whole Story*, 215. See also Sharon H. Ringe, “A Gentile Woman’s Story Revisited: Rereading Mark 7:24-31 in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 99.

⁵¹The response of Jesus to the woman “Let the children be fed first” and “for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” is rather puzzling. If it has to do with the religious and ethnic difference it



rude answer to the Syrophenician woman, the undaunting persistence of the woman to plead for her daughter won over. She dared to cross over the barriers of sex, race and religionism which brought healing to her daughter.⁵² She dared to challenge the existing cultural and religious norm due to the predicament she was in and thus crossed over the boundary that separated her from renewal and transformation. As Kinukawa asserts, “Her intuition about what Jesus should be and Jesus’ sensitivity toward the marginalized are drawn into one vortex and created a mutual transformation.” She goes on:

Thus, Jesus crossing the boundary, allows himself to be “defiled” and to become least in order to break through the exclusively group-oriented faith of his fellow Jews and redefine the community of faith in its radically new sense... Jesus is motivated to act, inviting the Gentiles, the socially outcaste, the materially poor, the sick, the oppressed, and the rejected into God’s community, which has been occupied by the privileged people protected by the purity laws.⁵³

This barrier and boundary breaking action of Jesus, is thus initiated by the Syrophenician woman because of her dire need for Jesus. Her need and persistent faith motivated the somewhat reluctant Jesus to reach out to her and welcome her - a Gentile, a woman oppressed by evil power, a subaltern – to the faith community and gave herself a place among the faithful. The story of the Syrophenician gives hope to those who live in the periphery (outside) of society, oppressed and alienated by structures and system that deny them of their rights – that there is hope in the reign of God. Discipleship, then is to break barriers and cross boundaries in acceptance of the ‘other’ despite gender, race, ethnic or religious affinity.

3.3.3. *Women as Instruments of Exposing Unjust Systems*

The story of the poor widow who gave all she had (12:41-44) to the Temple treasury is usually interpreted as a selfless act of giving to God and is glorified as a true disciple. However, there is another side to the story which is often overlooked. In the longer context Jesus had been spelling condemnation of the Temple and the high priesthood. In the preceding passage (12:38-40) Jesus warned the disciples of the scribes and their hypocrisy. In v.40 he says, “They devour widow’s houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.”⁵⁴ Though the Bible warned against oppression of widows and orphans (Exod 22:21-23; Isa 1:17; Jer. 7:5-6 etc.); this was not always the case and were usually exploited and

contradicts with the healing of the demoniac at Gerasa (5:1-20) and Jesus’ ministry to Gentile areas in the Decapolis and the second wilderness feeding, all of which are gentile territories.

⁵² For a fuller discussion of these barriers/boundaries see Joy, *Mark and its Subalterns*, 160-165.

⁵³ Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark*, 61.

⁵⁴ According to Horsley, “house” means not simply a dwelling but a family’s or a person’s resource for living generally. Then the widow giving “all she had to live on” exemplifies and confirms Jesus’ warning. While the rich give from the abundance of their wealth the widow gave her all and this amounts to what Jesus already said “they devour widows, houses.” Horsley, *Hearing the whole Story*, 216. In ancient Jewish society, a woman can become widowed due to divorce or death of her husband. The Old Testament usually depicts widows as poor and suffering (2 Kings 4:1-7). They are associated with orphans, the poor, the day laborer and aliens (Isaiah 1:23; Job 22:9; 24:3; Isaiah 10:2; Zech 7:10; Mal 3:5; Exod 22:22 etc.). And they are objects of injustice (Isaiah 10:2 etc). And they are not given their rights (Isa.1:23).



were victims of scorn, shame and injustice.

The exploitation of widows extent even to the religious realm where because of greed the widow's properties are all taken away in the name of religious piety. According to Kinukawa, blind to what is happening they are "devoured" socially, economically, and spiritually. And this is why Jesus accused the scribes.⁵⁵ The temple-based economy failed to live up to its purpose of storing tithes products and distributing them to ensure enough for everyone.⁵⁶

The widow here is thus a symbolic and representative figure of the extreme the scribes (and the rulers) had gone in securing revenues for their Temple stronghold. They not only engineered exploitation of the general mass, but also preyed on helpless widows, inducing them to give even their last copper to Temple maintenance.⁵⁷

On this, Addison Wright points out that Jesus' comment, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury," is a "downright disapproval" than appreciation and illustrates the ills of "official devotion." "She had been taught and encouraged by religious leaders to donate as she does, and Jesus condemns the value system that motivates her action, and he condemns the people who conditioned her to do it."⁵⁸ This is most plausible as in the passage there is no praise of the widow nor an exhortation for the disciples to imitate her.

Unlike the other stories of the minor characters in Mark, in the story of the Widow and her offering, there is no interaction between Jesus and the woman, no spoken dialogue, no touch and no healing whatsoever. But the character in this episode is used by Mark to initiate Jesus to react against an unjust and corrupt religious and political system and rouse the reader to that consciousness.

3.3.4. *Women Accepted to play Prophetic Roles*

An important role of a prophet in the Old Testament was that of anointing someone to rule as king over the people of God (1 Sam 9:16; 16:13; 1 Kgs 1:34, 45; 19:16), besides other functions. In Bethany, in the early stage of Mark's Passion Narrative, a woman anointed Jesus with precious oil (Mk.14:3-8). The incident is also recorded in Matthew (26:6-13), Luke (36-49) and John (12:1-8) with variations.⁵⁹ In Markan narrative the incident happened

⁵⁵Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark*, 69.

⁵⁶Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark*, 71.

⁵⁷Horsley, *Hearing the whole Story*, 217.

⁵⁸ Addison G. Wright, "The Widow's Mites: Praise or Lament – A Matter of Context," *CBQ* 44/2 April (1982): 256-65.

⁵⁹ It is interesting to note that while Matthew seems to follow Mark, Luke and John had different variants. Mark had the woman anointing Jesus' head, Luke and John had her anointing his feet and wiping with her hair. While the woman is unnamed in the Synoptics, John called her Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. The meal in the Mark is set at Levi, the leper's house but in John it is set in Lazarus'. The reason, especially of the difference in anointing Jesus, as Daube suggests, has to do with the anointing of Jesus' body after burial. While in John the body was anointed before burial by Joseph and Nicodemus, in Mark there is no such anointing after his death.



at the home of Simon the Leper, two days before Passover. The anointing of Jesus by an unnamed, uninvited woman in an all-male dinner, to enter was to transgress a social prohibition.⁶⁰ The agitation of the men seems to be on the waste, rather than on her devotion to Jesus.

However, the act of the woman is accepted by Jesus and considered it a good act (καλὸν) as it holds special significance for him – preparation of his body for burial. Moreover, Jesus' words that they always have the poor amongst them does not imply negligence toward them. Rather it should not be used as an excuse to criticize the woman's devotion to him. As for Jesus it symbolized her recognition of his priority over all things.⁶¹

Moreover, the act of the woman becomes a prophetic sign of the approaching death of Jesus.⁶² According to Waetjen, she has also undertaken the male prophetic role of anointing Jesus as the Messiah in death. In a radical break with the past she has acted on behalf of God to anoint Jesus as Messiah, which up to this moment Jesus refused to the title or at least the traditional content that it carries.⁶³ Similarly, Horsley sees this act as the woman assuming the long tradition of prophetic role by anointing Jesus.⁶⁴ Obviously the action of the woman subverts the traditional ideas of kingship and male leadership.⁶⁵

Thus, even though this woman is unnamed in Mark, due to her selfless and sacrificial devotion and prophetic act of anointing, Jesus remarked, "Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her (14:9). The Story of the anointing in Bethany, thus, reveals that the women and men together have the same role and responsibility of ministering, and that there is no gender distinction in the task of building edification of the body of Christ.

3.3.5. *Fallible yet Restorable Women*

Mark did not shy away from revealing the vulnerability of women though he had put them in good standing. At the conclusion of the gospel they showed the same fear and terror as the

Probably the tradition has it that Jesus wrapped in a linen cloth, was buried like a common criminal without being anointed. Such a tradition being unbearable to the believers, Mark must have added this in the start of his passion narrative to compensate for this lacking. This further led scholars to ask the priority of the narrative? For further discussion, see David Daube, "The Anointing at Bethany and Jesus' Burial," *ATR* 2/3 (1950): 186-199 and also Michael Chung, "A Bracketed Bethany Anointing," *BBR* 25/3 (2015): 359-369.

⁶⁰Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power*, 204.

⁶¹Williams, *Other Followers*, 181.

⁶²Williams, *Other Followers*, 181.

⁶³Herman Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power: A socio-Political Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 205.

⁶⁴Horsley, *Hearing the whole Story*, 216. However, the term used for anointing Christ/Messiah *criw* which is used for sacred and symbolical anointings is not used here. Rather Mark uses *murizw*, which is used of anointing the body for burial. See W.E. Vine, "Anoint, Anointing," *An Expository Dictionary of the New Testament Words*, (New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1966), 58/9. But still the, the prophetic significance of the woman's act cannot be ignored.

⁶⁵Ched Myers et al., *Say to this Mountain: Mark's Story of Discipleship* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 184.



Twelve, when they come to the empty tomb and saw the young man (16:1-8).⁶⁶ Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices and went to the tomb to anoint Jesus very early on the first day of the week, at sunrise. But they were seized with fear and terror by what they saw; fled from the tomb and told no one.⁶⁷

Thus, the abrupt ending of the gospel with “and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:8), leaves the reader baffled. This has led feminists to surrender the claim that women are more faithful disciples than men.⁶⁸ However, this cannot be interpreted to compare the intrinsic superiority or inferiority of one gender over the other. Rather it is a reminder of how everyone, male or female, as a human is susceptible to failure. Malbon thus explains that their silence suggests the fallibility of all disciples and that minimal stress is given to the fallibility of women in contrast to the crowd or especially the Twelve.⁶⁹ This is Mark’s way of overturning expectations. It would be “sad irony” for Mark to refuse to absolutize the Twelve as models of disciples in place of the women.⁷⁰

For Luise Schottrof 16:8 is a redactional insertion of Mark to encourage his community who has experienced fear and anxiety to overcome the same. So, 16: 8 is not the end but the beginning of discipleship for his community. Schottrof sees no gender distinction in Markan discipleship and agreed that both men and women equally fail and the common factor of their equality was poverty and did not take patriarchy in to consideration.⁷¹

According to Dewey, the failure of the women and the abrupt ending of the gospel suggest three things. Firstly, like the male counterparts the women also had difficulty in trusting God for good. Secondly, it calls on the audience/ readers to do better than the followers of Jesus in the narrative. Thirdly, the ending suggests that discipleship does not end in failure. Jesus going ahead of them in Galilee suggests that they are expected to recover and keep following.⁷²

⁶⁶The negative evaluation of the women at the Tomb is dealt with exhaustively in Paul L. Danove, *The Rhetoric of Characterization of God, Jesus, and Jesus’ Disciples in the Gospel of Mark* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 129-135.

⁶⁷The women found that the stone was rolled away, the tomb was empty and inside the tomb was a young man dressed in white who narrate to them the risen Christ and to tell the disciples and Peter what happened and that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee. But the women fled from the tomb did not tell anyone out of fear.

⁶⁸Victoria Phillips, “The Failure of the Women Who Followed Jesus in the Gospel of Mark” in *A Feminist companion to Mark*, 222-234.

⁶⁹According to Malbon, *Fallible Followers*, 45, the significance of the women’s silence is to be found in the outward movement of the text from author to reader. It seems that that the narrator, Mark, assumes that the hearer/reader assumes that the women did tell the disciples about the resurrection, because later someone surely told the narrator who now tells the hearer/reader! In addition, at the close of the Markan gospel the narrator’s story and that of his characters comes to an end—it reaches the point of silence, but the hearer/reader’s story is at a new beginning—it is the hearer/reader’s turn to speak now. The women characters follow Jesus after the disciples flee; the narrator tells Jesus’ story after the women’s silence; it remains for the hearer/reader to continue this line of followers.

⁷⁰Malbon, *Fallible Followers*, 45/6.

⁷¹Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark*, 117/8.

⁷²Dewey, “Women in the Gospel of Mark,” 28/9.



It may be concluded that women showed better discipleship traits in the gospel; but fallible they are like the rest of the disciples at the end. But one should not be too quick in condemning the women action a total failure at discipleship. The episode continues in reminding us that discipleship continues even after failure, if one is willing to follow him on the way (to Galilee). Discipleship does not end with failure, but continues when one is willing to follow.

Conclusion

The Gospel of Mark presents minor characters, especially women, in a fair light. They are seen as better examples of discipleship. The gospel discloses women's presence among the followers of Jesus, even though they were not insiders. This was something innovative. Markan narrative of women puts them on a pedestal on which one can learn what true discipleship is. This further suggests that male domination and all power structures are overturned. The new movement of Jesus calls for a community of equals where everyone serves each other as partners. The study of discipleship in Mark suggests that the community envisaged in Mark is an egalitarian community of equals where even those considered the least, including women who are instrumental in its formation.

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