PARALLEL GUIDE 4

The World to Which the Word Came:
Women and Men; The Life of Prayer

Summary
This chapter introduces two areas of life in New Testament times, the relationship of women and men and the life of prayer. While a patriarchal orientation dominated this epoch, cultural differences existed, and some women rose to positions of power and influence. The section about the life of prayer introduces prayer in the Gospel According to Mark and its relationship to Jewish practices of this era.

Learning Objectives

- Learn how the relationship between men and women differed among Jews, Christians, and citizens of the Roman Empire who followed other religions

- Learn the influence of Jewish prayers on the Gospels

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Take time to think about the relationship that may exist between the *Shema* and the *Apostles' Creed*. What is the relationship between a creed and a confession of faith?

2. Problems in the relationship between men and women in the twentieth century and the specific questions engendered by patriarchy and feminism abound. Look for the roots of these social issues in our Judeo-Christian heritage as well as in other practices.

Preparing for Your Seminar
Take some time as a seminar community to identify the issues which arise for you in the relationship of men and women. What does the Gospel According to Mark bring to this discussion?

Works Cited
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Sophocles, Antigone, text and trans. in Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *Sophocles: Antigone, The Women of Trachis, Philoctetes, Oedipus at Colonus* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1994).

The Standard Prayer Book (New York: Bloch, 1947).

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1984).

Suggestions for Further Reading

Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot, gen. eds., *A History of Women in the West*, vol. 1: *From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints,* Pauline Schmitt Pantel, ed.; Arthur Goldhammer, trans. (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1992).

Chapter 4

THE WORLD TO WHICH THE WORD CAME:

Women and Men; The Life of Prayer

Women and Men

What role do women play in Mark's story? What is their relationship to the men? We had not listened long to Mark before we heard of Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law—the first woman to appear in his story. She was healed of a fever and then at once "began to serve" Jesus and his disciples (Mark 1:30-31). Women appear in only three other stories about Jesus' ministry, and always in positions of supplication or need (5:22-43; 7:24-30). At the end of the story the women supporters of Jesus appear to stand by his cross and afterward to perform the last rites for his body (15:40-16:8). In addition to all this there is one other scene where Jesus himself did not appear, at the court of Herod Antipas. Here two women play a sinister role, one as temptress, one as malignant plotter. Together they are instrumental in bringing about the death of John the Baptizer (6:14-29). Those were the only roles women play in Mark's narrative. Everything else is done by or happens to the men.

To twentieth-century Western Europeans or North Americans, sensitive to issues of male-female relationship, the scarcity of references to female presence in such a narrative inevitably seems ill-balanced. How would it have sounded in the society for which Mark wrote? What features of the role of women in the story might have struck the people hearing all this then?

The world of the New Testament was patriarchal. Gentile and Jew alike normally assumed that, in most matters of any significance, it was the role of men to lead and make decisions and the role of women to be subordinate. According to Aristotle "the state is divided nearly in half into its male and female population" (*Politics* 1.1269b). Nevertheless, "between the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject" (*Politics* 1.1254b). This remained the norm for Greco-Roman society in matters of both household and state, as we can see in numerous "household codes" of the period and in various satires on women whose behavior did not conform. In terms of this custom, therefore, there was nothing in the general orientation of Mark's story that would have sounded odd or ill-balanced to its first hearers.

Things are seldom as simple as they sound at first, and this is no exception. Whether they wish to or not, the satirists and the formulators of the codes also tell us something else, namely that not everyone accepted the patriarchal norms. Traditional Roman *patria potestas* ("paternal power") was in theory as strong as ever but in fact had become less absolute. In the East and in Egypt, Hellenistic queens had set styles of ruthless ambition that women of the aristocratic Roman houses imitated. The story of Herodias and Herod's daughter who caused the destruction of John at Herod's court would have been seen as following these models.

Such abandonment of traditional behavior was not simply the prerogative of the upper classes. We learn from inscriptions of the period that many women were active in business and manufacturing. Freedwomen from the eastern provinces often traded

in luxury goods, like Lydia from Thyatira who was "a dealer in purple cloth" (Acts 16:14). Women used the money they earned to win themselves respect and recognition in their communities. A small but significant number of women are mentioned in inscriptions and on coins as benefactors and officials and as recipients of municipal honors. At Pompeii a woman called Eumachia manufactured bricks. She provided the cash for a major building, which she donated to a workers' association, and she held the title of *sacerdos publica* ("priest of the people"). In short, while it is evident that Greco-Roman society in general was not sexually egalitarian, it is equally evident that the actual situation, particularly in the Hellenistic cities, was a good deal more complex than the upholders of patriarchal tradition would have us believe.

Even among those who upheld traditional *mores* the matter was not always simple. Since Greco-Roman society was also an "honor-shame" society, it was normally assumed that the role of the man was to be aggressive in the *quest* for honor and the more passive role of the woman was to *defend* it by her modesty. But what if the males failed to act honorably? What if they behaved shamefully? Then females could win approval for *aggressive* action, even for *disobeying* the male, if such aggression and disobedience were demanded by honor—as in the case of Sophocles' Antigone, who thinks it "noble" to die rather than "hold in dishonor the things that the gods honor," and so she defies Creon, her king, in order to give her brother a proper burial, thinking no suffering greater than "an ignoble death" (Sophocles, *Antigone* 72, 77, 97). Plutarch, who wrote voluminously during the New Testament period, is clearly a traditionalist about patriarchy, yet his essay *On Virtuous Women* is full of examples of women who acted aggressively in pursuit of honor when the men who should have acted aggressively failed to do so.

Men and Women in Judaism

What may we say of specifically Jewish attitudes? Much rabbinic material after 70 CE is notably "anti-feminist". Josephus vigorously asserts that Judaism upholds patriarchal values and the subordination of women:

> The woman, says the Law, is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be submissive, not for her humiliation, but that she may be directed, for the authority has been given by God to the man. (*Against Apion* 2.201)

Philo insists that Jews respect and live by patriarchal standards:

> The husband seems competent to transmit knowledge of the laws to his wife, the father to his children, the master to his slaves. (*Hypothetica* 8.7.4)

Many Jews would have agreed with Philo and Josephus. Yet we are inclined to wonder at the very *vigor* of their assertions. Was Jewish patriarchalism in fact as monolithic as Philo and Josephus evidently wish us to think? Both, we should note, were *apologizing* for Judaism to conservative Roman society. There is evidence that Judaism was perceived by some Roman patriarchal moralists precisely as a newfangled eastern religion that was involved (like the mysteries of Isis and similar cults) in the emancipation of women. Josephus himself tells a story of the proselytizing of a woman in Rome by a "scoundrel" (*Antiquities* 18.81-84) in a manner almost remi-

niscent of Juvenal. In a less scurrilous vein he does not conceal that the conversion of King Izates of Adiabene to Judaism was accomplished with the cooperation of the king's wives, who had already been "taught to worship God after the manner of the Jewish tradition" by a Jewish merchant (*Antiquities* 20.34-53). More seriously, we should also take into account traditions of learned and pious Jewish women like the Therapeutridae described by Philo in *On the Contemplative Life*. Women were synagogue leaders and a learned Jewish woman named Beruriah lived in Palestine in the second century BCE.

We can consider the attitudes toward women reflected in the Book of Judith, a story written late in the second century BCE, probably in Hebrew. Judith, the heroine, is in some ways not unlike Moses for, as is repeatedly emphasized, the Lord delivers Israel and crushes the arrogance of Israel's enemies by her hand (8:33). What kind of woman is this whom the Lord so uses? Hardly the maiden meek and mild who would receive patriarchal approval! She has inherited her husband's estates and is running them with another woman in charge. She is pious but feisty, with authority, which she freely uses to "summon . . . the elders of her city" and rebuke them in no mild terms for cowardice, theological ineptitude, and lack of faith—in short, for acting dishonorably. Nor do they argue with her. For the honor of God and God's people she initiates decisive action. She obviously feels free to go out of her house unveiled, for the elders of her city admire her beauty (10:7). She is sexy, knows it, and to save her people uses her sex as a weapon against masculine arrogance and stupidity. She will act violently with the sword when that is necessary. Finally, though "many desired to marry her," she chose to remain a widow, and after her death "the house of Israel mourned for her seven days." Such is the heroine of the Book of Judith (8:10-16:24)!

First-century Judaism was then no more monolithically patriarchal than was first-century paganism. When we speak of Jesus' acceptance of women and his concern for them, we must be careful not to do so in ways that suggest none of his fellow Jews would have sympathized with him or that there were no strains in Judaism (or paganism) to which he could have appealed. Clearly there were both.

Men and Women in the Gospel According to Mark

Against this background of Mark's narrative we must say that matters are not nearly so simple or straightforward as they first seem. It is true that Peter's mother-in-law, once healed, "began to serve" Jesus and his disciples. But the word Mark uses to describe this service is surprising. It is not the usual word for service at table but the much rarer word *diakoneō* "minister"—the word for royal or priestly service, the word that is used for the service of the Son of Man himself in his redeeming of the world (Mark 10:45; cf. Luke 12:37). In Mark's view something was going on here that passed beyond the womanly duty of waiting at table in a patriarchal society.

The next woman to appear in this Gospel, the woman with the issue of blood, was in a very different situation. Here, as Mark goes out of his way to make clear, was an oppressed woman, an outsider, for some would have thought that her hemorrhage made her ritually unclean. She was also an exploited woman, oppressed not only by her sickness but also by a system that had taken from her "all that she had" and

given her nothing in return (5:25-26). In her frustration, desperate for healing, she touches the holy man's cloak, and so commits an appalling *faux pas*, for by that act she involves him in the uncleanness of her sickness. No wonder she is frightened when the time comes to confess what she has done (5:27-33). The result? Jesus calls her "daughter" (5:34) and acknowledges in her the faithfulness that brings wholeness, deliverance from oppression, and salvation. For him she is an insider, a member of his family.

The raising of Jairus' daughter comes at the end of a series of Jesus' mighty acts. These acts of deliverance have been wrought first for the Twelve (Jewish males), then for the Gaderene demoniac (a Gentile male), then for the woman with the issue of blood (an adult), and now, finally, for a little girl, twelve years old—the least important person imaginable in terms of patriarchy. But to the little girl, strikingly, is given the greatest miracle of all: she is brought from death to life—a parable of the final miracle that the Lord will work for the whole world (5:35-43)!

The next appearance of a woman in the story is that of the Syro-Phoenician woman, "in the region of Tyre." She is a foreigner. Mark goes out of his way to make sure we understand this: "the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin" (7:26). Yet it is at this point, with this woman who is also a foreigner, that Mark's Jesus comes as near as he ever does to losing an argument. The woman is a suppliant for her child. Jesus reminds her of who she is, and who he is. The privileges of God's kingdom are for God's people. "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (7:27). Her response is direct. Could it really be that the grace of God's kingdom comes to God's people and has no effect on those around them? "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (7:28). Jesus' response is equally direct. "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter" (7:29).

At the moment of Jesus' crucifixion we hear of women who are his followers—in Mark's Gospel, for the first time: Mary of Magdala and the others. Where have they been? Did Mark want us to imagine that they suddenly came rushing up to Jerusalem when they heard that the disciples had deserted Jesus? Hardly! Here we need to bear in mind a characteristic of ancient narratives to which Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has drawn attention: namely, that when women are not mentioned in such accounts, it does not mean that women are not understood to be present, but rather that they are taken for granted. The presence of women will as a rule be mentioned only "when women's behavior presents a problem or when women are exceptional individuals" (1984, 45).

Where have the women who followed Jesus been until now? Obviously Mark expects us to assume they have been there all the time (notice Mark 16:7: "there you will see him, *just as he told you*"). Why, then, are the women mentioned *now*? Because at this point they are behaving as "exceptional individuals"! How? Exactly as did Antigone and those women in Plutarch's essay, *On Virtues in Women*—they are stepping in where the men have acted dishonorably. They are saving the honor of Jesus' followers. They stand by their master in the moment of his dying, and they

seek subsequently to see that he is honored properly in the tomb.

Not surprisingly the saving word, the word of the Resurrection, first comes to them, for they are the ones still on duty, still at their posts. "Go, tell his disciples and Peter!" The irony could scarcely be more marked. The *women* are now the apostles (the "sent ones")—and they are sent to the apostles! They are *apostoloi apostolorum*, "apostles for the apostles," as the ancients put it. No wonder they leave the tomb in awestruck silence (16:8).

Would a conservative Roman or Jew, anxious to uphold the patriarchal status quo, have heard in Mark a supporter of his views? We may well doubt it.

The Life of Prayer

Mark's Jesus is a person of prayer, and clearly expects those who follow him to be persons of prayer also. No doubt this was particularly striking to the Gentiles in his audience. The Hellenistic world in general was cynical about prayer. Parodies of prayer had become a stock-in-trade for comic writers. "Why do you lift hands towards heaven?" asks the Stoic Seneca. "God is within you" (*Letters* 41.1). In Israel it was different. Prayer was a part of the life of the people.

The *Shema*

"Twice each day," says Josephus, "at its beginning and when the hour of sleep approaches, it is fitting to remember in gratitude before God the gifts which he gave us after the deliverance from Egypt" (*Antiquities* 4.212). Josephus is referring to recitation of the *Shema*, a series of texts from Torah beginning with Deuteronomy 6:4:

> Hear (Hebrew: *Shema*) O Israel, The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.

This is followed by a benediction:

> Blessed be his name, whose glorious kingdom is forever and ever.

This in turn is followed by verses 5-9:

> And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart and with all thy soul and with all thy might. And these words which I command thee this day, shall be upon thine heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be for frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the doorposts of thy house, and upon thy gates. (*The Standard Prayer Book* 1947, 48)

The other two texts are Deuteronomy 11:13-21 and Numbers 15:37-41. These were, and still are, to be recited by all adult Jewish males from twelve years of age. Women, children, and slaves were free from the requirement, because their time was not their own (b. *Berakot* 3.3). Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus (ca. 90 CE) is quoted as saying, "Who is an *am ha-arets*? He who does not recite the *Shema* in the morning and in the evening" (*b. Berakot* 47b).

Mark seems to imply that Jesus took this discipline for granted in his own life of prayer. So it is significant that when he is asked, "Which commandment is the first of all?" it is apparently natural for him to reply by quoting not only the commandment but also the words that precede it in the *Shema*, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One" (Mark 12:28-29). Similarly with the other evangelists. In Luke when Jesus asks the lawyer what is written in the Torah about eternal life, he goes on to say, in effect, "What do you *recite*?" (NRSV "read," Luke 10:26). The lawyer at once replies to him with the words of the *Shema* (Luke 10:27).

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The Tephilla

A second discipline of Jewish prayer required saying a series of benedictions three times daily. The series is called the *Tephilla* (that is, "the Prayer"). The rabbis always speak of "reciting" the *Shema*, whereas the *Tephilla* is "prayed." Unlike reciting the *Shema*, praying the *Tephilla* is expected of every Jew, including women, children, and slaves. First reference to the practice appears to be in the Book of Daniel, 6:13, and it was clearly taken for granted by New Testament times.

The *Tephilla* as arranged at the end of the first century of the Christian era was a series of eighteen benedictions. For this reason it is often called *ha-Shemone-esre*—that is, "the eighteen." This is the earliest form of the *Tephilla* known to us, but its core was certainly more ancient. Here is one of the benedictions in an early form:

> Blessed be thou LORD, our God and the God of our fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, God great, mighty, and fearful, most high God, Master of heaven and earth.
> Blessed be thou, LORD, the shield of Abraham.
>
> (Dalman, 299)

When Mark shows us Jesus calling God "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Mark 12:26), and when Matthew speaks of him calling God "Master of heaven and earth" (Matt. 11:25, NRSV "Lord"), we may well suspect echoes of the *Tephilla*.

The three hours of prayer and the benedictions said before and after meals were Israel's great treasure. They provided the basis for a training in prayer and a practice of prayer for all. We need hardly be surprised, therefore, when the evangelists suggest to us that they were also at the heart of Jesus' prayer.