
Women as Patterns for Ministry in the Gospel of Luke

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Introduction

The women are always there—from Galilee until the Resurrection—and yet, somehow, they travel unnoticed. The angel’s report in Luke 24:6–7 indicates that these women are privy to insider information that Jesus discussed with Peter, James, and John. Luke describes the women who support Jesus, whom Jesus visits, and who tell the story of Jesus’ resurrection without any hint of shock to the audience, without additional explanation to suggest something is awry to the reader, and without any sense that he is frustrating some sort of long-standing tradition, whether Jewish or gentile.

Both Jewish and Greco-Roman literature portray women as patrons in the ancient world. There is evidence of women supporting religious and political organizations apart from relationships to males in their lives. Barbara Reid and Shelley Matthews highlight women’s support of various religious and political movements: “Based on women’s legitimate involvement in financial matters in the Roman world, we conclude that Luke regards women taking initiative to finance a religious movement as an acceptable practice. . . . Luke’s mention of women financially supporting Jesus and the Twelve, independently from male relatives or guardians, would not set off alarm bells for Theophilus.”¹ Likewise, Tal Ilan, in her discussion of wealthy and elite women supporting the Pharisee party in the first centuries BCE–CE, asserts much the same: “Through [wealthy women’s] monetary contributions, such women may have influenced decision and policy making. . . . Such a reconstruction is certainly probable for early Christianity.”² In the first centuries BCE–CE, women’s support of various religious and political movements was relatively common. It is possible that this support is part of the reason that the author of Luke communicated these women’s contributions (in finances and in hospitality) without a sense of oddity.

Luke presents the women in Luke 8:1–3 as supporters and followers of Jesus. With Mary, Joanna, and Susanna as the inner circle of three (cf. Peter, James, and John), along with “many others (*kai heterai pollai*)” (Luke 8:3),³ these women traveled from Galilee

1. Barbara Reid and Shelly Matthews, *Luke*, Wisdom Commentary 43 (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2021), 249–250.

2. Tal Ilan, “The Attraction of Women to Pharisaism during the Second Temple Period,” *HTR* 88, no. 1 (1995), 24.

3. All translations are the author’s unless otherwise noted.

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to the cross, where the angel tells them to remember what Jesus told them in Galilee, despite no mention of their presence in these episodes. Perhaps they were elided from the narrative, or perhaps it was simply assumed that they were there—as they always had been—serving as a foil to their male counterparts, at least as the Gospel of Luke portrays them. Jesus’ understanding of his own ministry seems to be shaped by his interaction with Martha, who approaches him as one who serves. I could hardly assign to Jesus or the author of Luke a proto-feminist agenda, a claim many scholars have cautioned against. Nevertheless, the silent assumption of the women’s presence offers an unsurprising but important conclusion: women were always present—and sometimes instrumental—in modeling discipleship for the male disciples (all disciples, really). Characterized by *diak-* terms (*diakoneō*, *diakonia*), terms that are not used to refer to the male disciples until the Book of Acts, the women set a pattern for discipleship and influence Jesus’ ministry, even as they serve from the background.

The inner circle

Luke’s penchant for doubling—presenting male and female counterparts in similar stories in the narrative—has been well noted. This pairing has led some to connect three women named in Luke 8:1–3 with Peter, James, and John, the “inner circle” of disciples.⁴

4. Turid Karlsen Seim, “The Gospel of Luke,” in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, with the assistance of Ann Brock and Shelly Matthews, 2 vols. (New

At the same time, there is tension in suggesting parity between the inner circle of male disciples and the inner circle of female disciples because, though present, the Lukan narrative obfuscates their presence; they are not explicitly mentioned between Luke 8:1–3 and Luke 24:6–9. Reid and Matthews note that the named women “may function as counterparts to the three male disciples who seem to comprise an inner circle—Peter, John, and James (8:51; 9:28; cf. Gal 2:9)—but the fact that the three female names do not stabilize shows that recognition does not coalesce for the women as it does for the men.”⁵ Despite the women’s support of the mission and their having left their homes—along with the male disciples (cf. Luke 18:28)—and being with Jesus for the bulk of his ministry, the women’s presence is both assumed and elided. For example, the author of Luke does not mention the women’s presence in the episode where Jesus predicts his death and resurrection, though later on they are clearly expected to recall this teaching. As F. Scott Spencer demonstrates, “from early summary (8:1–3) to concluding scenes (23:49–24:40), Luke *assumes* the presence of Galilean women disciples. But they remain in the background, too easily ignored, too taken for granted.”⁶ The narrative takes the women’s presence for granted. On the one hand, it seems this is a boon: there is nothing to suggest that their presence was odd or objectionable. On the other hand, it leaves only echoes of how women may have affected Jesus’ ministry.

There is relatively wide agreement that the nature of the women’s ministry extended beyond cooking meals or a single donation. The imperfect verb *diëkonoun* in Luke 8:3 suggests that the women’s support was habitual and ongoing; therefore, they “continually ministered to them out of their resources.” Not only did the women leave behind their homes (as the male disciples did); they supported the mission financially. Despite the indications that some of the male disciples had means at their disposal (James and John appear to have had a fleet of ships and a fairly robust fishing business), there is no indication that these men contributed financially to the material needs of the group. Even in the scene where the disciples mention the possibility of purchasing food for a group of people (Luke 9:13b), the disciples never make such a purchase. By contrast, as Seim notes, “The women take care of the material needs of the group; they provide the basic sustenance for Jesus and those who follow him, having left everything behind. The women’s use of their property permits the group around Jesus to be free of concern about what they will eat or what they will wear.”⁷ Amy-Jill Levine takes this suggestion a step further and tentatively suggests that the women may have used their social capital to contribute to social connections Jesus

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and the disciples made.⁸ The women’s continual ministry, whatever it entailed, demonstrated their commitment to the mission and ministry of Jesus, to which it seems they had insider access.

Though the Gospel of Luke seems to depict an itinerant preacher who teaches the chosen twelve in private, the text simultaneously assumes the women are present for these “exclusive” teachings. There is no mention of the women’s presence during Jesus’ passion predictions, and yet, the women are expected to remember Jesus’ teachings from Galilee: “remember what he told you while he was still in Galilee” (Luke 24:6–8, NRSVue). The first prediction indicates Jesus is alone with Peter, James, and John on the mountain (Luke 9:21–22); the second prediction is “to the disciples” (Luke 9:43b–45); and in the third prediction, (Luke 18:31–34) Jesus takes the twelve aside to tell them about his death, though this prediction does not occur in Galilee. Parsons suggests that this call to memory suggests “that they [the women] have been included in the circle of disciples privy to Jesus’ teaching on these matters.”⁹ Even if the women were present for the second prediction (to an unspecified number of disciples), it seems peculiar that the women, at the height of their grief, were meant to remember something Jesus said in their presence once, which Peter, James, and John, were not expected to remember even after hearing the prediction three times.

It seems plausible that these women would have had some effect on Jesus’ ministry, not only through their financial support

York: Crossroad, 1993) 2:734; Mikeal Parsons, *Luke*, ΠΑΙΔΕΙΑ Commentaries on the NT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 134; François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, trans. Christine M. Thomas, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 300.

5. Reid and Matthews, *Luke*, 251.

6. F. Scott Spencer, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), 205.

7. Seim, “Luke,” 2:740.

8. Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III, *Luke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 225. Levine also notes that this need not imply that the women were rich; only that they had enough extra resources to dispose of some of them for the sake of the Jesus mission.

9. Parsons, *Luke*, 134.

but also through their presence. It is difficult to determine how—or whether—the women affected Jesus, but it is hard to imagine that, as followers, they would have had no impact upon Jesus’ mission ministry. They—like the male disciples, like the people Jesus healed, like the crowds who followed Jesus—were no doubt part of his mission. They hosted him, they challenged him, they supported him financially, and they told others about him. The women’s enduring presence and covert ministry, exemplified by Martha and the women who follow Jesus from Galilee to the cross, enabled Jesus and the male disciples’ overt mission and ministry.

From critique to pattern for ministry: Martha

There is at least one indication of a female disciple who attempted to affect Jesus’ ministry: Martha (Luke 10:38–42). In this scene, Jesus enters Martha’s home as a guest. Martha is introduced with no male relative and likely provides for her sister Mary, who sits at Jesus’ feet. Martha’s tasks—or ministries (*diakonian*, 10:40)—are weighing heavily on her, and she wants her sister’s help. Martha asks Jesus to advocate for her: “Lord, does it not matter to you that my sister has left me to do the ministries alone? Tell her therefore to help me” (Luke 10:40). The ensuing conversation with Jesus highlights the character of female discipleship. While the disagreement in female disciples’ roles here seems to revolve around whether service or listening is more important, the male disciples’ debates appear to center on power and how they might gain it (cf. Luke 9:46–48). The discussion of service and its relationship to discipleship will come up again in Luke 22, suggesting Martha’s request has a more substantial effect on Jesus than initially meets the eye.

Martha, like the other female disciples, is associated with *diakon*-root words (twice in Luke 10:40). While most translations determine that Martha is “distracted,” the sense of the term *periespaō* is to be “drawn away” from something, whether physically or metaphorically. Many imagine Martha anxiously preparing the meal and serving Jesus and whomever else is traveling with him. This image is certainly available in the text, but another image for what is happening is possible. Martha is drawn away by her service when she, too, wants to sit with Mary at the feet of Jesus. Instead, however, Martha is doing the work that makes Jesus’ mission possible. The beginning of Luke 10 confirms this reading of the text. Jesus sends out the seventy(two), telling them to “carry no purse, no bag, no sandals . . .” and to “remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer is worthy of his wages” (Luke 10:5, 7). Matteo Crimella observes that “Martha’s hospitality contrasts with the Samaritans’ refusal and is in line with the indications given to the disciples: in welcoming Jesus, the woman is also creating space for his mission.”¹⁰ One would expect Martha to receive a positive estimation from Jesus: she shows proper hospitality by welcoming

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Jesus into her home and providing for him and likely also for his entourage of male and female disciples.

It should come as a shock, therefore, that Jesus does not oblige Martha’s request that he command Mary to help her. This shock occurs on multiple levels. The first level is the relationship between Martha and Mary. As the householder and the elder sister, it would likely have been within Martha’s rights to command Mary to help her without the assistance of Jesus. Martha shows proper deference to her guest and teacher in asking Jesus to advocate for her. The second level of shock is Jesus’ critique of Martha, however gentle or implicit it may be. Martha represents the sort of host Jesus *wants* his supporters to be. As John Carroll notes, “Martha is busy with doing, but the pairing of hearing and action that Luke’s narrative commends requires more than action, more than the provision of hospitality, though Martha shows herself to be the kind of host that Jesus instructed his followers to seek out in their mission journeys.”¹¹ Martha is overburdened *because* she is ministering to Jesus and hosting him in her home. Little is said of Jesus’ insult to his host, which hardly makes him an ideal guest. Making Martha responsible for hospitality, for ministry, and for finding a way to be able to sit at the feet of Jesus with her sister presents an impossible scenario. She’s the ideal host, avoiding the pitfalls of the other hosts Jesus has critiqued in Luke (e.g., Luke 7:36–50, 10:13–16), and she still seems to get it wrong. It conjures the scene from the movie *Barbie*, in which America Ferrera’s character highlights the impossibility of being female:

We have to always be extraordinary, but somehow we’re always doing it wrong. You have to be a boss, but you can’t be mean. You have to lead, but you can’t squash other people’s ideas. . . . You have to answer for men’s bad behavior, which is insane, but if you point that out, you’re accused of complaining. . . . But always stand out and always be grateful. But never forget that the system is rigged. So find a way to acknowledge that but also always be grateful. . . . You have to never get old, never be rude, never show off, never be selfish, never fall down, never fail, never show fear, never get out of line.

10. Matteo Crimella, “Martha the Hostess, and Mary, the Listener. A Discussion with the Feminist Interpretation of Luke 10:38–42,” *Verbum Vitae* 40, no. 1 (2022): 60.

11. John Carroll, *Luke*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 247.

It's too hard! It's too contradictory and nobody gives you a medal or says thank you! And it turns out in fact that not only are you doing everything wrong, but also everything is your fault.¹²

Martha faces the impossibility of having to do everything and be everything as a disciple. She is the ideal host, and it still is not enough. She must both find a way to do the tasks of ministry and have enough time, energy, and focus to sit at the feet of Jesus. She enables Jesus' ministry, and her efforts make it possible for Mary to make the choice to sit at the feet of Jesus. Mary may have chosen the better part, but her choice makes it impossible for Martha to choose the same.

Jesus' reaction to Martha and her implicit argument with her sister stands in stark contrast to Jesus' response to the disciples' argument a chapter earlier. After Jesus' second passion prediction (Luke 9:43–45), the disciples respond with debates surrounding which one of them was the greatest. Instead of critiquing them for jockeying for positions of greatness or power, instead of telling them to choose the better part, Jesus places a child by his side and tells them: “the least among all of you is the greatest” (Luke 9:48). If this scene presents a critique, it is not nearly so direct as the critique of Martha. Nothing is said of the disciples' insensitivity or inappropriateness. Nothing is said of their failure to heed Jesus' teachings elsewhere in the gospel. Indeed, perhaps Jesus was not direct enough, because the disciples will have yet another debate about greatness in Luke 22.

In the male disciples' second debate about greatness (Luke 22:24–27), we see the influence Martha has on Jesus' ministry. The *diakon-* root words, used to describe the female followers of Jesus, both in the case of the women who minister out of their resources in Luke 8:1–3 and in the case of Martha's service to Jesus in Luke 10:38–42, are now part of Jesus' self-description and the pattern he sets out for the male disciples. They, like the kings of the gentiles, desire to rule over one another and argue about positions of authority and power. In response to their debate, however, Jesus turns the structure of power and authority on its head. Jesus asks them: “For who is greater: the one reclining at the table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is reclining at the table?” Jesus himself argues that he is in their midst “as one who serves (*ho diakonōn*)” (Luke 22:27b). The example for ministry that Jesus sets out for the disciples just before his trial and death is the same pattern that has already been set in place by the women throughout the gospel of Luke. Spencer highlights this point: “The work of service/ministry (*διακονεῖν, diakonein*) that preoccupies Martha is precisely what she *should* be about, like all of Jesus' disciples, male and female, following the word and deed of their Lord who hosted the five thousand (9:11–17) and will identify himself at the table as ‘the one who serves’ [*ho diakonōn*] (22:26–27).”¹³ Martha's behavior, which Jesus seemed to critique more harshly than the

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male disciples' desire for power, is not only the desired pattern for the male disciples; it is the role that Jesus claims he inhabits.

While Jesus may have critiqued Martha for being drawn away from him by her many acts of service, it seems her demand of Jesus has stuck with him. Her efforts enabled Jesus' ministry, and it also enabled Mary (and likely other disciples) the privilege of sitting at Jesus' feet. Martha faced expectations impossible to fulfill: do all the things necessary to enable others' ministry and still have time, space, energy, and the will to focus on the “better part.” The “better part” was made possible by Martha. At the end of his ministry, Jesus tells the Twelve to be more like Martha, implicitly affirming what he once critiqued.

From Galilee to the end of the age

Though their presence is not mentioned, and though their influence on Jesus' ministry is obfuscated, the female disciples were the lone Galilean representatives mentioned at the cross. The Twelve and the inner circle of male disciples are no longer on the scene. The women enable Jesus' mission through financial support and hospitality; their service and ministry are the pattern Jesus highlights for the male disciples. The female disciples are the ones who see the mission through to its end and its new beginning:

“[The female disciples] have proven their commitment to Christ by leaving their Galilean homes and families; but so have the male apostles. The women have no part, however, in outright betraying or denying Jesus. Moreover, only they among Jesus' associates stationed far from the cross are explicitly said to be ‘watching [*horōsai*, a feminine participle] these things’ (23:49), that is, maintaining some perceptual connection with the dying Jesus.¹⁴

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In the crucifixion scene, the male disciples fade into the background, and in the resurrection, the female disciples take center stage. The women witness the trauma of Jesus' execution, and they return a day later to anoint his body, likely deformed by hanging on a cross. Instead of anointing a body, as they had expected, the angel tells them to remember—even in the midst of

12. Greta Gerwig and Noah Baumbach, *Barbie*, directed by Greta Gerwig (Hollywood: Warner Brothers, 2023).

13. Spencer, *Luke*, 288.

14. Spencer, *Luke*, 607.

their grief and trauma—words Jesus had spoken to them “while they were still in Galilee” (Luke 24:6). Though the inner circle of three has shifted from Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna to Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, the inclusion of this third name suggests that there were several women named among the followers of Jesus who, up to this point, were left unnamed. Indeed, Luke 24:10 indicates that there were “other women” with those named, as there had been in Luke 8:1–3. The command to remember and the community of remembrance paints these women as ideal disciples. Though on center stage for only a moment, as Seim notes, this scene “confirms their discipleship and the instruction they have received as disciples.”¹⁵ Levine notes similarly that this episode “reinforces the presence of the women throughout the mission; they had been with him from the start.”¹⁶ While certainly obfuscated and likely elided from the reader’s awareness and view, the Gospel of Luke centers the women when it matters most: when following Jesus becomes difficult. Martha is instructive here; she paves the way for the women to embrace the challenge of following Jesus; Martha demonstrated faithfulness when the expectations of her were impossible and the right choice was unclear.

As these examples show, navigating impossible alternatives is part and parcel of being a female disciple of Jesus. These women are drawn into the tension of impossibility, not only in their ministry, but in their following the angel’s command. They tell the male disciples as the angel has instructed them, and the male disciples disbelieve them. Worse yet: they believe the women share an idle tale. Seim believes the reaction to the women’s report represents a tension between women’s recognition and their rejection:

In the story of the empty tomb in Luke 24:1–10, it becomes clear how certain factors operate in silencing women. The peculiar Lukan version of this story may help to explain the remarkable gap between the Gospel’s emphasis on the role of women on the one side and on the other side Acts’ reduction of them to invisibility in favor of the healing and preaching activity of the leading men. By the use of almost ironic devices, the women become simultaneously recognized and rejected.¹⁷

While the male disciples do seem to discard this report, and, while I concede that the overall effect is rejection of the women’s message, it is important to note that this episode simultaneously represents the male disciples’ failure to recall what *Jesus* taught them. The male disciples do not remember Jesus’ words. They spent much of Jesus’ ministry ignoring his teaching, especially insofar as it pertained to the renunciation of power and the calls to serve (i.e., Luke 9:46–48; 22:24–27). In response to Jesus’ own prediction of his death, they did not understand what he was saying: “its meaning remained concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this

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saying” (9:45). This ignorance on top of a fundamentally unbelievable message put the women’s message at a double disadvantage: the male disciples were hardly going to believe an impossible story delivered from the women when they did not believe the same message when it came from Jesus.

While the women fade into the background once again at the end of Luke, their words nevertheless reverberate. Cleopas recounts the women’s report, confirming it was “just as they had said” (Luke 24:24). Likewise, the women’s ministry reverberates in the debates between serving at the table and serving through preaching the word (Acts 6:2, 4). While this debate appears to be exclusively among male disciples, if Luke’s Gospel is any indication, it seems fairly safe to assume that women were still present and still serving here too. The female followers’ pattern of service through financial and physical support of the ministry (Luke 8:1–3) and the debate between serving through action and serving through the word (10:38–42) anticipate the ministry that will happen in Acts. The Twelve realize in Acts 6:2 the difficulty Martha faced, when their own acts of service distract them from preaching the word of God. Martha therefore teaches us—and maybe even Jesus—that to expect disciples to simultaneously minister, listen, be present, attend to the word of God, and preach the word of God is to present them with an impossible task.

Concluding remarks

Even though hidden from view for most of the Gospel of Luke, the women who supported Jesus’ ministry were present from Galilee to the cross. They have a variety of roles, including enabling Jesus’ ministry financially through their means and welcoming Jesus into their homes. Their behavior sets forth a pattern for discipleship. Like the female disciples, Jesus adopts the posture of “one who serves,” indirectly affirming Martha’s actions, despite his earlier critique of her.

15. Seim, “Luke,” 2:750.

16. Levine and Witherington, *Luke*, 651.

17. Seim, “Luke,” 2:748.

The female disciples have much to teach us. They teach us that discipleship is a habitual task. It constitutes an ongoing relationship with Jesus. While Mary may have chosen the better part, Martha's many labors and ministries enabled her to do so (and therefore enabled Jesus' critique of her). Martha teaches us that discipleship can feel like being drawn into multiple conflicting obligations: to learn, to listen, to lead, and to serve. Mary reminds us that it is a privilege to be able to sit at the feet of Jesus, a privilege that is often enabled by others' labor. The women at the empty tomb inspire us to remember Jesus and his words and to tell others about them, even if reporting these words will be received as an idle tale. Finally, the female disciples remind us to pay attention to those who are relegated to the background, elided from the story, and obfuscated from view. These individuals are often the ones who demonstrate faithful discipleship in the face of grief and trauma, whose words take center stage at the crucial moment, speaking truths that reverberate throughout history—"he is not here, he is risen"—and transform the lives of those who hear it.

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