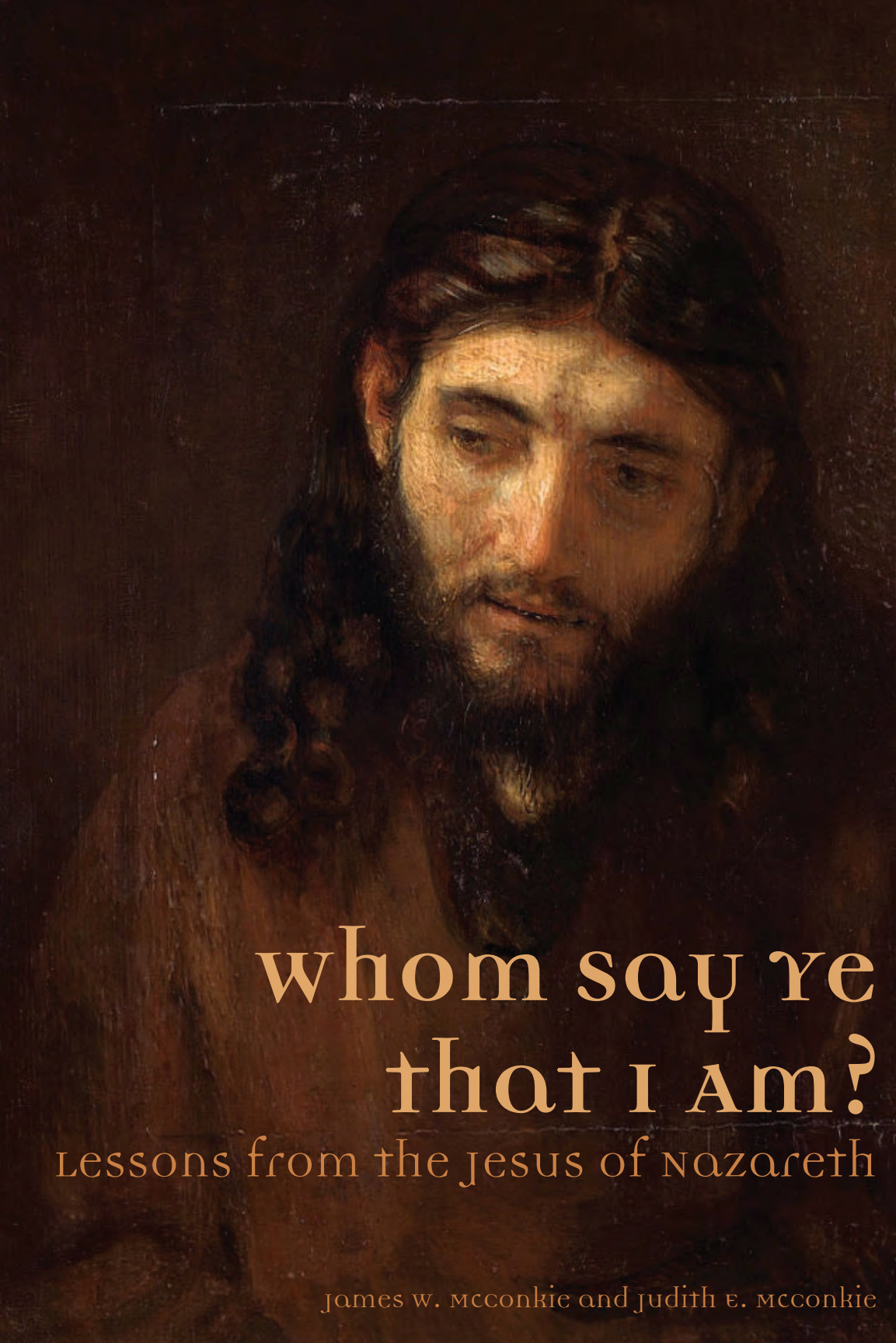

Whom Say Ye That I Am?

Lessons from the Jesus of Nazareth

James W. McConkie and Judith E. McConkie

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James W. McConkie and Judith E. McConkie
with an essay by Dean Collinwood

Greg Kofford Books
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To our children and our children's children

"We do well to remember that our duty is not only to ourselves but also to our children and our children's children. If in our time the Church were to become weak; if the Christian ethic were to be more and more submerged in the world; if the Christian faith were to be twisted and distorted, we would not be the only losers. Those of generations still to come would be robbed of something infinitely precious. We are not the possessors but also the trustees of the faith. That which we have received, we must also hand on."

William Barclay (1907–1978)

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foreword

The moment we decided to collaborate on a book of essays about Jesus of Nazareth, several challenges—as well as opportunities—presented themselves. First, the act of collaboration itself could create the opposite of joint joyful creativity: We are both strong personalities; disputes over content or style could derail a happy relationship of more than half a century. We thankfully write that we managed to come through the experience, as J. D. Salinger wrote in a wonderful short story about relationships, with "all [our] faculties in tact."[1] In fact, our mutual and individual warrants to be the disciples of the Jesus whom we know as the Savior of mankind have been immeasurably strengthened.

The second challenge we faced was choosing what and how often we would reference the sources we found to be important. We are both active members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, sometimes known as the Mormon Church. As would be expected, men and women in the leadership of our faith have written and spoken often about Jesus. Their wisdom and insights are invariably esteemed. However, we decided early on that the sources we would examine and share most often would be, as frequently as possible and appropriate, primary ones—that is, the four Gospels of the New Testament themselves, as well as those who wrote and spoke as close to the first century of the Common Era as possible. In addition, we would study the most respected scholars we could find on the subjects of the customs, beliefs, and especially contexts of the four Gospels. We admit that it was often tempting to especially lean on men and women of our faith who have made the personal commitment to read and then think critically about the Gospels and the scholars for themselves and then share their conclusions, especially by way of testimony, in written or oral form.

1. "For Esmé - with Love and Squalor," a touching short story by J. D. Salinger about a young girl and a traumatized soldier, was originally published in 1950 in *The New Yorker*. It has since been re-published often in American literature texts. Ours comes from an anthology of his work published in 2001 by Back Bay Books (New York City).

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But we have agreed that quoting them too often would in a way have short-circuited the purpose of our efforts for both of us. Therefore, the secondary sources we have tried to employ are works written by particular experts in various fields of research about the New Testament or the contexts of those scriptures. Without question, the authors we have chosen have added to whatever insights about Jesus we may have brought to these essays. We hope that the research those scholars have added to the authoritative testimonies from our pastoral leaders will serve to be as important to those who read this work as they have been to us.

Finally, we had to decide how we would blend our two voices in a series of essays. As you read the following chapters, you may discern the personality of one writer or the other. Our personal areas of expertise may come through. Our interests may come through as well. Judith brings to the volume references to works of art about the subjects at hand. She tends to produce complex sentences populated by any number of dependent clauses, which honestly made our editor crazy. James, on the other hand, employs direct and disciplined constructions. He tends to be more interested in the scholars whose expertise is the newest historical Jesus research, and his devotion to the study of their work is obvious. With the help of an able editor, we hope that we have been able to achieve a respectable fusion. In this foreword to the essays, however, we have chosen for the moment to write separately about what brought each of us to the work at hand.

From James:

In 1997, our daughter Kelly was accepted into the Brigham Young University Study Abroad program. She packed her bags and went off to be taught at BYU's Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies. The Center, a BYU satellite campus, offers coursework that focuses on the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, Near Eastern studies, and ancient languages—particularly Hebrew and Arabic. The classroom experience is built around field trips to various parts of the Holy Land.

The BYU campus itself is located on Mount Scopus, directly across the Kidron Valley from the famous Golden Gate of the Temple Mount. The BYU complex's enormous west windows look over what is left of the more ancient City of David, as well as the level ground on Mount Zion where Jesus, at least once and perhaps twice, drove out the moneychangers and merchants and where he went to teach the crowds and heal the sick. Today, the holy shrine of the Dome of the Rock dominates the famous skyline.

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chapter 1

Jesus in Historical Context

Based on our approach of looking at the details of Jesus in real-life situations to better understand who he is and what he is like, historical context is an essential ingredient. Without it, we will not be able to understand the meaning of the written text or appreciate the significance of what Jesus did and said. As Marcus J. Borg expresses it, "Setting biblical passages in their ancient context makes them come alive. It enables us to see meanings in these ancient texts that would otherwise be hidden from our sight. It unearths meanings that otherwise would remain buried in the past."[1]

Think for a moment about how difficult it would be for someone two thousand years from now to explain the World Series to a group of people unfamiliar with baseball. "Stealing third base" or "hitting the winning run at the bottom of the ninth inning" would be meaningless gibberish. Likewise, think about how difficult it would be to understand the phrase "That is a good course" if we did not know more about the setting. The phrase denotes one thing coming off of a golf course and another thing coming out of a schoolroom. The phrase takes on yet another meaning coming out of a restaurant. Or think of the word *left.* It could mean you exited a place (I *left* the room) or that an object remained behind (I *left* my credit card at home). It could be used as an adjective to identify which of your two hands you prefer to use (I am *left*-handed) or as a directional indicator (turn *left*) or even as a political preference (Joe leans *left* politically).

Not only does context help us know what is going on, but it also "helps us to avoid reading the Bible simply with our current agendas in mind and frees the Bible [Jesus] to speak with [his] own voice."[2] It should be obvious that out of historical context, Jesus could plausibly be expropriated to support almost any "good" cause, whether he would have actually endorsed it or not. For example, during the Civil War, the Confederate States often justified slavery by quoting the New Testament

1. Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time,* 39.
2. Ibid.

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and the Apostle Paul. Mormons used the same sources to justify priesthood restrictions. If Jesus and his disciples could be commandeered to support such practices, there is no limit to what his name might be used to justify. N. T. Wright explains, "Plenty of people in the church and outside it have made up a Jesus for themselves, and have found that this invented character makes few real demands on them."[3]

Think about that idea. Consider the many different ways the name of Jesus is employed and for what purposes. In the words of Wright, Jesus is "almost universally approved of" but for "very different and indeed often incompatible reasons."[4] He is "wheeled in" to give support to capitalism on the one hand and socialism on the other. Some groups use him to "undergird strict morality" while others use him to offer freedom from more "constrictive moral constraints."[5] Yet still others tout him as a pacifist while others make him out to justify violence in some circumstances.

If this is the case, then what Jesus are we worshiping, and is the Jesus we are worshiping of our own making? This is why "the question as to *which* Jesus we are talking about will not go away. Nor will the impression that this question contains the deeper question as to which *god* we are talking about."[6] Wright concludes, "The point of having Jesus at the center of a religion or a faith is that one has *Jesus*: not a cipher, a strange silhouetted Christ figure, nor yet an icon, but the one Jesus the New Testament writers know, the one born in Palestine in the reign of Augustus Caesar, and crucified outside Jerusalem,"—the Jesus that died and three days later came back to life.[7] How easy it is for us to distort the picture, to "see the world through the colored spectacles of our own personal histories, backgrounds, assumptions and so on."[8]

We did not want to devise a self-validating Jesus who just happened to agree with our view of things—a Jesus that could make us feel good about whatever we happened to be thinking or doing at the time. Making Jesus in our own image makes him no god at all and certainly not one that could save us.

During the past half century, historians have made significant strides examining the most recently discovered source materials to reconstruct

3. N. T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship,* ix.
4. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God,* 10.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 10–11.
8. Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions,* 17.

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the first-century Jesus—the Jesus that first-generation Christians would recognize. The aim is to put Jesus within the context of his own times using historical methods that place emphasis on primary sources—source material that is closest to the person being studied. This approach also involves an analysis of contemporary histories and gospels not in the biblical canon, used for historical and cultural information about the times in which he lived. The end result is, as N. T. Wright insists, a "historical jigsaw [that] must portray Jesus as a credible and recognizable first-century Jew, relating comprehensively in speech and action to other first-century Jews. No solution which claims to be talking about history can ever undo this basic move."[9]

As we mentioned in our Foreword, our interest in placing Jesus in his own historical perspective was awakened when our daughter Kelly came home from her study abroad program in Jerusalem, where she studied the New Testament. Our conversations with her put us on the lookout for good historical information about the life and times of Jesus. It was not long afterward that we were in San Francisco, where we visited a bookstore in the basement of Grace Cathedral. It was there that we became acquainted with a vein of historical scholarship on Jesus that opened up a whole new world to us and explained better than anything we had read before what Jesus was all about in the context of his times. We picked up a book by Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (1995). Once we started reading it, we could not put it down. We disagreed with his pantheistic view of God and his metaphorical approach to miracles and the resurrection narrative, but he brought to life the character, demeanor, and temperament of Jesus as a person, teacher, and social prophet. Borg convincingly portrayed Jesus as a compassionate person who was unflinching in his just criticism of the religious and socioeconomic conditions of his day. We were captivated by Borg's portrayal.

Our interest in what Borg had to say led us to read other scholars of the historical Jesus. One in particular was John Dominic Crossan, an Irish-American religious intellect and former Catholic priest. He presented Jesus as a revolutionary with an emphasis on personal action and social transformation. He believes that Jesus came from a landless peasant background and was initially a follower of John the Baptist. He was a healer and a man of wisdom who taught a message of tolerance and inclusiveness

9. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God,* 6.

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chapter 2

Jesus and Women

Arguably, some of the most striking images of medieval European Christianity are the sixteen high relief bronze panels on the Bernward Doors (circa 1015) of the cathedral in Hilldesheim, Germany. The image sides of the enormous single-cast doors face the pilgrim who approaches the cathedral. Scenes from the Book of Genesis on the left door tell the Adam and Eve story from top to bottom; the last panel shows the murder of Abel by his older brother, Cain. The right door's eight-panel cycle, reading from bottom to top, connects the birth and resurrection of Jesus to the fallen state of man and mankind's need for the Savior's redemption.

The fourth panel on the left door is an appropriate metaphor to begin a chapter on Jesus and women. In it, God stands on one side of the fallen couple, a serpent-like creature below Eve on the other. God reproaches Adam, pointing an accusing finger at the first man. But Adam in turn points to Eve, who seems to still hold the fruit offered by the serpent. She cowers in absolute, abject shame behind the tree of life, trying to cover her nakedness.

There they are, caught between ultimate goodness and evil. And the weight of the sin rests with Eve, who, for us in this chapter, aptly represents the theological second-class status of women, who are to be blamed for the concupiscence—meaning the lustful and carnal appetites (as opposed to those of the spirit)—of the human family throughout Judeo-Christian history, including the culture of Jesus's day.[1] Using the same canon text, the Jewish authorities justified their pervasive attitudes and treatment of women. It was common for devout Jewish men each morning to begin their day by thanking God that they were not women. "Blessed are you, Lord, our God, ruler of the universe," they prayed, "who has not created me a woman."[2] The prayer and Bernward's panel epitomize the misogyny

1. *Catholic Encyclopedia,* s.v. "concupiscence."

2. The Jewish prayer book called the *siddur* contains blessings, thanksgivings, petitions, and instructions. Some traditional translations contain one prayer that devalues women in comparison to men. "Blessed are you O God, King of the Universe, Who has not made me . . . a goy [Gentile] . . . a slave . . . [or a] woman."

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that existed in Jesus's day and that remains at the core of so many contemporary patriarchal religions and societies.

Women in First-Century Palestine

At the time of Jesus, women had virtually no rights. Women were considered objects, like an animal or a piece of property owned by their husbands. Some rabbis even wondered if females had souls.[3] A comment about Adam and Eve from the late Second Temple period (530 BC and AD 70) reflects the prevailing attitudes: "The Lord said: '. . . thy wife shall tremble when she looketh upon thee.' And an angel instructed Adam, 'Thus saith the Lord; I did not create thy wife to command thee, but to obey.'"[4]

A woman's world in first-century Palestine was bounded by the walls of her home—so much so that men and especially rabbis were forbidden from addressing and speaking with them in public places. The woman's job description was overtly specified. She was to nurse and raise children, grind flour, bake bread, wash clothes, cook food, and make her husband's bed.[5] In cases of abject poverty, women were allowed to work outside the home in limited settings but only as cooks, bakers, laundresses, hairdressers, or innkeepers.[6] In extreme cases, a man's wife and child could be sold as slaves. In the countryside, "economic necessity allowed some women to work outside of their homes to help with the harvest or other farm needs."[7] Because their role was limited to duties of the hearth and home, they were rarely if ever tutored or taught the Torah. Rather, their education was limited to culinary and household chores.

Dress standards were used to control women and protect men from sexual temptation. Absolute modesty was equated with sexual purity. A married woman was to be completely covered outside her home, and "if a Jewess uncovered her head in public, it was interpreted as a sign of rejecting God."[8] Veiling of the face was so prevalent that on one occasion a chief

3. Lisa Sergio, *Jesus and Women,* 3.

4. Lynne Hilton Wilson, *Christ's Emancipation of Women in the New Testament,* 4, citing Robert H. Charles, ed., *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament,* 2.134. The Jewish pseudepigrapha is a collection of religious works attributed to scribes sometime between 200 BC and AD 100.

5. Wilson, *Christ's Emancipation of Women*, 42.

6. Ibid., 45.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., 37.

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priest in Jerusalem did not realize that the person brought before him for judgment was his mother.[9] In agricultural areas, the dress code was slightly more relaxed to take into account the practicality of helping with chores.

In or out of the home, women were expected to take counsel from their husbands. The most reliable Jewish historian, Josephus, explained that (as the Bernward doors illustrate) Adam was cursed in the Garden of Eden "because he *weakly* submitted to the counsel of his wife."[10] Therefore, "a woman is inferior to her husband in all things."[11] After a man and woman married, the husband in devout first-century Jewish households claimed the new title of *rab* or *rabbi,* which meant "Master," "my great one," or "honorable sir."[12]

Divorce was the ultimate weapon of control that husbands held over the heads of their recalcitrant wives. It was easy for a man to divorce his wife but difficult for a woman to divorce her husband. A woman could leave her husband only for rare afflictions or grievances that would make him forever "unclean," such as if he were afflicted with boils or if he collected dog excrement. On the other hand, a man could divorce a woman for a long laundry list of items, including big or small affronts: her inability to bear children, her "bold speech," or even her burning her husband's bread for dinner.[13] For the husband to undertake a divorce, all he had to do was write on a piece of paper called a *get* (a Hebrew word for a divorce document) the words, "You are hereby permitted to all men."

The implication of the statement seems clear. The divorced woman could thereafter be used or abused by any male. The divorce became final when he simply handed the *get* to her. Threats of divorce controlled every aspect of the husband-wife relationship. It was the ultimate tool of intimidation because once divorced, a woman became a pariah in the society at large. Divorce put her in the same financial category as widows and orphans, who were most often economically destitute and left to live hidden from view in the shadows of society. Because of fear and ostracism, then, marriages were full of insecurity and distrust. A woman tried to

9. Ibid., 38.
10. Ibid., 44; emphasis added.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 156.
13. Ibid., 197–200.

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"comply with every demand her husband made."[14] She was subservient to her spouse, and her relationship with him was unequal.[15]

The wider first-century Greco-Roman world was generally contemptuous of women as well. Just as in Jewish society, most pagan women were nonentities. A woman's duty was "to remain indoors and to be obedient to her husband."[16] A Roman husband could divorce his wife at will provided he returned her dowry.[17] Under Roman law, a woman had more status but few (if any) rights, mainly because from a Roman perspective, a wife remained on the same legal level as a child—forever. And as a child, she was under the supervision of her father—a privilege referred to as *patria potestas* (power of a father)—meaning that he had the right of life and death over her until she married, at which time the father's supervisory responsibilities vested in her husband. Cato the Censor wrote, "If you were to catch your wife in an act of infidelity, you [could] kill her with impunity without a trial."[18] Another Roman, Publius Sempronius Sophus, divorced his wife because she had been seen at the public games.[19]

Clearly, in civilizations surrounding the Mediterranean at the time of Jesus, restrictions and expectations surrounding women reflected a decidedly patriarchal view of the world as a whole. Male dominance was at the heart of patriarchy and meant that males heavily controlled all public aspects of society. As K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman point out in their book, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus*, the idea that males were privileged stemmed from the concept that a man's "seed" was what created a child.[20] A woman simply provided the womb as a place for the gestation of her husband's children. Whether justified or not, this view was legitimized throughout the Israelite story of the Creation. After all, males were created first, as we saw on Bernward's doors at Hilldesheim, and it was Eve who broke the commandment first and ate the forbidden fruit. Adam got to blame it all on her.

Historians and sociologists often argue that gender divisions were also based on male fear. A woman was potentially dangerous because the fe-

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14. Ibid., 200.
15. Ibid., 198–200.
16. William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Letters of James and Peter*, 252.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts,* 50–51.

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male could sexually overpower a man. Women, therefore, were seen as fundamentally sinful. On the other hand, women were praised as wives and mothers. A good wife meant her "husband was respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders" (Prov. 31:23 NIV), and mothers were deserving of their sons' respect (Ex. 20:12; Prov. 1:8; 6:20). Associating women with the home meant that "males must guard the females within the family and continually be on guard against females from the outside."[21]

The effects of these general attitudes and beliefs about males and females, husbands and wives, at the time of Jesus justified the behaviors and customs related to women's roles in the home, in the marketplace, and in worship settings.[22] The obvious result was that women functioned differently from their male counterparts. Public behaviors such as negotiating contracts, testifying in court, or even attending public events were the prerogatives of males only. Similarly, religious roles were limited. Woman could not make sacrifices or otherwise officiate at the Temple. These privileges required intermediaries in the form of male priests.

Fundamentally, the roles assigned to men and women were made clear in the ancient Mediterranean values of honor and shame. "Males [were] expected to embody the family's honor in their virility, boldness, sexual aggression, and protection of the family. . . . Females [were] expected to keep the family from shame by their modesty, restraint, sexual exclusivity, and submission to male authority."[23]

Against this backdrop, how did Jesus view and treat women?

Jesus and the Samaritan Woman

The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman he encountered at Jacob's Well personifies Jesus's countercultural attitudes about women. Jesus was in Judea, where his disciples had been successfully baptizing converts. The account indicates that Jesus left Judea and set off to return home to Galilee through the customary route through Samaria, the province separating Judea and Galilee. On his northward journey, he stopped to rest at Jacob's Well, just outside the Samaritan town of Sychar. His disciples went into town and left him alone at the well. A Samaritan woman came to the well, and Jesus asked her for a drink. The woman was surprised because Jews

21. Ibid., 50.

22. William Whiston, trans., *The Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus, the Jewish Historian*, "Antiquities," 15.419.

23. Hanson and Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus*, 51.

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did not associate with Samaritans or women. Jesus responded by telling her that if she knew who he was, she would have asked him to give her "living water," which would be "a well . . . springing up into everlasting life." When the woman asked for this "water," Jesus told her to find and bring her husband. The woman answered that she did not have a husband, whereupon Jesus told her that she previously had five husbands and was currently living out of wedlock with a sixth man. She perceived that he was a prophet. He then engaged her in a weighty religious discussion. He taught her about the proper worship of God and then declared himself to be the promised Messiah. She believed him. With Jesus's approbation, she returned to her village to tell her friends and relatives that the Messiah had come. The story concludes with the men and women of the town coming to hear Jesus preach the gospel (John 4:5–42).

This story, which does not seem so out of place to us in our gender–mixing society, was revolutionary in its time. It not only portrays how Jesus related to women in general, but it also illustrates how his view of women was different from his own society and culture. First, as we have established, in Jesus's day, it was inappropriate for males, let alone a rabbi like Jesus, to speak to a woman. Second, it was inappropriate for Jesus to be alone with a woman to whom he was not related or married, let alone an unclean Samaritan. And third, it was inappropriate for Jesus to approve of a woman functioning in a religious role (inviting her friends and relatives to believe that Jesus was the messiah). In this account, Jesus was seemingly indifferent to many social norms of his day. All of the boundary lines, those presumed sets of beliefs about the way men and women or Jews and Samaritans should relate, are turned upside down.

Speaking with a Woman

When Jesus spoke to the woman at the well and asked for a drink of water, she was genuinely surprised by his flaunting of social protocols. She knew that customs were so deeply rooted that the most religious Pharisees would literally shut their eyes upon catching sight of a woman and stumble into walls and houses, thus deserving their popular nickname, "bruised-and-bleeding Pharisees." In public, women were to be invisible.

This interaction between Jesus and the woman at Jacob's Well was even more egregious because Jesus was a Jew and the woman a Samaritan. The antipathy between these two groups was legendary and based on centuries of Samaritans intermarrying with non-Jews. The antipathy was so great

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that Jews traveling in Samaria would literally shake the dust off of their feet as they exited the territory. As well, Jesus knew that he was speaking to an unsavory Samaritan woman who was living in adultery and had been divorced five times. Her reaction to Jesus when he asked for a drink of water was not surprising: "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink?" (John 4:9 NLT). She could have added, "I am also an immoral woman." Jesus had every reason to ignore her.

This story is even more remarkable and culturally atypical when we consider the fact that Jesus did far more than simply utter a few words to quench his thirst. He engaged the woman in a lengthy and serious religious conversation. After all, a woman's religious education was limited. Women were not expected to study the Torah but rather to devote their attention to household responsibilities. Yet Jesus and the woman talked extensively about the meaning of worship and what a person must do to be saved (John 4:21–24). "So tell me, why is it that you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place of worship, while we Samaritans claim it is here at Mount Gerizim, where our ancestors worshipped?" she asked (John 4:20 NLT). Jesus responded that the Samaritans knew little about God and that "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22 NLT).

During the course of their conversation, he compared his words to "living water" that leads to eternal life (John 4:11 NLT). "Anyone who drinks this water [in the well] will soon become thirsty again. But those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life" (John 4:13–14 NLT). Jesus then revealed his true identity and said he was the messiah (John 4:26). The woman was so overtaken at the news that she "left her water jar beside the well and ran back to the village telling everyone" (John 4:28 NLT).

Alone with a Woman

Being alone with a woman in *public* was even more suspect than speaking with one. Being alone with a woman at a *well* reached the height of impropriety. It was scandalous and indecent. In addition to being a public place where women should not speak to men, wells had a reputation of being places for amorous encounters. Just being there with a woman was something Rabbi Jesus ought to avoid. Genesis 24 recounts the story of Abraham's servant's encounter with Rebekah at the well. He had been sent by Abraham to find a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24:15–28). Isaac's son Jacob

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courted Rachel at that very well, where he kissed her and fell in love so deeply that he was willing to work seven years for the privilege of marrying her (Gen. 29:1–18).

It is no wonder that when Jesus's disciples returned from the village, they were astonished to find Jesus speaking with a woman (John 4:27). Yet, none of them had the temerity to ask him, "What do you want with her?" Or "Why are you talking to her?" (John 4:27 NLT). It appears as though the woman immediately left when the disciples arrived, perhaps in haste because it was an utterly inappropriate situation.

A Woman Preaches the Gospel

There was a wall of separation between priestly duties and women. Priests were by definition men. Sacrificing animals, administering the affairs of the Temple, and expounding the Torah and Oral Law were for males only. Women were not even admitted into the most sacred precincts of the Temple, but were limited to the Women's Court. Therefore, it is of particular interest and import that Jesus approved of this woman going back to her village to tell all her friends and neighbors about her heartfelt belief that Jesus was the messiah, and by implication that the Kingdom of God was on the earth. Her efforts prompted people to come "streaming from the village to see [Jesus]" (John 4:30 NLT). Many believed that Jesus was "indeed the Savior of the world" (John 4:42 NLT), and they "begged him to stay" (John 4:40 NLT).

In this one account we see a Jesus who related to women in an entirely different way than other men in his culture. He was inclusive—he spoke to women about religion and envisioned them as emissaries who could and should carry the message about the messiah and the emerging Kingdom of God to others.

Other Encounters Jesus Had with Women

Jesus's partnership with women would continue to be a hallmark of his ministry. In the twenty-nine different passages in the four Gospels where Jesus encountered women, he continued to defy the traditional roles assigned to men and women.[24] Invariably, Jesus did not hesitate to

24. See Jesus and his mother at the Cana wedding (John 2:1–12); Jesus talks with Samaritan woman (John 4:1–42); Jesus on adultery and divorce (Matt. 5:28–32; 19:1–12; Mark 10:1–12; Luke 16:18); Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law

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recognize, speak with, bless, and include women in public encounters and in his closest and most intimate circles. When a woman who had suffered from constant bleeding for twelve years unobtrusively touched him in a crowd, he healed her and reassured her. "Daughter, be encouraged!" he said, "Your faith has made you well" (Matt. 9:22 NLT). On yet another occasion, contrary to tradition, Jesus involved Mary in a religious discussion instead of having her respond to Martha's plea that she perform her more traditional role to help prepare food. "My dear Martha," Jesus said, "you are so upset over all these details! There is really only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it—and I won't take it away from her" (Luke 10:40–42 NLT).

It is not surprising that women followed Jesus and even contributed money to his ministry (Luke 8:2–3). Many were committed disciples, faithful through adversity to the end of Jesus's life (Mark 15:40–41; 16:1). In the end, there came a point in the story where his male disciples abandoned him and ran away. As far as they were concerned, Jesus's death marked the end of their hope that he was the messiah. But not the women!

(Matt. 8:14–15; Mark 1:30–31; Luke 4:38–39); Jesus raises widow's son at Nain (Luke 7:11–15); Mary and family come to take Jesus home (Matt. 12:46–50; Mark 3:20–21, 31–35; Luke 7:11–15); Jesus raises Jairus's daughter, heals woman with issue of blood (Matt. 8:18–26; Mark 5:22–43; Luke 8:40–56); daughter set against mother (Matt. 10:35; Luke 12:53); Jesus anointed by sinful woman (Luke 7:36–50); group of women supports Jesus and the Twelve (Luke 8:2–3); Jesus exorcises demon from girl (Matt. 15:21–28; Mark 7:24–30); Jesus teaches Martha an object lesson (Luke 10:38–42); woman calls Jesus's mother blessed (Luke 11:27–28); Jesus commends queen of the south (Matt. 12:42; Luke 11:31); Jesus heals crippled woman on Sabbath (Luke 13:10–17); woman hides leaven in meal (Matt. 13:33; Luke 13:20–21); woman loses piece of silver (Luke 15:8–10); widow troubles judge (Luke 18:1–8); mother of sons of Zebedee makes request (Matt. 20:20–28; Mark 10:35–45); Jesus teaches on marriage in the resurrection (Matt. 22:23–33; Mark 12:18–27; Luke 20:27–40); Jesus teaches on widow's mite (Mark 12:40–44; Luke 20:47–21:4); Jesus predicts calamities facing nursing mothers, women at mill (Matt. 24:19–21; Mark 13:17–19; Matt. 24:41; Luke 17:35); Jesus teaches parable of ten virgins (Matt. 25:1–13); Mary and Martha grieve for Lazarus (John 11:1–44); Mary anoints Jesus (Matt. 26:6–13; Mark 14:3–9; John 12:1–8); women bewail and lament Jesus (Luke 23:27–31); women behold Crucifixion (Matt. 27:55–56; Mark 15:40–41; Luke 23:49; John 19:25–27); Mary Magdalene and others attend Jesus's burial, set out to anoint his body on third day (Matt. 27:61, 28:1–11; Mark 15:47–16:8; Luke 23:55–24:12; John 20:1–18). See Margaret E. Köstenberger, *Jesus and the Feminists: Who Do They Say That He Is?,* 187.

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Women were the first to come to the empty tomb, the first to see the risen Lord, and the first to run to tell the apostles that Jesus had risen from the dead (Mark 16:2–8; Luke 24:1–11; Matt. 28:1–10; John 20:11–18) As N. T. Wright emphasizes, "This is of incalculable significance. Mary Magdalene and the others are the apostles to the apostles."[25] They are the unshakable disciples and followers of Jesus.

The Role of Women in the Earliest Christian Communities

It is no wonder, after even a cursory examination of how Jesus and women related to each other, that the first Christians allowed women expanded roles in the early Church as compared to their own restrictive society. They were deacons and missionaries who worked hard in the cause of Christ (Rom. 16:1–2, 6, 12; Philip. 4:2–3). They participated in Christian meetings (1 Cor. 11:5), founded churches (Acts 18:2, 18–19; 1 Cor. 16:3–5), and acted as prophets (1 Cor. 11:5; Acts 21:9).

Given the history of the early Christian Church, feminist New Testament scholars have given considerable attention to females who were included in the inner circle of the apostles. Paul referred to a female *apostolos* when he wrote, "Greet Andronikos [husband] and Junia [wife], my fellow Jews who were in prison with me. They are highly respected *among the apostles* and became followers of Christ before I did" (Rom. 16:7 NLT; emphasis added). In this context, Junia may actually have been one of the apostles herself. Paul in his letter uses the preposition *en* that in this locution means she was a member of the group. "Had he meant to exclude her he probably would have used the dative *apostolois* without the preposition." Therefore, "what we have is a reference to a woman Paul considered not only an apostle, but an outstanding one."[26] Joel's prophecy anticipated that when the messiah came, God would "pour out [his] Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your *daughters* shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17 KJV; emphasis added).

One of the books that has received a great deal of attention on the subject of women and early Christianity is the Gospel of Mary, an apocryphal book discovered in 1896 in a fifth-century papyrus codex. Most believe that the Mary referred to in this non-canonical gospel is Mary Magdalene, based on her status as a known disciple of Jesus. The narrative begins in the middle of the story, so it is difficult to know the setting.

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25. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging in Contemporary Issues,* 69.

26. Anthony A. Hutchinson, "Women and Ordination: Introduction to the Biblical Context," 66.

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But because this gospel begins with Jesus speaking with his disciples, it seems to be one of the post-resurrection accounts. Jesus departed, and his disciples became apprehensive and distraught. Mary recounted a vision she had in which Jesus communicated with her. Some of the apostles were skeptical because she was "just a woman." Yet they knew that Jesus loved Mary more than all the other disciples.

As Mary spoke to the Twelve about her vision, it was evident that her leadership was based on her superior spiritual understanding. After she finished speaking, "Andrew said, Brothers, what is your opinion of what was just said? I for one don't believe that the Savior said these things. . . . Has the Savior spoken secretly to a woman? . . . Surely he did not wish to indicate that she is more worthy than we are?" At this, "Mary wept." Levi then spoke up in defense of Mary and said to Peter, "If the Savior considered her to be worthy, who are you to discard her? For he knew her completely and loved her devotedly."[27]

Karen Jo Torjesen has written extensively about the role of women in the early Christian Church in her thought-provoking book, *When Women Were Priests.* In it she tracks the scholarship of Giorgio Otranto, an Italian professor of church history, who has shown through papal letters and various inscriptions that women participated in the Catholic priesthood for the first millennia of that church's history as deacons, priests, and even bishops from the first to the thirteenth century.[28] For example, in a Roman basilica, the fresco of the female face of Theodora Espicopoa looks down. *Espicopoa* is the female designation for the word "bishop." Over time someone crossed out the "a" at the end of the word and replaced it with "us," an ending that changes the word from female bishop to male bishop.[29] The practice of having female bishops was prevalent enough that at the end of the fourth century, Epiphanius, the bishop of Salamis, in Cyprus, referred to women bishops and argued for their subjection.[30] Evidence of women acting in priestly roles is also found on a third-century fresco in a Greek chapel (Catacombs of Priscilla in Rome), where a woman is depicted breaking bread at an early Christian Eucharist.[31] Torjesen also documents that widow evangelists probably baptized their own converts,

27. Robert J. Miller, *The Complete Gospels*, 357–65.

28. Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity,* 2.

29. Ibid., 9–10.

30. Ibid., 44.

31. Ibid., 52.

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especially if they were female, because early converts to Christianity took off all their clothing to be baptized.[32]

In the beginning, when the church was small, Christians met in homes where women had more influence and naturally assumed positions of leadership. By the third century, the process of institutionalization gradually transformed the house churches, where woman originally played prominent roles, into a body presided over by a monarchical male bishop. Over the next two centuries, the leadership of women was contested.[33] After the fourth century, the role of women changed. During the rule of Constantine, Christianity became more institutionalized, and leadership roles for women decreased. The trend continued, and in the Western Roman Empire, the Councils of Oragne in AD 441 and of Orleans in AD 533 directly targeted the role of deaconesses and forbade their ordination. In the Byzantine Church, the demise of female deaconesses happened over a longer period, with the vanishing of ordained orders for women in the twelfth century.

In the twenty-first century, when these issues are alive and controversial, Jesus's treatment of women is prescient. His example and the privileges afforded the first Christians provide important perspectives. We certainly should not rush to any conclusions or use historical material as a shortcut to a feminist agenda by turning "women into men."[34] But we must also "think carefully about where our own cultures, prejudices, and angers are taking us, and make sure we conform not to the stereotypes the world offers but to the healing, liberating, humanizing message of the gospel."[35] We live in a time when "we need to radically change our traditional pictures of what men and women are and of how they relate to one another within the church, and indeed of what the Bible says on this subject."[36]

Commenting on feminist biblical scholarship, Marcus J. Borg said, "The emergence of feminist theology seems to me to be the single most important development in theology in my lifetime."[37] Although feminist theology is important, a general consensus has not been reached on its

32. Ibid., 148.
33. Ibid., 6.
34. Wright, *Surprised by Scripture*, 68.
35. Ibid., 82
36. Ibid.
37. Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith,* 70.

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implications, and there is disagreement among feminist scholars on the meaning of the evidence for the acceptance of leadership roles for women in the early Christian church. Consequently, there is a considerable spectrum within feminist interpretation.[38] Regardless of where one comes down on this issue, however, there is enough evidence inside and outside the New Testament to cause a reevaluation of the role women played during Jesus's ministry and shortly thereafter.[39] The subject becomes even more intriguing as we appreciate more and more the significance of the priestly roles that women in the Mormon faith play in temples. At the founding meeting of the Relief Society, Joseph Smith said to the women there that "he was going to make of this Society a kingdom of priests as in Enoch's day—as in Pauls day."[40]

38. Margaret Elizabeth Köstenberger, *Jesus and the Feminists,* 216–18.

39. Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation,* 205. "Today we stand at the crossroads. As Christians we can no longer dodge the 'woman problem.' To argue that women are equal in creation but subordinate in function is no more defensible than 'separate but equal' schools for the races."

40. "Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book," March 31, 1842.

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