

# Liberation and Universality:

## Women in Luke's Gospel

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### Introduction

It has long been observed that Luke's Gospel\* shows greater interest in women than any other New Testament writing. The observation is based on the frequent mention of, or reference to, women not only in the narrative of Luke's Gospel – which recounts the story of Jesus' birth, public ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension – but also its sequel the Book of Acts which recounts the story of the movement of the good news of salvation from Jewish territory to the ends of the Gentile world mainly through the labor of Peter and Paul under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

What merits attention is Luke's distinctive organization of the material on women. Terms like “doubling” or “pairing” have been suggested to describe a Lukan literary device or technique whereby stories about, or references to, women characters are set beside stories about, or references to, men characters so as to create a deliberate gender pair.<sup>1</sup>

It has also been noted that most of, and not necessarily all, the stories about women that Luke uses in his pairing technique come from special Lukan material (L), i.e. material found only in Luke. To understand this point, it is important to draw the reader's attention to a very important working hypothesis on the relation between the first three Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) used by New Testament scholars. The hypothesis states the following: The Gospel of Mark was the first written Gospel, and both Luke and Matthew used Mark as a primary source in their Gospel compositions. In addition, Luke and Matthew utilized a second source called Q (for the German word *Quelle* meaning “source”) which explains the common material found in Luke and Matthew but not in Mark. Stories and material that are exclusively found in Luke, and not in Mark or Q or for this matter in Matthew are identified as “L” such as the Annunciation story (the appearance of the angel to Mary and the famous Magnificat) which will be dealt with in detail later on. These methodological clarifications make it evident that the Lukan technique of pairing or doubling was intentional and deliberate, particularly when gender pairs are created through the use of special L material.

\* The Bible version used in this article is the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

1. For a listing of all the gender pairs that have been identified by scholars, see: Mary Rose D'Angelo, 1990; Turid Karlsen Seim, 1995.

In what follows I will explore samples of the evidence. I have chosen to limit the investigation to four stories of women that appear within what we defined above as a “pair”, since an exhaustive examination of all the evidence is beyond the scope of this article. Three of the four examples come from Lukan special material “L”. All the examples deal with real characters and not fictional ones like in a parable or a simile. While part of the investigation will show how Luke organized his special material on

women, the contexts within which he placed them, the qualities they exhibit, and the roles they play, the other part will answer the following question: why does Luke do what he does?

The thesis that I wish to defend in this article is the following: Luke's interest in women is evident not only from the exclusive and special material on women he imports into the composition of his narrative, but also from the way he organizes this material through his pairing technique. But this is just an articulation of something deeper. Luke's interest in women stems from his understanding of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God and his public ministry as one of liberation and release to the marginalized in society, which includes not only women but also the poor, the lowly, the sick, the possessed, and the aliens. It is a ministry where social, ethnic, gender, and economic boundaries come tumbling down. This conviction on Luke's part is the driving force behind the frequent mention of women, as well as his pairing technique. Stories about women demonstrate the certainty and the proof of his convictions. Although the investigation will be limited to a sampling of women stories from the Gospel of Luke, the theme of liberation is transposed in the narrative of Acts, Luke's second volume, into a clear universality touching the lives of Gentiles, and women as well.

### **Zechariah and Mary**

The first sample comes from a pair found in the birth narrative of Luke's Gospel (chapters 1–2). There we have two angelic announcements. The first is given to a priest called Zechariah, who along with his wife Elizabeth, is depicted as righteous before God (Luke 1:6). The angel reveals to Zechariah that his old and barren wife will bear a child whose name shall be John (known later in the narrative as the Baptist). The second announcement is given to a young virgin, betrothed to a man named Joseph, and the virgin's name is Mary. She is told by the angel that she will conceive in her womb and bear a child, and the child's name shall be Jesus (Luke 1:31ff.).

These two announcements clarify Luke's pairing technique whereby a story about a woman is placed side by side to a similar story about a man. Both announcements are found only in Luke's Gospel, and it is a good example of Luke's special material (L). No other Gospel contains this material or displays such a pair. The only other Gospel in the New Testament that has a birth narrative is Matthew, but there it is Joseph and not Mary who is the recipient of the angelic announcement. This shows that Luke has more interest in Mary's experience than Joseph's.

What is more fascinating is not so much the fact that we have a pair, but how that pair functions. How are the characters depicted? What responses do they make? What does the author want to communicate through these characters? Do they have a leading role in the narrative or do they function as exemplary characters for the readers?

If one were to comment on the responses made by these two characters to the angelic announcements, one will come up with the following observations. While both may have been terrified by the angelic voice (Luke 1:13, 30), Zechariah's response is more skeptical: "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years" (Luke 1:18). Mary's response on the other hand is more trusting: "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" (Luke 1:34). Unlike Zechariah who is interested in

“knowing”, Mary’s response is about “understanding”. Mary’s response is one of wonder: “How shall this be?”. She asks but does not question. Jane Kopas (1986) describes these two different responses in an eloquent way when she says:

Zechariah’s question is the question of a skeptic, the question of one who seeks knowledge more than understanding. His concern is reason and certainty ... Mary, on the other hand, asks out of wonder. She wonders how the promise of the angel can come to pass since she is a virgin. Despite a superficial similarity to Zechariah’s question, Mary’s question must have been rooted in faith that was willing to be moved to a deeper level of mystery”. (p. 195)

The nature of the responses determines the course of events. Zechariah leaves dumb, and unable to speak, because he did not believe that the words of the angel will be fulfilled in their time (Luke 1:20). Mary leaves with a saying that reflects her contemplative experience and wonder: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Mary’s obedient response is active and participatory, and does not need to be seen in passive and submissive terms.

As the story continues, Mary goes to visit her relative Elizabeth who describes her as “blessed”. Why? It is because she “believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (Luke 1:45). Mary’s blessedness stems from the fact that she believed that the things spoken to her will in fact come to pass. From Luke’s perspective Mary exemplifies true faithfulness that seeks understanding by placing herself under the word of God spoken to her by the angel and not questioning it. Luke reminds us of this type of blessedness in two other places of his Gospel. In Luke 8:21, when the crowd tells Jesus that his mother and brothers are standing outside desiring to see him, he replies: “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it”. In Luke 11:27-28, when a woman from the crowd cries out to Jesus saying: “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked”, Jesus responds to her: “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it”. In many ways, Mary is the first disciple of her son. From Luke’s perspective, Mary is an exemplary and paradigmatic character. She epitomizes true faith in her openness to the divine and true discipleship in doing or keeping what she hears.

As Mary hears Elizabeth’s words she bursts into a song of praise (The Magnificat): “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever” (Luke 1:46-55).

Mary’s song raises a number of themes. First, and most importantly, it announces the reversal of fortunes for the lowly and the marginalized, which is a pervasive theme in Luke’s Gospel. She is describing her own experience, how in the age of God’s coming Spirit those who are no-bodies, by patriarchal traditional societal structures, have been

graced, lifted up, and regarded. Through the no-bodies God is now doing something. Mary is an empowering testimony to other women of the possibility of a partnership with God to achieve God's purposes for creation, provided these women have the faithfulness of Mary. Mary's story of faith demonstrates that the restraints placed upon women, as well as the roles imposed on them by their societal structures, are not God-given but human-made. As it will be shown later on, Mary's song is in many ways an anticipation of the good news of salvation and liberation proclaimed by Jesus her son. Second, Mary's identification with the lowly and the marginalized is not intended to reinforce the subservient and passive roles of women, but rather to express solidarity with women who yearn for a similar deliverance under a merciful and a compassionate God (Kopas, 1986).

### Men and Women Disciples

The second example is the intended pairing between Luke 6:12-19 (cf. Mark 3:12-19) and Luke 8:1-3 (special "L" material). These two texts do not follow each other as in the earlier example, but the intended connection between them cannot be missed as we will see later on.

In the first text, we are told that Jesus, after calling his disciples, chose from among them twelve males and called them apostles (Luke 6:12-19). Luke 6:12-19 contains a listing of all the names of the twelve male apostles. The rest of chapter 6 is a collection of sayings and teachings by Jesus. Chapter 7 contains two miracle stories, a dialogue between Jesus and the disciples of the Baptist, and the story of the woman who weeps at Jesus' feet and whose sins are forgiven. Immediately afterwards at the beginning of chapter 8, Luke informs us in a summary fashion that:

Soon afterward he [Jesus] went on through cities and villages, preaching and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, who provided them out of their means. (Luke 8:1-3)

In this text Luke provides the reader with a list of women disciples. Three of them are mentioned by name, and many others unnamed. This list is intended to function as a parallel to the list of male disciples in chapter 6, and together they must be viewed as a pair. What this text further suggests is that Jesus' close circle was not exclusively made out of male disciples but also of women disciples who were socially and economically prominent. Joanna was the wife of Chuza, King Herod's steward. The fact that these women were able to finance this newly emerging movement led by Jesus suggests that they were economically well to do.

More importantly, the presence of women disciples among Jesus' close followers suggests that the Jesus movement practiced social openness. In a patriarchal Jewish context like the one Jesus lived in, a woman was considered the property of her husband, a second-class citizen, whose legal status was mediated by her husband or father. Jesus challenged this mindset and allowed many women to participate in his ministry and made them witnesses to the breaking in of the kingdom of God. In this context, it is important to

underline the courage of these women who left their homes and families and followed Jesus, accepting the social challenge he introduced to that culture. The women who followed Jesus were, undoubtedly, women of great courage.

Unfortunately, we do not know much about these women. All we know is that they were healed by Jesus of evil spirits and infirmities. Among them was the acute case of Mary Magdalene from whom seven demons had gone out.<sup>2</sup> This is not the place to engage the phenomenon of demon possession, but given the primitive medical knowledge of first century Palestine, it was natural to attribute emotional illnesses, schizophrenia, psycho-somatic disorders (physical illnesses attributed to mental or emotional disturbances), or even physical illnesses like blindness, deafness, lameness, or epilepsy, to demon possession.<sup>3</sup> We simply have no evidence so as to diagnose the infirmities of these women. All we know is that they were healed by Jesus, and as a gesture of gratitude they followed him from Galilee to Jerusalem.

In Jerusalem events surrounding Jesus' life and ministry intensify. Opposition to Jesus by the Jewish religious leadership escalates. Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve male apostles, betrays him (Luke 22:47-53). Jesus gets arrested, is tried, and then condemned to death. As the events intensify, Peter, a leading and representative figure of the twelve, denies him (Luke 22:54-62). The rest of the male disciples abandon him. In the darkest moment of his life, I mean when he was nailed to a piece of wood, none of his male disciples stood by him. Only Mary Magdalene and the other women, who followed him from Galilee to Jerusalem and who provided for him from their own means, were present watching things at a distance. While Luke 23:49 speaks about "acquaintances" of Jesus present at a distance, there is nothing to suggest that the twelve male disciples were among them. What Luke wishes to articulate from all of this is the fidelity, commitment, and loyalty of female discipleship.

No wonder then that these women were given the privilege to be the first recipients of the good news of Jesus' resurrection (see Luke 24:1-11). When they went to announce this good news to the rest of the male disciples, we are told that they did not believe them for their words seemed to them "an idle tale" (Luke 24:11). As the story unfolds, the male disciples come to believe that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead, and consequently, the women's testimony was not "an idle tale". In highlighting their experience of the resurrection, Luke wishes to shatter stereotypes about women's words, testimony, and witness.

If this is so, someone may ask: why didn't Jesus choose some women as apostles? The answer to this question is fairly easy and simple. The reason why we do not have women apostles is because the "twelve males" have a symbolic meaning in Jewish religious heritage. They symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve male children of Jacob among whom Joseph, who was abandoned by his brothers and ended up in Pharaoh's court in Egypt, is well-known. Jesus' choice of twelve males symbolically meant that he is the one re-gathering Israel under his leadership, so that Israel might be a light to the nations. This thought is clearly articulated in one of Jesus' sayings to the disciples in Luke 22:28-30: "You are those who have continued with me in my trials; and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel".

**2.** The number seven was known as a number perfection. The reference to seven demons is not to be taken literally. Rather, it describes the serious condition of her case.

**3.** See on this John Meier, 1994; and Johnny Awwad, 2005.

The women from Galilee serve important functions in Luke's presentation of women. Like men, they are the recipients of God's liberation that is breaking into the world. Their release from their infirmities is to say that the benefits of the Messianic age are to be shared equally by men and women. That is to say, their equality is God's given gift. It is a right that they have and not a right they have to claim. In tracing their journey with Jesus we have discovered Luke's interest in underlining their fidelity and commitment to Jesus, a commitment that surpasses that of his male apostles. We have seen their faithfulness in their active discipleship. They are women of courage who shatter the fixed roles set for them, or imposed upon them, by society. They are empowering characters for women who wish to actively participate in leadership positions in religious life but have been hindered by cultural restraints. In their witness to the resurrection they shatter a stereotype that is commonly present in traditional patriarchal societal structures that women's talk is an "idle tale". The word of a faithful and serious woman must be taken seriously.

### **The Hemorrhaging Woman in the Context of a Pair**

The third example is not a clear cut part of a pair, but it can be seen as such. It comes at the end of chapter 8 (Luke 8:26-56). The material in this section is not exclusively special Lukan material (L). It is taken from the Gospel of Mark and follows the same Markan order (Mark 5:1-43). Luke's borrowing of it means that he wishes to utilize it and add it to his archive of stories about women.

It is a section made out of three miracle stories by Jesus. The first involves a man from the country of the Gerasenes who is possessed by demons, and whom Jesus heals (Luke 8:26-39). The second story is about the healing/raising of a twelve year-old girl, the daughter of a certain Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue, who was on the verge of dying/died (Luke 8:40-42; 49-56). The second story is interrupted by a third story, the story of a hemorrhaging woman (Luke 8:43-48), after which the second story is brought to closure.

After the possessed man from Gerasene is healed, he begs Jesus to be with him. Jesus, however, refuses and tells the man: "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you" (Luke 8:39), and the story continues that he went away "proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done to him" (Luke 8:39). As Jesus leaves the country of the Gerasenes, he is approached by a group of people who inform him that a girl, twelve years of age and the daughter of a certain Jairus, is dying and begged him to go to his house. Jesus heads toward Jairus' house, but gets interrupted on the way by a woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years and could not be healed by anyone. As the crowds pressed upon Jesus, the woman comes close to him and touches the fringe of his garment. The moment she touches his garment the flow of blood immediately ceases. Suddenly Jesus stops and asks: "Who was it that touched me?" (Luke 8:45). Even though Peter tries to explain that being touched is something natural given the multitudes and the crowds that press upon him, nevertheless, Jesus insists on knowing: "Someone touched me, for I perceive that power has gone forth from me" (Luke 8:46). Recognizing that she was no longer unnoticed, the woman approaches Jesus with fear and falls down before him as a public declaration that she was the one who touched him and that she was immediately healed. Jesus looks at her and says: "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace" (Luke 8:48). While



Jesus is still speaking, a delegation from Jairus' house informs him that the young girl has died and that he need not trouble himself to go there. Jesus insists on going. When he arrives he takes the young girl's hand and tells her: "child arise". And she immediately rises (Luke 8:49-55).

The way I related the three stories shows that I am interested in focusing on the story of the hemorrhaging woman. Jewish religious rituals consider a menstruating woman or a woman with a flow of blood to be unclean and impure. Touching her is a source of contamination that requires going through prescribed purity rituals. Given the woman's chronic condition, and the fact that she has tried for twelve years to be healed, it must be that her condition is now public knowledge. She is to be avoided lest any accidental touching of her will contaminate others.

There is something intriguing about the story of this woman. Why would Jesus expose her? Why does he publicly embarrass her by insisting on knowing who touched him? These are legitimate questions and need to be answered. However, before we do so, a comment about her healing is in order. The woman approaches Jesus as a woman of faith and trust. She believes that if she touches his garment she would be healed. This is what happens. Jesus' final words to her commend her for that faith: "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace" (Luke 8:48). Jesus does not object to the fact that a hemorrhaging woman touched him, nor does he have any reservations about touching the hand of the young girl who, given her age, may have been menstruating. He just wants to know who touched him. By insisting on knowing who touched him, and yet without objecting to it, Jesus redefines what makes a person clean or unclean. The cleanliness of a woman is not determined by her feminine biological functions but by her faithfulness and trust.

Why does he publicly expose her? Jesus exposes her publicly not to embarrass her but to embrace her. He wants to publicly announce that the woman who touched him is no longer unclean and to be avoided. His action is a public declaration that this woman must be reintegrated into society like everyone else. By exposing her, Jesus helps her overcome her social insecurities. In a culture where social marginalization gets intensified by sickness and impurity, the stories of the hemorrhaging woman and the possessed man from Gerasene have far reaching social effects. Both stories demonstrate the shift from social marginalization to social integration. Liberation and release from sicknesses and infirmities have social implications too.

### **The Bent-Over Woman and the Man with Dropsy**

The fourth and final example of a pair is two healing stories on a Sabbath. The first is a healing story of an older woman on a Sabbath day who for eighteen years, and because of an evil spirit, was bent-over and unable to fully straighten up (Luke 13:10-17). The second is a healing story of a man on a Sabbath day with dropsy at the house of a Pharisee (Luke 14:1-6). Although the stories do not directly follow each other, what makes them an intended pair is that both are healing stories on a Sabbath, which is a day of rest, and the cause of a controversy between Jesus and the Jewish religious leadership. Both stories come from special Lukan material, though the story of the man with dropsy has similarities with a story in Mark about a man with a withered hand (see Mark 3:1-6).

Both stories are the cause of a controversy. In both cases Jesus is criticized for healing on the Sabbath. To defend his action, Jesus throws questions at his critics. In the story of the man with dropsy, Jesus asks a question to which his opponents could not respond: "Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well, will not immediately pull him out on a Sabbath day?" (Luke 14:5). In the story of the bent-over woman Jesus asks two questions that put his opponents to shame: "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger, and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" (Luke 13:15-16). Jesus' questions are intended to say that actions of liberation and release are not subject to Sabbath rules. As acts of liberation, they are above the Sabbath. In fact Jesus is saying that if God is at work healing, releasing and liberating on a Sabbath, aren't we also supposed to do so? What is intriguing in Jesus' question to his critics in the story of the older woman is his description of her as a "daughter of Abraham". This is the only place in the entire New Testament where a female is described as such. The description has tremendous implications. If women are daughters of Abraham, then they are Abraham's progeny, and as Abraham's progeny, they are equal beneficiaries of the promises to Abraham. These promises were articulated earlier in the narrative by Mary's song. They are the promises of a merciful God, who reverses human fortunes, who lifts up the lowly, and gives regard to the destitute, and who fills the hungry with good things. As Mary sings, these promises are spoken "to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his posterity for ever" (Luke 1:55). By designating her as a "daughter of Abraham", Jesus declares the woman's right as an equal beneficiary of the mercies of God promised to Abraham. If the promises are to Abraham and to his posterity, then, as a "daughter of Abraham", being healed is her God-given right. If God is healing, even on a Sabbath, nobody has a say in it. The story of the bent-over woman is not only about liberation and release from an infirmity; it is also about the right of women to be equal participants in the religious cycle of life in Israel.

### **Jesus' Ministry and the Dawning Age of Liberation and Release**

The four examples we have examined have shown tremendous potentials in Luke's presentation on women. They are stories of liberation and release not only from sickness and disease, but also from the restraints of traditional patriarchal societal codes and cultural stereotypes about women. The inevitable question is what prompts Luke to do so, or why he does what he does.

The answer is to be found in Luke's understanding of the ministry of Jesus as one of liberation and release. In other words, the liberation stories of women that Luke celebrates through re-telling in his narrative demonstrate that the age of liberation and release has truly arrived in Jesus' ministry. God's mercy and compassion for his creation are now being revealed and felt. Luke's primary interest is not in relating stories of liberation of women as such, but rather in how the dawning age of liberation in Jesus' ministry impacted society including the lives of women.

To demonstrate this primary concern in Luke's Gospel, I will focus on one text which has been considered programmatic and descriptive not only of Jesus' vision of his own ministry in Luke's Gospel but also of the ministry of his apostles in the Book of Acts. This text comes at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. After his baptism



(Luke 3:21-22) and the experience of temptation in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13), Jesus returns in the power of the Spirit to Galilee to his hometown Nazareth. There he goes to the synagogue on a Sabbath day and is given the book of the Prophet Isaiah. He opens the book and reads the following passage from it:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4:18-19; cf. Isaiah 61:2)

Then he closes the book, sits down, and begins to say to the people: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

The text that Jesus reads is Isaiah 61:1-2 which, in its original context, promises deliverance and restoration to Israel. In it Jesus finds, and always from a Lukan perspective, an encapsulation of the vision that will inform and define his public ministry. Jesus is the anointed one of God spoken of by the Prophet Isaiah, who gets anointed by the descent of the Spirit upon him during his baptism (Luke 3:21-22), and the same Spirit accompanies him throughout his temptation and leads him to his hometown Nazareth. He is sent on a mission of liberation and release: proclaiming good news to the poor, release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, setting free the oppressed, proclaiming the acceptable year of the Lord (the Jubilee year of release of slaves and debts). Jesus' words in Nazareth are a messianic "manifesto". "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" means that what the prophet Isaiah announced a long time ago about the restoration and deliverance of Israel has begun. The rest of the Gospel must, therefore, be seen as an implementation of this programmatic statement and vision. All the healings, exorcisms, miracles, and parables in Gospel are to be read as signs of God's kingdom breaking into the world to liberate, release, and deliver, where justice and compassion for the poor and the marginalized prevail (Hays, 1996).

In the seventh chapter in Luke's Gospel, there is an interesting episode about an encounter between Jesus and the disciples of John the Baptist. The text relates that John the Baptist, who is now in prison, has sent his disciples to ask Jesus a question: "Are you he who is to come or shall we look for another?" (Luke 7:18-23; esp. 20b). Jesus answers them: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me" (Luke 7:22-23). Jesus' response to the Baptist's followers is an indirect allusion to many texts in Isaiah (29:18; 35:5-6; 42:18; 26:19; 61:1), and it reiterates his vision in slightly different terms. The material between chapters 4 (the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in Nazareth) and chapter 7 (the Baptist's question to Jesus) is a catena of stories of liberation and release in the implementation of the vision.

Back to the story in Nazareth, the people that heard Jesus speak about the fulfillment of Isaiah's words in their hearing react with wonder and ask a question: "Is not this Joseph's son?". The question provides Jesus with the opportunity to respond with a saying and an allusion to two stories from the Old Testament. At first sight the

question might seem straight forward and innocent. However, given the nature of Jesus' response, the question must be viewed as an indirect statement of ridicule and cynicism: Is not this Joseph's son, whose mother is Mary? We know who he is. By what authority does he claim to be the one fulfilling the hopes of deliverance and restoration to Israel as stated in the Prophet Isaiah? Who does he think he is? While it is true that Joseph is the adoptive father of Jesus, however, from a Lukan perspective, Jesus is the Son of God. Regardless of whether the people's question is informed or uninformed by Luke's Christological concern, the question itself ("Is not this Joseph's son?") is of a condescending nature. The people of his hometown will neither perceive who Jesus truly is, nor will they honor and accept him as a prophet. He is simply someone's son.

The people's question provokes a sharp answer by Jesus who says:

Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself; what we heard you did at Capernaum, do here also in your own country'... Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country. But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, when there came a great famine over all the land; and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian. (Luke 4:23-27)<sup>4</sup>

With this response Jesus sets himself within the prophetic tradition known for its concern for compassion and justice. Like the prophets of old, his ministry will not be appreciated by his own people. More importantly, he refuses Israel's claim as the sole and exclusive beneficiary to God's mercy and compassion. The two examples he gives from the Old Testament illustrate God's mercy and compassion extended to a Gentile woman from Sidon and a Syrian leper. God's mercy and compassion is for all of God's creation. It transcends ethnicity, gender, and social status. With these examples, Jesus gives a universal outlook to the mercy and compassion of God. This universal outlook will be materialized in the second volume of Luke's narrative, I mean the Book of Acts, in a mission to the ends of the earth embracing men and women in the non-Jewish Gentile world. Jesus' Nazareth incident proves to be programmatic not only to Jesus' ministry of liberation and release in the Gospel itself, but it also prefigures the extension of God's salvation and liberation beyond the boundaries of Israel into the Gentile world.

From its very beginning, Jesus' ministry in Luke's Gospel is tuned toward liberation and universality. His stories on women ought to be seen in this context. They are demonstrations of how God's Kingdom of liberation and release is breaking into the world through his ministry touching their lives, reversing their status, and reshaping and reconfiguring their roles. Mary's song is a testimony to this reversal of fortunes. The story of the women disciples is a witness to how liberation and release reshape and reconfigure one's life. The story of the hemorrhaging woman and the bent-over older woman are living testimonies of the freedom they have attained, both socially and religiously.

4. Note how the two stories from the Old Testament form a gender pair.

## Conclusion

Luke does indeed show great interest in women. His archive of stories on women (especially Lukan exclusive material), as well as his way of organizing these stories (pairing technique), reveal this interest. More importantly, women are given a voice in Luke's story. It is a voice that testifies to the breaking in of a new world order where the no-bodies have become some-bodies and participants in the unfolding of God's salvation history. It is a voice that testifies to a reversal of fortunes raising them to the status they had not formerly enjoyed. It is a voice that calls for social and religious re-integration. It is a voice that calls for equality between the sexes. It is a voice that shatters traditional patriarchal societal stereotypes and codes. We need to hear their voices and take them seriously, because they have shown to be exemplary characters in faithfulness, commitment, loyalty, and courage.

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