



Gender critique on the narrator's androcentric point of view of women in Matthew's gospel

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The article, from a gender-sensitive perspective, is critical of patriarchal values that are harmful to women and other non-dominant groups. When the focus on women and women's roles is usurped by male control, the androcentric self-interest of interpreters and authors becomes apparent. This is still the case in present-day theological studies, but is especially prevalent in premodern biblical writings, of which the Gospel of Matthew is an example. Recent mainstream Jesus studies demonstrate that women were welcomed in an 'egalitarian' way in the community of the first followers of Jesus. Women's contribution to the first Christian faith community is highlighted. This stands in stark contrast to the silencing and invisibility of women in the surrounding patriarchal world of the ancient Middle East. Although Matthew does view women and other formerly excluded people as part of the faith community and *equal recipients* of God's love, they are never treated as *equal participants*. The article focuses on three issues concerning the narrator's point of view, namely that (1) women fulfilled a supporting, rather than an initiating role (Mt 1–2; 9:18–26; 15:21–28), (2) double standards were applied to male and female sexuality and women's sexuality was regarded with prejudice (Mt 5:29–32; 19:2–12) and (3) women were seemingly given the opportunity to live 'authentically' as human beings, but in actual fact they could do so only if this 'authenticity' was sanctioned by men (Mt 20:20–23; 27:38; 27:56).

Introduction

The perspective of this article is gender-sensitive and critical of patriarchal values that are harmful to women and other non-dominant groups. When the focus on women and women's roles is usurped by male control, the androcentric self-interest of authors and interpreters becomes apparent. This still occurs in present-day theological studies, but is especially prevalent in premodern biblical writings, of which the Gospel of Matthew is an example (cf. *inter alia* Anderson [1983] 2001:25–69; Osiek 2009:723–740). Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza came up with a neologism to describe this hegemony. She calls it 'kyriarchy'. In a *Festschrift* honouring Schüssler Fiorenza's wisdom, Shelly Matthews (2003:334–350) uses the Gospel of Matthew as a test case. She refers to Schüssler Fiorenza's 'understanding of systems of domination as kyriarchal rather [than] patriarchal' as follows:

This neologism, derived from the Greek *kyrios* (master) and *archē* (rule), signals that 'domination is not simply a matter of patriarchal, gender-based dualism but of more comprehensive, interlocking, hierarchical ordered structures of domination, evident in a variety of oppressions, such as racism, poverty, heterosexism, and colonialism' [quote from Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:ix].

(Matthews 2003:334–335)

Recent mainstream Jesus studies have indicated that women were welcomed in an 'egalitarian' way in the earliest Christian faith community and that their contribution was invaluable (see *inter alia* Schüssler Fiorenza 2001:9, 11). Taking John H. Elliott's (2002:75–91) admonition that exegetes should not succumb to the fallacy of misplaced concreteness by seeing Jesus idealistically and anachronistically as a modernist egalitarian seriously, one can still say on scholarly grounds that Jesus redefined traditional family values (cf. Osiek 1997:812; Theissen 1999:24).

Cathleen Corley (2002) states emphatically that Jesus was not a feminist, but even so, his contact with women did contrast strongly with the pervasive silencing and invisibility of women in the patriarchal world of the ancient Middle East. Corley (2002:53) argues that Jesus' 'message concerning the Kingdom of God' did not aim 'at a clear social program geared towards major social change for women.' However true this may be, Schüssler Fiorenza (2003:225–250) (cited in Matthews 2003) nevertheless points out that the

egalitarian impulses in the Jesus movement should not have been seen as 'originating' with Jesus, but rather in line with several ancient social movements and emancipatory struggles against kyriarchal relations of exploitations.

(Matthews 2003:348, n. 41)

Within these 'ancient social movements' the place of the Gospel of Matthew was ambiguous. The Gospel does include women and other formerly excluded people in the faith community. They become *equal recipients* of the love of God. Probably the only overtly 'misogynist' passage is the parable of the wise and foolish women. Mary-Eloise Rosenblatt (2001:171–195) acknowledges the misogynist implications of the parable, but argues that Matthew portrays the women in this passage in a positive light. He gets them 'into the party after all'. However, in the Matthean community women were clearly not treated as *equal participants*.

This article aims to illustrate that Matthew's story is told from a dominating androcentric narrator's point of view. The article focuses on three issues concerning the narrator's perspective, namely that:

1. women fulfilled a supporting, rather than an initiating role (Mt 1–2; 9:18–26; 15:21–28)
2. double standards were applied to male and female sexuality and women's sexuality was regarded with prejudice (Mt 5:29–32; 19:2–12)
3. women were seemingly given the opportunity to live 'authentically', but in actual fact they could only do so if this 'authenticity' was sanctioned by men (Mt 20:20–23; 27:38; 27:56).

Supporting, not initiating A patriarchal world-view

The focal point of the Gospel of Matthew is how to understand and do the will of God (see Burrige 2007:187–225). The author tries to keep the Jesus followers from adopting the Pharisees' interpretation of God's will (cf. Minear 1974:36–37). Matthew's specific perspective, objective and message can be clearly detected where he deliberately changes his Markan source. Mark is explicit about the male followers of Jesus having failed to understand their calling as disciples (Mk 4:10–13; 8:33; 9:32; 10:38) (see Malbon 1983:29–34). He uses the women characters to fill the gap. They better understand what Jesus' message is all about and nearly succeed in fulfilling his ideal. In Matthew, on the other hand, the male followers do understand (Mt 13:51), but in practice they struggle to get it right. They cannot fully adopt Jesus' understanding of the Torah and end up being rather like the Pharisees. Jesus urges that the 'righteousness' of the Pharisees should be 'exceeded' (Mt 5:20). Matthew deviates from his source, Mark, by changing the roles of both the disciples and the women in order to be more acceptable to his Palestinian context.

In Matthew, the male followers of Jesus fare much better than in Mark. They understand who Jesus is, but struggle to do God's will as Jesus does (cf. Duling & Perrin 1999:329–364). In Matthew, only the Twelve are called 'disciples'. Only in Matthew and Revelation are the terms 'disciples' and 'apostles' used interchangeably (Rv 21:14; Mt 10:1–2; over against Mk 6:7; in Mk 8:30 the term 'apostles' implies 'disciples' who fulfill their commission; cf. Donahue & Harrington 2002:190).

In Matthew women are only followers, clearly distinguished from the twelve disciples or apostles. Along with all the other marginalised categories of people who did not have access to the temple, women are the receivers of Jesus' love and therefore have free access to God. They *receive* that love. However, they are not the agents who *transmit* that love to others. They do not take the initiative.

The positive side of Matthew's perspective on women is his message that God's love is inclusive. The negative element is that agency is the exclusive prerogative of males. (Matthew's women would, for example, not ever have been ordained.)

Matthew's choices, which become clear when he deliberately deviates from his source, Mark, make it possible for his readers not to have to break radically with their Israelite culture. According to Craig Keener (2009:2–3), it is remarkable 'how often Matthew "re-Judaizes" his sources'. Should Matthew have taken Mark's message over as is, it would have meant for his readers to be asked to break with their cultural conventions. In the Israelite world it was unthinkable to place women in such a central position as Mark does. Matthew's compromise is that he does include women in God's love, but women remain subordinate to men.

The male disciples have the commission to bring God's love to *all* people, also and especially to the marginalised. They are not equal to the task. The role of the women characters is that of a catalyst by means of which the narrator shows whether or not the males succeed in fulfilling their calling.

That Matthew relegates women to being supporting characters only, can be seen in the way in which he reports on women such as Mary, the menstruating woman, the Canaanite mother and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Mary, the mother of Jesus (Mt 1)

The value of women in society was that they should help build the nation (the children of Abraham). They were to bear sons. However, the women had to be acceptable or honourable, for the sons of a dishonourable woman (such as a prostitute or an unmarried mother) did not count as 'children of Abraham'. Matthew (3:9) pushed the boundaries when he recounts the life of the humble woman from Bethlehem, Mary, mother of Jesus. Matthew states that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from stones and shows that God does not need the 'holy seed' (real Israelites).

Mary is unmarried and pregnant. However, Joseph obeys God and takes her into his home in spite of her dishonourable position. Matthew attempts to convince his readers that Mary is acceptable (cf. Turner 2008:64–75) by including four other unacceptable women in the genealogy (1:1–18): Tamar (Gn 38), Rahab (Jos 2), Ruth and the wife of Uriah (2 Sm 11–12).

A marked difference between the gospels is that Joseph, the patriarch, plays the leading role in the Gospel of Matthew – God speaks to *him*. Luke gives the leading role to Mary – God

speaks to *her* (cf. Keener 2009:88). In Matthew, Mary quickly recedes into the background. She does not sing the *Magnificat* (Lk 1:46–55) and she is not a character in the story of the 12-year-old whose wisdom supersedes that of the learned men in the temple (Lk 2:4–52). In the story of the flight to Egypt, which is told only in Matthew (2:13–18), Joseph is mentioned (Mt 2:13), but not Mary (cf. Saldarini 2001:168 n. 28). Mary is also not present amongst the women who witness Jesus' death on the cross (Mt 27:55–56).

The menstruating woman (Mt 9:18–26)

Matthew's version of the story of the menstruating woman is interwoven with the story of the daughter of Jairus. The one story assists the reader in understanding the message of the other (see Wainwright 1991:212). In the one story, an adult woman bleeds. The cause of this condition is not mentioned. In the other story, the daughter's age is only mentioned by Mark. She is 12 years old. Her age helps the reader to understand that the cause of the adult woman's bleeding is menstruation (in Mark – cf. Levine 2001:75). At the age of 12, girls usually started to menstruate which created a problem for the men who never knew whether they were unclean or not. According to Leviticus (15:19–30), menstruating women were unclean and could not be touched. When women withdrew, the men knew that they were out of bounds until the cleansing ritual had been completed. The age of 12 in Mark is therefore meaningful.

A healer who came to help the girl would first have wanted to make sure that she was not unclean. Jesus, however, did not adhere to the purity rules of the Torah. He went into her room and healed her.

Matthew deviates from his source, Mark, in that he changes menstrual blood to general bleeding by omitting the age of the daughter of Jairus (compare Mk 5:42 with Mt 9:22–25).

With these two interwoven stories, Mark and Matthew demonstrate Jesus' attitude. In Mark, the menstruating woman touches Jesus. The male disciples protest when she does so. In Matthew it is not about menstruation and the woman does not take the initiative. Therefore the disciples do not need to protest. Jesus did not disobey any rules. According to Amy-Jill Levine (2001:82–83), 'both the placement and the content of the pericope reinforce the Matthean Jesus' conformity to the Law.' The woman simply received Jesus' love, as did all the other unclean people. Levine (2001) puts it as follows:

Jews as well as Gentiles are welcome in the Matthean church, as are men and women. The issue is not who one is; the point for Matthew is what one does.

(Levine 2001:86)

In Mark (5:33) the woman openly speaks to Jesus about her condition. In Matthew she remains silent, voiceless (Mt 9:22).

The Canaanite mother (Mt 15:21–28)

Mark tells the story of the Syro-Phoenician (not Israelite) woman with the sick child. His structure: first a story about

Jesus feeding the multitude, then the story about the woman and her child and then another story about Jesus feeding the multitude. In the story of the woman and her child the bread is not given at first, but later it is given. 'Bread' connects the three stories. In the gospels, bread is symbolic for God's love, which is to be given to *all*. In Matthew, *all* includes all nations, those who had been previously excluded from the temple, in other words from the presence of God (see Van Aarde 2007:419; cf. Luomanen 1998:267). It includes non-Israelites, women, girls, boys under the age of 20, the blind and the infirm.

The male disciples are the mediators: they can give the bread, or withhold it, extend God's love to *all*, or not. This can be seen in a small but important grammatical difference between Mark and Matthew. In Mark, the act of the disciples who take the bread from Jesus and pass it on to the hungry multitude, is described by means of *hina* plus a subjunctive – it was *supposed* to happen, but did not necessarily. Matthew simply uses *kai* plus indicative – the disciples *did* what Jesus did. In this way the women characters in the middle story help the readers to understand the roles of the male disciples in the surrounding stories.

Matthew takes the stories and structure over from Mark, but makes some changes by means of which he shows where his perspective differs from that of Mark.

Canaanite rather than Syro-Phoenician

Matthew changes Mark's *Syro-Phoenician* woman (non-Israelite, a person from beyond the borders) to a *Canaanite* woman (non-Israelite, but within the borders of Palestine). Mark and Matthew differ when it comes to foreigners. Matthew brings the foreigners in (cf., amongst others, Käsemann 1969:88). Mark and Paul go out to meet them in their world.

In Matthew, Jesus focuses on the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Mt 10:6; 15:24). The 'kingdom' where Jesus reigns as the 'Son of Man', is open to *all* who come from the 'four corners of the earth' (Mt 24:31). This 'kingdom' takes the place of 'Israel' and the 'Son of Man' is the king (Mt 19:28). In this 'kingdom' the roles are reversed: the first are last and the last are first (Mt 19:30; 20:16). According to Matthew, the disciples are the ones who are to bring all the nations (*panta ta ethne*) into the inclusive church: to baptise them, to make disciples of them and to teach them to do what Jesus had done (Mt 28:16–20).

Territory

The difference in Mark's and Matthew's approach to 'mission' is also illustrated by small changes to Mark's text. In Mark, the first feeding of the multitude happens on Israelite soil (Mk 6:33–34) (see Van Iersel 1964:188–189). Then Jesus steps into a boat and crosses over to the other side, 'gentile' territory, where the second feeding of the multitude takes place (Mk 7:31; 8:10) – from the inside to the outside (see Van Aarde 1994:180–203). The numbers in the story support this.



On *home territory*, 5000 people are fed with 5 loaves of bread and fish and there are 12 baskets of leftovers (Mk 6:30–40). The number 5 symbolises the Torah and 12 refers to the 12 patriarchs of Israel. Both numbers indicate an Israelite heritage. On *foreign territory*, 4000 people are fed with 4 loaves of bread and fish and there are 7 baskets of leftovers (Mk 8:1–10). The number 4 symbolised the four corners of the earth (universal) and 7 consists of 3 (symbolising the godly) plus 4 (the earth).

In Matthew, the first feeding of the multitude also takes place on Israelite territory (Mt 14:13–21). Jesus and the disciples step into a boat, but do not cross over to the foreigners. The boat returns to Israelite territory where the second feeding of the multitude takes place (Mt 15:32–39). *All* do indeed receive bread, the multitude, the foreign woman, but they receive it on Israelite territory. Matthew's approach to 'mission' is that foreigners are to be brought into the fold.

The role of the disciples

In Mark, the disciples are concerned that the people are hungry (home territory) and they take the initiative to inform Jesus (Mk 8:1–2). When Jesus asks them to distribute the bread, they are not very enthusiastic about the miracle, but do the job (Mk 6:30). On the other side (foreign territory) they are not concerned about the hungry people. There, Jesus takes the initiative. When Jesus asks them to distribute the bread, they are downright unwilling (Mk 8:4) (cf. Klostermann 1971:129).

In Matthew, both events take place on Israelite territory. He does not change Mark's story about who notices that the people are hungry. He does change the reaction of the disciples. Matthew's disciples simply do the job without complaining.

Conversation in the boat

After feeding the multitudes, Jesus and his disciples again get into a boat. Jesus asks the disciples whether they have brought bread. They do not understand that he does not mean it literally, but is referring back to the wonder of the feeding of the multitude. Jesus warns them of the yeast of the Pharisees. As yeast is unclean, this is a negative image. The Pharisees are also supposed to give bread, but they do so without love. They only give to their own kind. Their bread does not nourish. It is not a wonderful gift of God.

The disciples' reaction is different in Matthew. In Mark they do not understand what it is all about (Mk 8:21). According to Matthew, they do understand, but they do not fully grasp the *implications*.

Women as role models

From Matthew's narrator's perspective, marginalised people gain access to the temple, in other words to God, through Jesus. This is what his message of 'God-with-us' means. Matthew conveys this message by using the characters of the disciples. There are two sides to these characters. On the one

hand they understand their calling. On the other hand they cannot seem to do what it takes. Peter is an example of this: he is '*petra*' and '*skandalon*' (Mt 16:23).

Matthew tells the story of the Canaanite woman in order for the disciples to realise that the bread is not only meant for Israel but for *all* marginalised people – foreigners, women and children.

Matthew's readers were familiar with the rabbis' exposition of the Old Testament. The story of Ruth provided a model for how foreigners could become part of God's people (see Jackson 2002:126–140, 2003:779–792). Like Ruth, a proselyte had to pass a test three times (see Bamberger 1968:15). Twice the proselyte was refused. Should they insist a third time that they were really serious about becoming part of Israel, they were welcomed into the Israelite community. Twice, Naomi told Ruth to return to her own country and gods. When Ruth insisted a third time on accompanying Naomi to her land, she was allowed to do so. Likewise, Jesus told the Canaanite woman twice that the bread was actually meant for the 'lost sheep of Israel' (Mt 15:24). When she insisted a third time that she as a 'dog' (gentile) could surely get the crumbs from the table, she passed the test and was accepted.

The difference between Mark's and Matthew's stories is that Mark allows the woman to speak for herself, whereas in Matthew the story is told by the narrator. Yet again Matthew renders the woman voiceless. This illustrates his androcentric perspective.

Double standards

Women live vicariously (Mt 20:20–23; 27:38; 27:56)

In Mark (10:35–40), the sons of Zebedee seek honorary positions for themselves at the right hand and left hand of Jesus. In Matthew, it is *their mother* who wants these positions for her sons (see Saldarini 2001:168–169). In that culture women's status depended on having sons and on how well their sons did in life. When Matthew changes his Markan source and makes it the woman who seeks honour for her sons (and through them for herself), he reveals his attitude towards women and their place in society. He portrays the mother in a negative light. In the story she is duly put in her place. She is an eyewitness (Mt 27:56) of Jesus' crucifixion. On the cross, two robbers have the 'honorary positions' on his right-hand and left-hand side (Mt 27:38). The mother is chastised: in the kingdom of God it should not be about people's honour. Matthew is the only gospel in which the mother of the sons of Zebedee is a character.

Sexuality (Mt 5:29–32; 19:2–12)

In Mark, Jesus allows women to get a divorce (Mk 10:12). Matthew ignores this information. Matthew is the only gospel in which Jesus allows divorce on the grounds of *porneia*. This word does not only refer to a married woman who commits adultery (cf. Sissa 1990:91). A woman who had

sex before marriage was also guilty of *porneia*. Priests were not permitted to marry such 'used' women, which included widows or women who had been raped. Women who were not virgins were unacceptable. The label was *porneia*.

Men, of course, could never be 'used', irrespective of how much sex they had or with whom they had sex. A married man could even have sex with a prostitute without it being labelled *porneia*. It would rather be seen as his wife's fault – her deficiencies compelled him to do that (cf. Countryman 1988:35–39). Adultery was not regarded as a moral problem. It was about the male right of possession. A woman was the possession of her husband. Adultery was about stealing another man's possession. A man did not ever 'belong' to a woman.

In Matthew's world, a virgin was the ideal woman. All other women were contaminated. Matthew's story of Jesus' virgin birth and the divorce texts illustrate this view. To a large extent Matthew conformed to, rather than criticised, the cultural norms of his world.

False authenticity

Jesus liberates *all* people. When freedom is lost because of the pressure of cultural norms, culture goes against the gospel message and should be evaluated critically. The way in which Mark portrays women characters shows how the gospel can be liberating for women. With regard to Matthew, Anthony Saldarini (2001) suggests 'imagining' a similar perspective:

Matthew does not exclude or attack women, but he does not reimagine their place in society either. He seeks to reshape society and his community according to the teachings of Jesus from the top down, working through male heads of the community and its households. We may imagine and argue that women took part in that process and that women benefited from the emphasis on men taking on the social role of slaves/servants within the community and society, rather than as dominant authorities using resources of women and slaves. However, we must imagine it and fill in the gaps which Matthew leaves.

(Saldarini 2001:170)

The textual evidence, however, does not allow the exegete to consider the liberation that Jesus brought for the marginalised as having been successfully carried through to women by Matthew. His androcentric perspective caused him to regress and to conform to the cultural norms of his day. We then are left with imagining how to fill the gaps.

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