

WOMEN IN THE WORK OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

World Assembly 2023 Conversatorio

Welcome to the beginning of our conversation! To help us consider Women in the Work of the Kingdom of God, I invite you to reflect theologically on the story of God's Kingdom!

We follow a king who is our creator, rescuer, redeemer, and friend! He is also a king who specializes in reversals – as Mary wrote, he lifts up the humble and brings down the proud. In the most dramatic reversal of all, the apostle Paul pictures this king succumbing to a humiliating death on a cross, so that God the Father could raise his name above every name, and one day every knee would bow at this throne.

Of this king's many wonders is the fact that he knows our names and invites all of us into his story! He is a king who intentionally pursues us, welcoming us to live as daughters and sons of the Father.

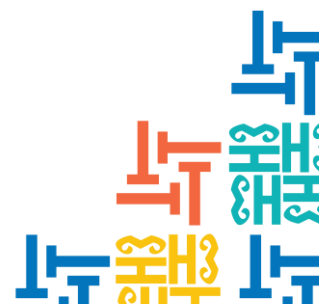
That story begins in a garden, with two image bearers created as stewards God's good creation. All too quickly, they need to be rescued after disregarding God's instructions and seeking wisdom on their own terms, when they should have trusted the divine plan. The good news is that they are rescued and given the promise of a rescuer who is to come, bringing an end to evil and restoring humanity's relationship with our Creator and each other.

In Genesis 12, a man named Abram is invited into God's story and responds in faith and obedience. Although there are bumps along the way, Abram will become Abraham, and be blessed and called to be a blessing in God's story.

As God's story continues, it features both women and men in the Old Testament, but we often hear more about the men than the women. (This would have been culturally appropriate when these stories were recorded and could also be related to male scribes being the recorders!) One of the earliest reversals in God's story comes when Hagar, an Egyptian slave girl, is the first person to give a name to God (Genesis 16:13)! There are other notable women who appear in the Old Testament as well, including several who are leaders.

Some of the women who lead in the OT include:

- Miriam – the sister of Moses and Aaron, is highlighted in Exodus 15:20-21 as a prophetess and leads the women in song.



- Deborah – the one female judge (leader) in the book of Judges, appearing in chapters 4-5. In 4:4-5 she is described as a prophetess and a wise judge. Later, when she helps to lead in the battle, Deborah prophesies that the enemy, Sisera, will meet his end at the hands of a woman (4:9). This happens in Judges 4:21 when Sisera unwisely takes a nap in the tent of Jael – a bold woman with a tent peg!
- Huldah – another prophetess, sought by King Josiah after the law code is found and needs interpretation. Significantly, Jeremiah was active in Judah at this time, but the priests choose to ask Huldah, who speaks for the Lord (2 Kings 22:11-20).
- Esther – she may not have been a typical “leader,” but her courage, obedience, and faithfulness to God and her people stopped a genocide from occurring while she was Queen.

God’s story continues in the New Testament. Luke begins with one of many reversals: an aged barren woman gives birth to a son, and a virgin agrees to bear the Son of God. As Jesus starts his ministry, we see how God has always held women as equal partners, even though this may feel like a reversal to us. In the Gospels, we find Jesus intentionally engaging with women as disciples, as examples and as recipients of his healing ministry. The apostle Paul continues this posture in his radical partnerships with women as he plants the early church! But let us pause here and focus first on Jesus! I’ll touch on several examples from Luke’s Gospel, and in our online resources you’ll find more examples from all four Gospels.

JESUS & WOMEN - AN OVERVIEW OF THE GOSPELS

At a time when some prayed “Blessed art thou O Lord that you have not made me a gentile, a slave, or a woman,” we see Jesus teaching women, interacting with women, and holding women up as examples in his teaching!

WOMEN AS DISCIPLES:

Luke 8:1-3 - Jesus was followed by men and women, and the women provided financial support!

Matthew 27:55-56 & Mark 15:40-41 - report of women being present at the crucifixion.

Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-11; John 20:1-18 – record of women being the first witnesses to the resurrection!

WOMEN IN CONVERSATION:

John 4 - one of Jesus’ longest dialogues is with a Samaritan woman.

Matthew 15:21-28 - Jesus’ dialogue with a Canaanite woman. (He seems harsh at some points, yet clearly affirms the woman’s faith in the end!)

Luke 10:38-42 - Jesus affirms Mary for sitting at his feet, just as a male disciple did!



John 11:17-27 - one of the clearest statements regarding Jesus' divinity comes from Mary's sister, Martha, as they interact around the death of Lazarus.

OTHER WOMEN INTERACTING WITH JESUS:

Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-8 - Mary (of Bethany, above) anoints Jesus on his way to the cross. She seems to be one of the few who really understands what is about to happen; in Matthew, Mary is commended.

Luke 7:11-17 - Jesus raises a widow's only son when he encounters his funeral.

Luke 7:36-50 - a sinful woman anoints Jesus, where upon he forgives her and commends her for her faith.

John 8:2-11 - Jesus protects, forgives, and instructs the woman caught in adultery.

WOMEN JESUS HEALED:

Matthew 8:14-15 and Mark 1:29-31 - Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law.

Mark 7:24-30 and Matthew 15:21-28 - Jesus heals the daughter of the Canaanite woman.

Mark 5:21-43 & Luke 8:41-56 - Jesus heals both Jairus' daughter and a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years.

Luke 13:10-17 - Jesus heals a crippled woman on the Sabbath and calls her "a daughter of Abraham," clearly including her among God's covenant people.

WOMEN AS EXAMPLES IN JESUS' TEACHING:

Luke 18:1-8 - a woman given as an example of persistent prayer.

Matthew 13:33 - a woman demonstrating the Kingdom's work.

Luke 15:8-10 - a woman searching for her lost coin.

Matthew 25:1-3 - patient bridesmaids waiting for the groom.

Mark 12:41-44 - the widow and her mite.

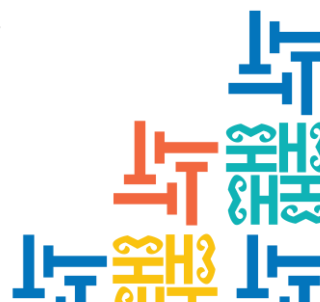
Luke 4:25-27 - the widow who sheltered Elijah.

Matthew 5:27-28 - women should not be the subject of lust!

Luke 11:27-28 - as Jesus' mother is blessed, Jesus calls all who hear and obey God blessed.

From Apology to Women by Ann Brown.

Repeatedly, we see Jesus interacting with women in surprising and counter-cultural ways! He is living out God's great reversal of how women are viewed in the wider culture, and he intentionally engages with women and men in his ministry. When we go back to creation, we are reminded that the man and woman were both made in God's image and called together to steward the king's creation. Equal partnership has always been God's



intention. While Jesus lived on earth, he demonstrated the value and honour of women by teaching, healing, and using them as examples in his message.

The life and ministry of Paul continues to follow Jesus' example and reverse trends in the wider Greco-Roman culture. As you'll see in our online handout [link] – Paul's ministry is marked by numerous strong partnerships with women who are consistently affirmed in his letters.

PAUL & WOMEN PARTNERS IN MINISTRY:

Acts 16:11-15 - **Lydia**, who sold purple cloth, was the first convert in Europe, in the city of Philippi. (It's also quite possible the church in Philippi met in her home.)

Philippians 4:3 - **Euodia & Syntyche** are described by Paul as "women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel."

Acts 17:4 - States that "not a few prominent women" joined Paul & Silas.

Acts 17:34 - Tells of a woman named **Damaris** who was a convert in Athens.

Colossians 4:15 - Paul sends greetings to "**Nympha** and the church in her house."

Romans 16:1-2 - Paul commends **Phoebe**, a Deacon (diakonon) in the church in Cenchrea, as one who greatly helped many, including himself. **It's likely that Phoebe was charged with reading Paul's letter to the Roman church!**

Romans 16:3 - Paul greets **Priscilla** & Aquila (he also serves with this couple in Corinth and Ephesus in Acts 18).

Romans 16:7 - Paul greets **Junia** as one who is outstanding among the apostles.

I would now like to focus on one partnership in particular – that of Paul and Priscilla. Yet another reversal is that Priscilla and her husband Aquilla are named six times in the NT and four times Priscilla's name comes first! This would have been very counter-cultural at the time Luke was writing the early church history in Acts and Paul was writing to various churches.

Priscilla and Aquilla support the growth of the early church in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Rome again, and finally back to Ephesus. They host Paul at their home in Corinth and host several churches as well. In Romans, Paul notes that Priscilla and Aquilla risk their lives for him. Their intentional ministry partnership spanned many years and places. Paul's letters make it clear that he held this couple in high regard and with deep affection.

In Acts 18, we're told that Priscilla and Aquilla together are teaching Apollos, whose understanding of God's story was incomplete. Acts 18:26 lists Priscilla first and then Aquilla, when Luke writes about their instruction of Apollos. What we often miss is where this teaching took place! Priscilla's ministry occurs in Ephesus, the very same community where Paul later writes to Timothy and forbids SOME women from teaching. Since Paul consistently affirms Priscilla as a partner in God's story (the Gospel), it seems quite clear that his prohibition on women teaching is focused on a particular group and not all



women for all time. There would be many reasons for some women in Ephesus not to teach initially: women often participated in the cult of Artemis and needed to be disciplined in the ways of God's Kingdom before becoming teachers. In the life of Priscilla, we find a woman who partnered with Paul, hosted churches in her home, and taught a man who didn't fully understand God's story.

As noted earlier – there were many other women who partnered with Paul to establish the early church. Sociologist Rodney Stark notes that women's leadership was one of the factors that was significant in the growth of Christianity. In his book, *The Rise of Christianity*, Stark notes factors like rejecting infanticide of baby girls and the care for widows would draw women to the Christian faith and be counter to the wider Greco-Roman culture. The presence of women leading in the early Church was one more reversal between God's Kingdom and the wider world.

Today, I've been focusing on reversals with regard to women in God's story – how they appear at crucial points and are critical and equal partners in God's Kingdom. I have been deeply impacted by a new book by Amy Peeler called *Women and the Gender of God*. In this book, Peeler, a New Testament scholar at Wheaton College, focuses on the incarnation and God's radical partnership with Mary. Peeler writes:

The consensus of Christian tradition is therefore on solid footing. God has not oppressed Mary with the birth of the Messiah; instead, God has presented her with a great honour. Equally important, it is an honour she has accepted willingly. Therein lies the paradox; in her humility before God, Mary is active and even esteemed. (p. 84)

Before we move to the practical and future aspects of how this plays out in God's story, and his Kingdom, I want to note another great reversal, which has to do with power in God's Kingdom in contrast to power in our world.

Peeler has helped me to see in new ways how the almighty and all-powerful King chose to become incarnate and be carried to term in the body of a young virgin, named Mary, in Palestine some 2000 years ago. Even in the process of approaching Mary, God the Father goes to her (through Gabriel), and they engage in respectful dialogue before Mary gladly assents to God's proposal that she bear His son.

Throughout the life and ministry of Jesus, we see a King who comes to serve! One who uses his power to serve, instead of seeking others to serve him. During his final night on earth, Jesus serves his disciples by washing their feet and calling them to do the same for others.

He is a King who lays aside all of his power and all of his rights for the sake of our redemption. As Paul eloquently summarizes in Philippians 2 – he empties himself, taking



on the nature of a servant and humbling himself with obedience, leading to death on a cross.

As we move to the practical and the future, I wonder if our need to keep pursuing this reversal for women has to do with the sad reality that many in Christianity today have also forgotten about Jesus' call to reverse the balance of power in his Kingdom and God's story. How often are women's roles limited in the Kingdom because of men seeking to hold onto their power? How many women are kept from entering the Kingdom because they face limits in their fellowships that they would not face anywhere else on campus or in their country?

My prayer, as we follow our King Jesus into the future is that we would be a Kingdom community that is marked by radical equality and serving one another in the name of our Servant King.

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