

DISCIPLESHIP OF EQUALS AND HISTORICAL 'REALITY'¹

In her pioneering and influential work *In Memory of Her; a Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza coined the phrase 'discipleship of equals'. According to this concept no distinction can be made between male and female disciples at the beginning of the Jesus movement. They were all disciples of one teacher, all brothers and sisters of Jesus. The gospel of the kingdom of God allows no distinction. It was meant for everyone without exception.² Although Schüssler Fiorenza emphasised that her method of feminist historiography generates a 'different historical imagination', rather than allowing conclusions to be drawn about historical 'reality',³ her reconstruction of discipleship as a 'discipleship of equals' challenges one to reflect on 'reality' again.⁴ Could women 'really' have been disciples of Jesus and, if so, would they 'really' have functioned in an equal way compared to his male disciples?

Schüssler Fiorenza's contribution is twofold: first, her argument for a 'discipleship of equals' rekindles the question whether women 'really' could have been disciples on an equal basis with men, and, second, her methodological insight in the use and the meaning of androcentric language provides a new perspective on the New Testament texts about them. In *In Memory of Her* she says:

1. This article has been written as part of the dissertation project *Reconsidering the Gnostic Mary. Mary Magdalene in the Canonical Gospels and the Gospel of Mary* and under the supervision of prof.dr. C.J. den Heyer, dr. R. Roukema and dr. C. Vander Stichele. I wish to thank them for their useful commentary and their encouragement, as well as express my special gratitude to Paula Pumplin for her comments on the English text.

2. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, London: SCM Press 1983, 106-159.

3. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She said. Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*, Boston: Beacon Press 1992, 80-101, esp. 92.

4. See also E.A. de Boer, *Mary Magdalene. Beyond the Myth*, London: SCM Press 1997, 31-38.

A *historically adequate* translation must take into account the interpretative implications of androcentric language which functioned as inclusive language in a patriarchal culture. Such androcentric inclusive language mentions women only when their presence has become in any way a problem or when they are 'exceptional, but it does not mention women in so-called normal situations.⁵

Could it be *historically adequate* to imagine women and men when the word 'disciples' occurs in the New Testament Gospels, although the synoptic Gospel writers allow the women followers of Jesus only to play a role at the end of their accounts?⁶

Two important arguments have been raised which seem to preclude the possibility that women could have been disciples. The first argument is the utter implausibility of the thought. Given the social status of women at that time, female discipleship would simply be inconceivable: it would not have been the custom for women and men to travel together and disciples of a rabbi normally would have been exclusively male because women were not to study Torah. If Jesus did have women disciples, why do the New Testament Gospels give no indication whatsoever of the scandal this must have caused? The second argument against the discipleship of women is that the New Testament Gospels do not record the call of a specific woman to be a disciple and that the disciples in general seem to be the male Twelve.⁷

In this article I want to explore the validity of these two arguments by carefully examining the position of the women followers of Jesus as depicted in the earliest source we can consult: the Gospel of Mark.

TWO GROUPS OF WOMEN

Mark introduces the women followers of Jesus at the end of the Gospel, immediately after the death of Jesus. Mark relates:

There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome, who, when he

5. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 44.

6. Matthew 27:55-28:10; Mark 15:40-16:11. Luke mentions the women in 8:1-3, but they also play their part at the end of his account in 23:49-24:11.

7. E.g. E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, Harmondsworth: The Penguin Press 1993, 110; E. Schweizer, 'Scheidungsrecht der jüdische Frau? Weibliche Jünger Jesu?', in: *Evangelische Theologie* 42 (1982) 3, 294-300; K. Rengstorf, 'Manthano', in: G. Kittel (ed.): *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament IV (ThDNT)*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company 1977, 460-461.

was in Galilee, followed him and ministered to him; and also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem (15:40-41).⁸

Mark distinguishes between two groups of women: the first group is small and consists of women identified by name; the second and larger group consists of many women who remain unnamed. Mark describes the small group as having been with Jesus longer, following him and ministering to him in Galilee. The larger group has decided at some point to go up with him to Jerusalem.⁹

Here, almost at the end of the Gospel, Mark for the first time declares that a considerable number of women has been following Jesus. The going up of the large group of women probably refers to the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the sacred festival of Passover.¹⁰ Mark 10:32 describes the going up of Jesus to Jerusalem, also mentioning 'those who follow'. Does Mark here allude to a large group of followers, among them perhaps the large group of women of 15:41? I do not think so. Mark 10:32 is a peculiar verse:

And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; and they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him (10:32).

'They' who are 'amazed' seem to be the disciples, who in 10:23-27 are also amazed by how hard Jesus says it is to enter the Kingdom of God, especially for the rich.¹¹ But who are 'those' in 10:32 who are 'afraid'? Some commentators argue that Mark here alludes to the large group of women going up with him to Jerusalem.¹² This might be possible, but the

8. Translation: Revised Standard Version.

9. Ἡκολούθουν and διηκόνουν: imperfect durative; συναναβάσαι: aorist ingressive.

10. Cf. Luke 2:42; John 2:13; 5:1; 7:8, 10, 14; 11:55. That women did participate in the annual pilgrimages (Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot) to Jerusalem is shown by T. Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine. An Inquiry into Image and Status. Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum* 44, Tübingen: Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 1995, 179-180. See also Ch. Safrai, *Women and Temple. The status and role of women in the Second Temple of Jerusalem*, Amsterdam: [s.n.] 1991, 15-21.

11. Both times ἐθαμβοῦντο (10:24, 32).

12. For instance R. Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium*, Freiburg: Herder Verlag 1977, 148 and 508: those who are amazed are the disciples and those who follow are the Passover pilgrims among them the women in 15:40-41. R.H. Gundry, *Mark, a Commentary on His Apology for the Cross*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company 1993, 569-571 and 573-574, suggests that both represent the people in general, distinguishing between those in front of the train that accompanies Jesus to Jerusalem and those in the back. W.L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark*, London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott

direct context seems to point to the Twelve, differentiating between the Twelve and the disciples in general. Whereas the disciples, reacting to the departure of the pious rich man and to the saying of Jesus about the camel going through the eye of a needle, ask themselves how anyone can possibly be saved (10:23-27), Peter, as a representative of the *Twelve*,¹³ concludes that *they* are indeed followers of Jesus, having left everything behind (10:28), in contrast to the rich man in 10:17-22 and apparently also to the amazed disciples in 10:23-27.¹⁴

In 10:32b Jesus takes the Twelve aside to explain what will happen in Jerusalem. This suggests that in 10:32a Mark also may mean both groups describing the disciples as the ones who are amazed and the Twelve as 'those following'. The latter have just heard Jesus' enigmatic saying that 'many who are first will be last and many who are last will be first'. Indeed the Twelve are last now. Mark's mentioning that they are afraid suggests that this is why Jesus takes them aside to explain what will happen in Jerusalem.¹⁵ In addition, he teaches them that their having left everything behind does not make them greater than anyone else. They are not to rule after his death, or exercise authority; they are to be servants and slaves, just as he will show himself to be in Jerusalem (10:35-45).

Since, in my view, Mark in 10:32 only refers to the small group of Jesus' disciples, we should be wary about imagining the large group of women followers to be going up to Jerusalem directly within a discipleship context. Instead, the suggestion that Mark makes in 15:40-41 that the large group of women 'came up with him to Jerusalem' encourages the readers to include them every time the Gospel mentions the *crowd* (ὄχλος) that follows Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem from 10:1 onwards.¹⁶

Thus Mark allows us to visualise the large group of women followers among the great multitude in 10:46, where they witness the blind beggar of Jericho regaining his sight. We can also visualise them among the crowds at the entry into Jerusalem, who lay down their garments on the

1974, 373 n.60, suggests that there is only one group: the Twelve who are both amazed and afraid.

13. See J. Roloff, *Apostolat – Verkündigung – Kirche. Ursprung, Inhalt und Funktion des kirchlichen Apostelamtes nach Paulus, Lukas und den Pastoralbriefen*, Gütersloh: Güterloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn 1965, 161-162. In Mark, Peter is mostly mentioned in the context of the Twelve (3:16; 11:21; 14:29; 14:54) or together with certain persons of the Twelve (1:16-20; 5:37; 9:2-5; 13:3; 14:33-37). He is always named first.

14. ἡμεῖς: 'we' with emphasis (10:28).

15. The earlier sayings about what will happen make no mention of Jerusalem and are directed to the disciples in general (8:31-33; 9:30-32).

16. Jesus' journey into Jerusalem starts in 10:1.

road or spread branches which they had cut from the fields (11:8). In both cases Mark allows us to imagine them speaking. The blind beggar, who is crying 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy upon me', they order to be silent, but when Jesus tells them to call the blind man they say: 'Take heart; rise, he is calling you' (10:49). At the entry into Jerusalem they cry out: 'Hosanna! Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed be the Kingdom of our father David that is coming! Hosanna in the highest!' (11:9-10). In Jerusalem we may perhaps also visualise them among the multitude whom the chief priests, scribes and elders fear when they consider arresting Jesus (11:27; 12:12), the same multitude who, for the most part, are glad to hear Jesus teaching in the Temple (12:37).

At this point, however, we should ask if it is historically correct to imagine women in the Temple. In the Outer Court yes, but in the Inner Court they were largely confined to a section called the Court of Women. Does this mean that men and women were strictly separated in the Inner Court, as in later times in the synagogue, where women were confined to the balcony? The balcony for women in the synagogue is said to derive from a balcony in the Court of Women. Rabbinic literature reveals the reason for the construction of the balcony in the Temple: it was to enable men to dance in the Court of Women at the festival of Sukkoth without mixing with the dancing women. Thus, the Court of Women obviously allowed both men and women. Their contact with one another became a problem only when both groups were dancing. As Tal Ilan says: 'The Court of Women did not solely serve women, but marked the boundary beyond which women could not cross into the Temple if they had no sacrifices to offer'.¹⁷

We may, therefore, visualise both men and women listening to Jesus teaching in the Temple, unless we assume that Jesus taught in the part of the Temple near the altar. This is, however, not likely since Mark emphasises the fact that Jesus speaks in public (11:12, 38). Mark only once refers to a specific place in the Temple where Jesus teaches. It is opposite the treasury, where the crowd, both women and men donated their money (12:41-44). On these grounds we may conclude that the large group of women, being part of the crowd, was familiar with the teaching of Jesus in the Temple: the shocking parable of the tenants of the vineyard and Jesus'

17. Ilan, *Jewish Women*, 180 n.7. For the discussion about the balcony, see Ilan, *Jewish Women*, 180-181 and Safrai, *Women and the Temple*, 69-76. See also Safrai for the active presence of women in the Temple. They prayed, they brought offerings, they donated, they completed nazirite vows and they belonged to the Temple congregation celebrating the annual festivals and partaking in daily service.

warning against the scribes. They also heard the questions from the official religious leaders and Jesus' answers to them: questions about Jesus' authority, about paying taxes, about the resurrection from death, about the most important commandment and about the Christ being the Son of David (11:27-13:1).

But what about the *small* group of women in 15:40-41 whom Mark identifies by name, the ones who followed Jesus and ministered to him when he was in Galilee? It is not immediately clear whether Mark mentions three or four women, but in the flow of the story it seems more likely that there are four: Mary Magdalene, Mary she of James, Mary the mother of Joses, and Salome (15:40,47; 16:1).¹⁸ Is it Mark's intention that we imagine these four named women every time the following crowd is mentioned, as is the case with the large group of unnamed women? There seem to be major differences. The named women are apparently more closely related to Jesus than the larger group of women, being with him longer, since Jesus' ministry started in Galilee (1:14). They are accustomed to following Jesus and ministering to him.

FOLLOWING, MINISTERING (SERVING) AND JEWISH DISCIPLESHIP

Following and ministering are the main characteristics of Jewish discipleship. The pupils of a rabbi were not supposed to learn only theoretically, but also to learn from daily life.¹⁹ They were to follow their rabbi wherever he went and to serve (*sjimesj*) him, even to this extent: 'All manner of service that a slave must render to his master, a student must render to

18. There is considerable argument about this, especially because in 6:3 a James and Joses (along with a Judas and a Simon) are said to be the brothers of Jesus. Mary, the mother of James and Joses in 15:40 could therefore be the mother of Jesus, which some find highly desirable. However, I opt for four women because the Gospel itself distinguishes between Mary she of Joses in 15:47 and Mary she of James in 16:1. If this is taken seriously the four times that *καί* occurs in 15:40 must be interpreted as referring to four different persons. See also Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium II*, 505-507 and H. Melzer-Keller, *Jesus und die Frauen: Eine Verhältnisbestimmung nach den synoptischen Überlieferungen*. *Herders biblische Studien* 14, Freiburg, etc.: Herder Verlag 1997, 49-52. R.E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah. From Gethsemane to the Grave: a Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels*, New York: Doubleday 1993, 1016 and 1152-1154, argues that there are three women.

19. See the comments of K. Rengstorf in his article 'Didaskoo', in: *ThDNT II*, 153-154, esp. 154 n.40 and in his article on 'Manthano', in: *ThDNT IV*, 434-435. See also H.L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasj I*, München 1965, 527-529 and W.D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1964, 422-425 and 455-456.

his teacher (...).²⁰ The root of the verb διακονέω, which is the Greek equivalent of *sjimesj*, has the notion of being a 'go-between', of being sent out on errands, the dative designating the person authorising the activity.²¹

Mark relates that the disciples of Jesus did indeed follow him and serve him. Several times they arrange for a ship and serve as the crew (4:35; 5:21; 6:35), they distribute food to the crowd (5:37), they find a donkey for Jesus to ride on (11:1-6) and they prepare the Passover meal (14:12-16). Jesus emphasises the importance of service. The disciples are not to become masters, but to remain in service and even to serve all. To follow and to serve is clearly central to the Markan concept of discipleship (10:17-45).

Does all this mean that Mark in 15:40-41, by using the words 'following' and 'serving' when the named women are mentioned, and by stating that they had done so already in Galilee, encourages the readers to include Mary Magdalene, Mary of Joses, Mary of James and Salome every time we read the word 'disciples'? According to Luise Schottroff this is the case: 'Marcus gibt hier zu erkennen, dass er bisher den in der Antike üblichen patriarchalischen Sprachgebrauch verwendet hat, in dem Frauen in Begriff miteingeschlossen sind, die Männer bezeichnen'.²² The question is, however, whether following and serving by *women* may be regarded

20. Quotation: bKet 96a. See also M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, New York: The Judaic Press 1982, 1601-1602.

21. See J.N. Collins, *Diakonia. Re-interpreting Ancient Sources*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1990. On p.60 of this major philological study, Collins mentions the interpretation that the word *diakonia* may refer to Jewish discipleship in his survey of various modern authors on early Christian notions of *diakonia* (46-62). However, he does not consider the possibility of women as disciples and on p.245 simply labels the women's ministry to Jesus as 'menial attendance of one kind or another.' J.R. Karris, 'Women and Discipleship in Luke', in: *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56 (1994), 8-9, on the basis of Collins' study on *diakonia*, suggests that the women's ministry to Jesus should be translated as 'going on mission for him', referring to Collins, *Diakonia*, 222, where he writes about the *diakonia* of Onesimus to Paul in Philemon 13 which in Collins' view would consist of 'more than (being) a butler for a gaoled apostle.' In the case of Onesimus in his role as *diakonos*, Collins refers to Tychicus 'who is sent to Colossae, Onesimus accompanying him, to inform the community there of Paul's affairs and to encourage their hearts (Col. 4:7-9).'

22. L. Schottroff, 'Maria Magdalena und die Frauen am Grabe Jesu', in: *Evangelische Theologie* 42 (1982), 3-4. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 320, also considers 15:40-41 to be a clear indication that Mark's androcentric language functions as inclusive language. However, according to Melzer-Keller, *Jesus und die Frauen*, 46-53, and others, Mark's disciples are exclusively male: Mark added the women in 15:40-41 as a replacement.

as references to their discipleship. As Ricci rightly states: 'If the reality of being a disciple involved serving, the opposite was not necessarily true: that a servant had to be a disciple'.²³

The few exegetes who really address the status of the women mainly focus on the exact nature of their service.²⁴ They relate it to serving at table and preparing food and label it as specifically women's work. In this context they either conclude that the women were not disciples,²⁵ or they confine themselves to contrasting the roles of men and women disciples.²⁶ Others disagree with this and argue that the women's service must be seen in the broader light of the service Jesus demands of the Twelve (10:35-45), assuming, that this does not include the preparation of food and serving at table.²⁷

Within Jewish discipleship, however, serving at table and preparing food is not regarded specifically as women's work, or as unusual or unworthy, but simply as one aspect of the service of disciples to their rabbi, which is part of their discipleship. A fine example illustrating the worthiness of this kind of serving is the story about a great rabbi serving other

23. C. Ricci, *Mary Magdalene and many others. Women who followed Jesus*, Trs. Paul Burns, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1994, 170.

24. See the survey of Ricci, *Mary Magdalene*, 29-50, for research from 1860 onwards. Exegetes for the most part did not discuss the texts concerning the women followers of Jesus. See for instance also D.E. Garland, *One Hundred Years of Study on the Passion Narratives. Bibliographic Series 3*, National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion, Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press 1984. This bibliography has entries on nearly everything, except for the women at the crucifixion and the burial which are decidedly absent.

25. E.g. Schweizer, *Scheidungsrecht*, 294-300 esp. 298-299 and B. Gerhardsson, 'Mark and the Female Witnesses', in: H. Behrens et al. (ed). *DUMU-E2-DUB-BA-A. Studies in Honour of Ake Sjöberg*, Philadelphia: Occasional Publications of the Samuel Noah Kramer Fund 1989, 219-220.

26. E.g. B. Witherington, 'On the road with Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and other Disciples - Luke 8,1-3', in: *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 70 (1989), 243-247 and B. Witherington, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990, 110-112 and J. Ernst, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas. Regensburger Neues Testament*, Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet 1981, 475-476.

27. Schottroff, *Maria Magdalena*, 11-12; W. Munro, 'Women Disciples in Mark?', in: *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 (1982), 232-234; S. Heine, *Frauen der frühen Christenheit. Zur historischen Kritik einer feministischen Theologie*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht 1990, 68-70; M. Fander, *Die Stellung der Frau im Markusevangelium. Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung kultur- und religionsgeschichtliche Hintergründe. Münsteraner Theologische Abhandlungen* 8, Altenberge: Telos-Verlag 1989, 145 and Melzer-Keller, *Jesus und die Frauen*, 53.

rabbis, who dined with him. This indeed caused astonishment, but the discussion about it is thus concluded: 'God (...) spreads the table before all people, and should not Rabban Gamaliel therefore (...) stand and serve us?'²⁸

Mark's concept of discipleship conforms to the Jewish model of discipleship.²⁹ The Gospel includes in a matter of fact way that Jesus' disciples prepare food and serve at table (5:37; 14:12-16). Thus, focussing on the exact nature of the service of the four named women in 15:40-41 does not really help to answer the question if and how they were disciples. We conclude that any service, whatever its nature, is part of the role of the disciple for Jesus' male as well as female followers,³⁰ and that, clearly, Mark's portrayal of the four women as having followed and served Jesus may indicate their discipleship role.

We will now focus on the two arguments against the possibility of women as disciples mentioned in the introduction.

MARKAN DISCIPLESHIP, THE TWELVE AND THE NECESSITY OF A SPECIAL CALL

In the Gospel of Mark the disciples are always referred to in the plural, just as the disciples of John the Baptist and those of the Pharisees (2:18). Mark only once speaks of an individual disciple and even then uses the phrase 'one of his disciples' (13:1). Grammatically men as well as women may be meant by a masculine plural, but this would not be the case if Mark identified the disciples with the all-male Twelve. The lack of a definite article with 'twelve' in 3:14, however, seems to suggest that Jesus summoned the Twelve out of a larger group he called to him. This may mean that he called more disciples than the Twelve alone.³¹ The second

28. Quotation: Qid, 32b, cf. M.Ex. 18,2 as quoted by H.W. Beyer, 'Diakoneoo', in: G. Kittel (ed.). *ThDNT II*, 83.

29. Melzer-Keller, *Jesus und die Frauen*, 46-53, and others, arguing that ἀκολουθῆω and διακονῆω typically belong to Markan vocabulary and Markan redaction, suggest that the women in 15:40-41 are to be considered a product of the evangelist. According to Melzer-Keller, 53, the two verbs are Mark's own *termini technici* to refer to discipleship.

30. See also Gundry, *Mark*, 167.

31. See also Sanders, *The Historical Figure*, 118-122, 291, who argues that Jesus used the number 'twelve' as a reference to the twelve tribes as a symbol of his mission and his hope. Roloff, *Apostolat - Verkündigung - Kirche*, 145-150, considers the call of the Twelve not only as a symbolic act of representation, but also as a demonstration of eschatological reality. See also Matthew 19:28 and Luke 22:30.

time Mark mentions the Twelve this is confirmed: the Twelve are together with a number of other insiders (4:10).

In addition, it is striking to note that Mark uses the word disciples in a very special way, carefully avoiding identifying any specific individual as disciple. The Gospel never calls the Twelve the twelve disciples, nor is the word 'disciples' directly connected with the names of the Twelve, or with any name at all. At an interpretative level this, of course, does not mean that the Twelve are not disciples. Like the other disciples they learn from Jesus, but, unlike them, they do so with a special purpose: they are sent by Jesus to preach and have authority to drive out demons (3:13-15; 6:7-13). The Twelve are disciples, but the disciples are not to be identified with the Twelve. They are a distinct group of specific individuals, as we suggested earlier when discussing 10:32, whereas the group of disciples as a whole remains unspecified.³²

Thus Mark, by always using the term 'disciple' as a male plural, which remains unspecified, opens up the possibility that both men and women are included. Mark indeed has no reference to women being personally called, but perhaps the Gospel wants us to visualise their call in 3:13 where the Gospel portrays Jesus on the mountain calling to himself whomever he wishes, before he appoints the Twelve. However, it is clear that Jesus' invitation to follow him is not limited to specific persons and has nothing to do with a special personal call. The call to follow him is, on the contrary, all-inclusive, since he also invites the crowds to follow him and, by the use of 'whoever', includes even those who read or hear the Gospel.³³ Mark often sets the unspecified group of disciples over and against the unspecified multitude and frequently uses the word 'whoever' or 'anyone'.³⁴ According to Elizabeth Struthers Malbon this is a compelling invitation to the readers to get into the story and to make the choice

32. See also 6:1/6:7; 6:30/6:35; 9:31/9:35; 14:16/14:17 and for instance Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 319-320 and Gundry, *Mark*, 167. According to M.J. Wilkins, *The Concept of Disciple in Matthew's Gospel. As reflected in the use of the term μαθητής. Supplements to Novum Testamentum LIX*, Leiden, New York, Kobenhavn, Köln: Brill 1988, 166, most scholars tend to identify the Twelve and the Markan disciples. For various exegetes on the topic see E. Struthers Malbon, 'Disciples / crowds / whoever: Markan characters and readers', in: *Novum Testamentum* 28 (1986), 107 n.9.

33. Struthers Malbon, 'Disciples', 105-110.

34. 3:7; 3:9; 4:1/4:34; 5:31; 6:45; 8:1; 10:46; 12:41/12:43; see also the useful appendix of Struthers Malbon, 'Disciples', 126-129.

to follow Jesus: to be one with the crowd and to become one with the disciples.³⁵ Everyone is invited to follow Jesus as Mark relates:

And calling to himself the multitude with his disciples, he said to them, 'If anyone wishes to follow me, let that one deny himself and take up his cross and follow me' (8:34).

Likewise Struthers Malbon concludes: 'Disciples, crowds, whoever – everyone is a potential follower. The demands of followership, however, make for a different actuality'.³⁶

In Mark the disciples are a relatively small group around Jesus sharing his life. They are in his house, they eat with him, they provide food, they arrange for a ship and a colt, they follow him, they withdraw with him, they ask him questions and he asks questions of them.³⁷ Although Jesus' teaching is mostly in public, in the synagogue, at the sea of Galilee, in the villages, on the road and in the Temple, his disciples also receive advanced teaching at his house or at the house of another or are taken aside on a journey.³⁸

THE ARGUMENT OF IMPLAUSIBILITY

When one realises how close Jesus was to his disciples, questions inevitably do arise which concern the first argument I mentioned earlier that has been raised against the discipleship of women: the utter implausibility of the thought. Does Mark really want us to visualise Jesus with men as well as women in the privacy of his house, teaching them as a rabbi would and answering their questions? Does Mark really want us to visualise women eating with Jesus? Does Mark really want us to visualise Jesus in public, with male as well as female disciples? If so, why does Mark not once indicate that this would all be highly unusual?

In order to account for this, it is important to look at those texts in Mark, where the Gospel specifically describes Jesus meeting women, namely Peter's mother-in-law (1:29-31), the woman who suffered from

35. Struthers Malbon, 'Disciples', 104-130, argues that Mark's use of the words 'disciples', 'crowds' and 'whoever' is complementary and opens up the followership of Jesus to the readers.

36. Struthers Malbon, 'Disciples', 110.

37. 2:15, 18, 23; 3:7, 9; 5:31; 6:1, 35, 41; 7:2, 17; 8:4, 6, 10, 17-21, 27, 29; 9:28, 33; 10:10; 11:1-7; 14:12, 14, 16.

38. 1:21, 39; 3:1; 4:1, 33-34; 6:2, 6b, 31; 7:17; 8:4, 14-21, 27-33; 9:23-33; 10:1, 10; 11:15, 17, 27; 12:35, 41.

severe bleeding and the daughter of Jairus (5:21-43), the Phoenician woman (7:24-30), the widow in the temple (12:41-44) and the woman at Bethany (14:3-9). In Mark's description of Jesus' encounters with these women Jesus touches them in the privacy of their houses (Peter's mother-in-law, the daughter of Jairus) and is touched by them in public (the bleeding woman and the woman at Bethany). Mark also relates that Jesus is convinced by and praises a woman who questions his negative attitude towards non-Jews (the Phoenician woman). Moreover Jesus uses women as positive examples when teaching his disciples (the woman at Bethany and the widow in the temple). And last but by no means least, he allows a woman to anoint his head in public and declares that her action is authentically prophetic, one which is to be remembered wherever the Gospel is preached throughout the world (14:8-9).³⁹

It is noteworthy that in these texts nothing is said to imply that the attitudes of Jesus and the women are strange or unusual with respect to gender norms. This may signify that, for Mark, these open attitudes were not strange or unusual at all.

At this point it is important to examine exactly what lies behind our conception of what is unusual. It is either a strongly rooted bias deeply internalised through art, literature and education or it is based on sources of the time. The latter seems at first to be the case. Referring extensively to Rabbinic literature Joachim Jeremias concludes that women were not supposed to go out of doors unless heavily veiled, men were not to talk to women, women were to live in their own separate quarters, to obey their husbands or their male relatives and to devote their lives to housework rather than, like men, to religious life with its laws and the study of Torah. Although in the country and in cases of poverty women would be allowed more freedom of movement, this, according to Jeremias, was the basic

39. For the women in Mark see for instance Fander, *Die Stellung*, and M. Fander, 'Frauen in der Nachfolge Jesu. Die Rolle der Frau im Markusevangelium', in: *Evangelische Theologie* 52 (1992), 413-432 and also Melzer-Keller, *Jesus und die Frauen*, 13-45. Both Fander and Melzer-Keller argue that the five stories, in which women play a major role, are at the centre of Markan theology: Peter's mother-in-law is an example of discipleship, the woman with the flow of blood recognises Jesus' power and nature, the Syrophoenician understands Jesus' mission and identity, the poor widow serves as example of self-sacrifice and the anointing woman understands Jesus' destiny. See the introduction of I. Dannemann, *Aus dem Rahmen fallen. Frauen im Markusevangelium. Eine feministische Re-Vision*, Berlin: Alektor-Verlag 1996, for a survey of several feminist scholarly opinions on the women in Mark. She focuses on the Syrophoenician woman (7:24-30), Herodias and her daughter (6:17-29) and the female slave of the high Priest (14:66-72) and argues that each story hides patriarchal supporting and patriarchal critical elements.

framework for women lives.⁴⁰ Leonard Swidler, who also draws on Rabbinic literature, concludes: 'that in the formative period of Judaism the status of women was not one of equality with men, but rather, severe inferiority, and that even intense misogyny was not infrequently present'.⁴¹

However, both Jeremias' and Swidler's work have been heavily criticised, as has the use of Rabbinic literature as a source for the study of the lives of Jewish women. Rabbinic scholars have emphasised that Rabbinic literature is a literary source and that no history is to be found in it.⁴² Feminist scholars have emphasised that Rabbinic literature is not about women, but about men's views on women and, as such, is mostly prescriptive rather than descriptive.⁴³ They have also shown that there is a tendency among scholars to select Rabbinic sayings that are restrictive for women, declaring them to reflect the general Jewish attitude of the time.⁴⁴ If, however, Rabbinic literature cannot be used as a historical source, then which sources can be drawn on?

RECENT RESEARCH

On the basis of his research, Swidler suggested that Jesus must have been quite revolutionary in his attitude towards women, interpreting Jesus' attitude as liberational against the background of restrictive Jewish attitudes. The title of one of his articles became widely known: 'Jesus was a

40. J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem zur Zeit Jesu. Eine kulturgeschichtliche Untersuchung zur neutestamentlichen Zeitgeschichte*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1962, 395-413. T. Ilan, *Mine and Yours are Hers. Retrieving Women's History from Rabbinic Literature*, Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill 1997, 17, calls his work 'the most fully annotated and learned study of the topic until this day' and says that 'it created the basic corpus on which many later studies relied.'

41. L. Swidler, *Women in Judaism. The Status of Women in Formative Judaism*, Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press 1976, 67.

42. See for instance Ilan, *Mine and Yours*, 9-25, about Jacob Neusner's radical and influential criticism of the use of Rabbinic literature as a historical source.

43. See for instance B.J. Brooten, 'Early Christian Women and their Cultural Context: Issues of Method in Historical Reconstruction', in: A.Y. Collins (ed.), *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship in North America* 10, Chico CA: Scholars Press 1985, 65-91.

44. As pointed out by B.J. Brooten, 'Jüdinnen zur Zeit Jesu', in: B. Brooten, N. Greinacher (ed.), *Frauen in der Männerkirche*, Grünewald: Kaiser 1982, 41-148 and also by Brooten, 'Early Christian Women', 65-91, and J. Plaskow, 'Anti-Judaism in Feminist Christian Interpretation', in: E. Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the Scriptures. Vol. I: A Feminist Introduction*, London: SCM Press 1995, 117-129.

feminist'.⁴⁵ In contrast to this interpretation, Judith Plaskow argues that, because Jesus was a Jew, his open attitude towards women actually represents a possibility within early Judaism, rather than a victory over it.⁴⁶ Plaskow suggests that the New Testament should be seen as a source for Jewish women's history, rather than being used as evidence of a radical alternative to Jewish attitudes. This is possible precisely because of the fact that nothing is said in the New Testament about the peculiarity of Jesus' inclusive attitude towards women, which 'suggests that his relation to women and gender norms might not have been so different from the attitudes of his contemporaries'.⁴⁷

This would radically change the perspectives of Swidler and Jeremias. Instead of being remarkable the reference to the women who followed Jesus would simply mean that Jewish women apparently travelled and also travelled together with men. The mention of the woman at the dinner in Bethany, who is not criticised for her being there but for her behaviour, would simply mean that Jewish women and men could be together at meals. The reference to Priscilla and Aquila, both tentmakers like Paul, being in the synagogue, listening to the learned Apollo, who was well versed in Scripture, who then took him aside to teach him, might simply mean that both Jewish women and men could have professions and both could be trained in the study of Scripture, listening and learning in the synagogue and even teaching others (Acts 18:3, 26). There is no indication that this was considered strange and nothing is said about Priscilla being inferior to Aquila. When Paul mentions them, he calls them both his fellow workers in Christ (Rom 16:3).

Schüssler Fiorenza's pioneering work on methodology is very useful when dealing with such androcentric texts as the New Testament, as a historical source. She also refers to the book of Judith as a source for Jewish women's attitudes at the time.⁴⁸ Judith is a widow who inherits the estate of her husband, which a female steward administers for her. Judith is independent and has great freedom. She refuses a second marriage. She devotes her life to prayer, asceticism and observing the Sabbath. She criticises the elders of her city for their folly and their theologically perverse judgement and she travels with her maid and without a male

45. Brooten, 'Early Christian Women', 74-75, states that Swidler's 'studies of women in ancient Judaism and early Christianity have been more influential on a broad scale over the past decade than the work of any other single scholar.'

46. Plaskow, 'Anti-Judaism', 124.

47. Plaskow, 'Anti-Judaism', 126.

48. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 116-118.

escort, and is clearly not heavily veiled, but probably even unveiled because everyone notices her beauty. All this is described with approval.

Bernadette Brooten refers to Philo of Alexandria as a source.⁴⁹ In his book *De vita contemplativa* he describes the 'Therapeutai' who lived near Alexandria. This was a group of Jewish women and men who studied the Torah, prayed, sang and ate together and lived in strict asceticism.⁵⁰ Philo relates that these communities existed in many other countries, which could also include Palestine.⁵¹ These independent and learned women Therapeutai are, like Judith, favourably portrayed. They are not criticised in any way and no special attention is given to their gender. In fact, they are admired for their way of life. Brooten also argues that we should reject the idea that Rabbinic opinions were all-powerful, especially during the first century.⁵² The women Therapeutai obviously studied the Torah not because they had some special Rabbinic permission to do so, but because they themselves had decided it to be important. Philo makes no apologies for their studying the Torah, but simply states that they do so and thinks it praiseworthy.⁵³

Brooten and others also emphasise the great importance of non-literary documents, such as papyri (contracts or letters) and archaeological remains.⁵⁴ There is still much work to be done in this field, but already it is clear that women were in business and had economic resources. Documents also reveal that women had certain rights within marriage and could initiate divorce. Brooten has studied inscriptions which show that women had religious roles, for instance, within the synagogue.⁵⁵ Eileen Schuller, on the basis of what has been found at the Qumran site and one of the

49. Brooten, 'Jüdinnen', 145.

50. Philo, *De vita contemplativa* 2, 28, 32, 68. See also R.S. Kraemer, 'Monastic Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Egypt: Philo on the Therapeutrides', in: *Signs* 4 (1989), 342-370.

51. *De vita contemplativa* 21.

52. B.J. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue. Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues*. *Brown Judaic Studies* 36, Chico, California: Scholars Press 1982, 150 cites the work of Neusner, 1980, who regards as obvious the viewpoint that what the male rabbis said about women does not reflect the general attitude towards women nor the attitudes of women themselves.

53. Brooten, 'Jüdinnen', 145.

54. Brooten, 'Early Christian Women', 88-91.

55. Brooten, *Women Leaders*; Fander, *Die Stellung*, 215-257 and Fander, 'Frauen im Urchristentum am Beispiel Palästinas', in: *Volk Gottes, Gemeinde und Gesellschaft. Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 7, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 180-185.

caves, suggests that women were members of the Qumran community, even serving as scribes and elders.⁵⁶

Tal Ilan made a study of all the sources that contribute to our knowledge of Jewish women in Greco Roman Palestine, including the New Testament, the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls, funerary inscriptions, and papyri and ostraca from the Judean desert. In addition, and in spite of recent discussion, she also uses Rabbinic literature as a source for the study of Jewish women's history.⁵⁷ She has recently outlined her methodology, defending her stand that Rabbinic literature as the most extensive source concerning Jewish women available from antiquity, should not simply be labelled literary and thus dismissed as a-historical, but should instead be scrutinised with the help of historical and literary criticism to reveal the layers that might contain historical information.⁵⁸

She shows, for instance, that in Rabbinic literature women studying Torah is a controversial issue. Rabbi Eliezer is an especially aggressive opponent of Torah study for women. However, in more incidental remarks about women and Torah study it is clear that not only men but also women were allowed to study Torah and other texts as well, as these quotations from the Mishna show: 'If a man is forbidden by vow to have any benefit from his fellow, (...) he may teach Scripture to his sons and daughters' and: 'Men and women who have suffered a flux, menstruants and women who have given birth are permitted to read Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings and to learn mishnah, midrash, halakhah and aggadah'.⁵⁹ This last saying relates specifically to women handling Scrip-

56. E.M. Schuller, 'Women in the Dead Sea Scrolls', in: M.O. Wisse et al. (eds.), *Methods of Investigation of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Khirbet of Qumran Site: Present Realities and Future Prospects*, Annals of the New York Academy of Science 722, New York: New York Academy of Sciences 1994, 115-131. See also T. Ilan, 'The Attraction of Aristocratic Women to Pharisaism During the Second Temple Period', in: *Harvard Theological Review* 88 (1995), 28-33.

57. Ilan, *Jewish Women*.

58. Ilan, *Mine and Yours. Jewish Women and Mine and Yours* are the first and second books of a trilogy on Jewish women. Ilan regards the first book as a rather naïve attempt to master and resolve the issue of Jewish women in one single work, under traditional headings such as marriage, family, sex, childrearing and housework. Nevertheless it is a very useful source book. The third book will place the data she found in the first two books into the framework of the main events of Greco-Roman Jewish history (Ilan, *Mine and Yours*, preface and 24 n. 91).

59. mNed.4,2-3 and tBer 2,12. See Ilan, *Jewish Women*, 190-204. Her conclusion that women studying Scripture 'would most probably concentrate on the relative simple book of Genesis' is surprisingly meagre compared to the sources she herself refers to. Cf. for

ture and studying Torah. Ilan refers to Daniel Boyarin who has demonstrated that, although this saying was quoted literally in the Palestinian Talmud, the Babylonian Talmud changed it rather severely to exclude women: 'Men who suffer from a (venereal) discharge and (male) lepers and men who had intercourse with menstruants are permitted to read from the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings and to study mishna, gemarah, halakhot and agadot.' The women who are conspicuously present in the earlier version are simply left out.⁶⁰ Women also used to be scribes, but their work was declared unacceptable by later rabbis, which is shown by this remark: 'They taught: (...) a Torah scroll, tefilin and a mezuzah which (...) a woman wrote (...) are disqualified.'⁶¹

Ilan argues that reality must have been very different from even the lenient legislated ideal of the Pharisees that survived in Rabbinic literature. Jewish women did indeed go out of doors, going to the market and travelling on their own.⁶² They did have professions and men and women mingled in public.⁶³ Women studied Torah, questioning rabbis and receiving detailed answers.⁶⁴ Ilan attributes the discrepancy between what has been written and what was practised to the highly heterogeneous nature of Second Temple period Jewish society, and also to the fact that most of the surviving sources relate to upper-middle and aristocratic classes.⁶⁵

Helga Melzer-Keller suggests that one should focus on contemporary opposition and renewal groups at the time of Jesus.⁶⁶ With regard to this it is interesting that Ilan researched texts which mention women supporting the Pharisees. She argues that, as an opposition group, the Pharisees accepted this support, and did not enact specific rules against women. Only later, when they came into power after the destruction of the Temple, did their misogynistic tendencies emerge.⁶⁷

instance 204 and 193. However, Ilan, *Mine and Yours*, 166-169 gives even more material and concludes that 'the Rabbinic world as a whole admitted to a reality (...) which preserved in it the possibility for women to study Torah' (p.169).

60. Y. Berakhot 3:4, 6c and B. Berakhot 22a. Ilan, *Mine and Yours*, 60-61.

61. bMen.42b, see Ilan, *Jewish Women*, 193.

62. Ilan, *Jewish Women*, 128-129; Ilan, *Mine and Yours*, 171-173, 265, 268-269.

63. Ilan, *Jewish Women*, 184-190.

64. See Ilan, *Jewish Women*, 190-204 about Beruriah and Matrona and other female figures in Rabbinic literature, who apparently discuss Scripture and Halacha with knowledge and insight. See also Ilan, *Mine and Yours*, 297-310.

65. Ilan, *Jewish Women*, esp. 226-229.

66. Melzer-Keller, *Jesus und die Frauen*, 437-439.

67. Ilan, 'The Attraction of Aristocratic Women', 1-33.

If indeed Jesus' attitudes towards women and the attitudes of women towards him are not to be considered unusual for that time but part of the pluralism of early Judaism, it is no longer valid to say that women especially were attracted to early Christianity because it offered them more freedom and respect. Fander concludes that the challenge is to find a different explanation of why Christianity was so appealing to women.⁶⁸ In contrast to this, Judith Lieu argues that the question in itself is wrong. According to her, the assumption that women especially were attracted to early Christianity is a mere truism, based on a naïve use of sources. Rather than asking 'what did early Christianity do for women', it is more appropriate to inquire 'what did women do to early Christianity'.⁶⁹

In fact, the latter question was the fundamental premise of Anne Jensen who wrote a major study of early Church women in which she brings to light actual women who were missionaries, prophetesses, martyrs, deacons, theologians, teachers and writers.⁷⁰ Whereas Jensen studied contemporary writings, Ute Eisen researched inscriptions and documentary papyri. She concludes that women were apostles, prophets and teachers of theology, consecrated widows, deacons, stewards, priests and bishops.⁷¹ Both studies are very thorough and impressive.

Thus, if we were only to rely on the studies of Jeremias and Swidler female discipleship would, indeed, simply be inconceivable. If, however, we take into account the more recent research, it is certainly possible that women were disciples of Jesus.

In fact, there are early sources which call Jesus' women followers 'disciples', such as Tertullian in his book *Against Marcion*, and the apostles in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*.⁷² Both mention the women in the band of Jesus' disciples: *discipulae*. The *Gospel of Peter* calls Mary Magdalene μαθήτρια τοῦ κυρίου;⁷³ the *Gospel of Thomas* presents

68. Fander, 'Frauen im Urchristentum', 185.

69. J.M. Lieu, 'The "Attraction of Women" in/to Early Judaism and Christianity: Gender and the Politics of Conversion', in: *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 72 (1998), 5-22.

70. A. Jensen, *Gottes selbstbewusste Töchter. Frauenemanzipation im frühen Christentum?* Freiburg, etc.: Herder Verlag 1992.

71. U.E. Eisen, *Amtsträgerinnen im frühen Christentum. Epigraphische und literarische Studien. Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte* 61, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1996.

72. Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* IV, 19,1; *Didascalia Apostolorum* III, 6.

73. It is also noteworthy that both in the *Gospel of Thomas* and in the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* Mary Magdalene's questions are about the nature of discipleship (GosThom 21; SJC 98,9-11; 114,8-12).

Salome saying to Jesus 'I am your disciple' (in Coptic using the Greek word μαθητής); the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* and the *Apocalypse of James* both mention the presence of twelve male and seven female disciples.⁷⁴ This, however, makes it all the more striking that Mark does not explicitly call Mary Magdalene, Mary of James, Mary of Joses and Salome in 15:40-41 disciples (μαθητρίαι or μαθηταί), but only refers to their role with the words following and serving.

Does this perhaps reveal that Mark is ambiguous about their discipleship? On the contrary, in my opinion, it supports the view that it could be a typical Markan characteristic to avoid identifying any specific individuals as disciples in order to make choosing to follow Jesus more accessible to the reader. As we showed before, the Gospel achieves this by the consistent use of the word disciples as an unspecified plural and even goes so far as not to identify the Twelve as such.

MARKUS 3:33-34

There is one more text in Mark which needs to be dealt with to reveal its view on the gender of Jesus' disciples. When Jesus' mother, brothers and sisters send for him, he replies:

74. GosPet 50; GosThom 61; SJC 90,16-18 (BG 107,4-10); ApocJas 38,16-17; 42,20-24. For the twelve male and seven female disciples see also the Manichean Psalmbook Ps. II 192,21-193,3. A. Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved. Mary Magdalene in the Nag Hammadi Library & Related Documents*, Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill 1996, 71-72, argues that the tradition of the twelve male and seven female disciples predates the early second century *Sophia of Jesus Christ* and is not necessarily Gnostic in origin. The tradition might be a good explanation for the peculiar double story about Jesus' feeding the people (Mark 6:30-44; 8:1-10), where respectively twelve and seven baskets with bread are left over. The Markan Jesus himself emphasises the symbolic meaning of these two numbers (8:14-21). The most common interpretation is that the first feeding (twelve baskets) refers to the Jewish and the second feeding (seven baskets) refers to the Gentile mission. However scholarly opinions differ. See Gundry, *Mark*, 395-401, who gives a survey of opinions which 'differ wildly'. I suggest that Mark's double story might draw on the early tradition of the seven and the twelve disciples. Mark 8:14-21 underlines that the disciples do not need the leaven of the Pharisees or the leaven of Herod. Through Jesus they each individually, the twelve and the seven, male and female disciples, have their own basket of bread to share, to feed themselves (8:14-21) and to feed all the needy people (6:30-44; 8:1-10), even the non-Jewish (7:24-30).

Who are my mother and my brothers? And looking around on those who sat about him, he said: 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother' (3:33-34).⁷⁵

Mark calling those around Jesus his mother and his brothers suggests that the group includes women as well as men. In addition, by using the masculine plural 'brothers' (ἀδελφοί) and then splitting it up into the singular brother (ἀδελφός) and the singular sister (ἀδελφή), Mark clearly shows that the Gospel makes use of the grammatical possibility of choosing a masculine plural to mean both men and women. This strengthens the argument that Mark possibly does the same with regard to the masculine plural 'disciples'. Indeed the text strongly suggests this to be the case, because who else can the men and women sitting around Jesus (τοὺς περὶ αὐτὸν κύκλῳ καθημένους) be but Jesus' disciples?⁷⁶ This conjecture is confirmed in the following verses. In 4:10 the men and women are mentioned again as οἱ περὶ αὐτὸν. They, as well as the Twelve, are with Jesus and when they ask him about the parables he says:

To you has been given the secret of the Kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables (4:10).

In 4:34 Mark explicitly calls them his disciples, even τοῖς ἰδίῳις μαθηταῖς, to whom he explains everything.

I conclude, therefore, that Mark indeed wants us to visualise women as well as men when the Gospel mentions the disciples and that Mary Magdalene, Mary of James, Mary of Joses and Salome in 15:40-41 are introduced as women belonging to the inner circle, who had followed Jesus right from the beginning of his ministry in Galilee.

DISCIPLESHIP OF EQUALS

Mark assures us that there were more women than the four who are named, even many more women who had been following Jesus, most of them having done so on their pilgrimage to the Passover feast in Jerusalem. However, the four named women, and perhaps some others, had

75. Melzer-Keller, *Jesus und die Frauen*, (410-411), suggests that these words belong to the 'historical Jesus'. In her view they are important evidence that women historically belonged to the followers of Jesus. This is, however, not to be considered a result of any emancipatory tendency in the Jesus movement, but rather is a result of a form of 'Gleichberechtigung der Armut' (436-437).

76. Cf. Matthew 12:49, see Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar II*, 763-764, about the custom of sitting around the teacher while being taught.

followed Jesus, right from the very start of his work in Galilee, since they belonged to the band of his disciples. As disciples the three Mary's and Salome are among the other disciples following and serving Jesus. Like them they share his life. They witness his influence on people, his healings, the power of his teaching. Though Jesus' teaching is mostly in public the three Mary's and Salome as well as the other disciples receive advanced teaching when he takes them aside. Together with the Twelve and others they belong to those Jesus calls his sisters and brothers to whom the secret of the Kingdom of God has been given (4:10).

As disciples the three Mary's and Salome are amazed like the others, even shocked and terrified at what happens (e.g. 1:27; 4:35-41; 10:24-32). Like them they do not understand Jesus' words about the Son of Man who will be put to death and after three days rise again, not daring to ask anyone about it (9:30-32). Like them they are at the Passover meal, sharing bread and wine, and in Gethsemane, where Jesus prays and is arrested (14:12-42). Like the other disciples they flee (14:50), but unlike them, and more like Peter, who dared to follow Jesus into the palace of the high Priest (14:54-72), the three Mary's and Salome return and are present at the crucifixion. Perhaps the four named female disciples, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Joses, Mary of James and Salome, at the end of the Gospel thus reflect the four named male disciples at the beginning, Simon (Peter), Andrew, James and John, who later, just before Jesus is handed over, receive special instruction about the suffering in the near future.⁷⁷

But why does Mark introduce the women disciples only at the very end of the Gospel and not earlier? Some exegetes suggest that this shows Mark's ambivalence towards the discipleship of women.⁷⁸ As must be clear by now I think that Mark is not at all ambivalent, considering that Mark clearly indicates as early as chapter three that women as well as men can be disciples. The Gospel consistently and characteristically uses an inviting unspecified plural to refer to the disciples. Jesus' open attitude towards women is not described as unusual and, finally, no other contemporary sources support the assumption that open attitudes of or towards women generally were to be labelled as unusual.

77. 1:16-20; 13:3-37; see also Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 320 and Melzer-Keller, *Jesus und die Frauen*, 54.

78. As do Munro, 'Women Disciples', 226-229, 234-235, Melzer-Keller, *Jesus und die Frauen*, 54-55 and De Boer, *Mary Magdalene*, 41-44, and is opposed by M.J. Selvidge, 'And those who followed feared. Mk 10.32', in: *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45 (1983), 396-400.

Mark introduces Mary Magdalene, the two other Mary's and Salome at the very end of the Gospel because only then do they play their explicit and individual part. Until then, they are implied in the larger unspecified group of Jesus' disciples: women as well as men. Yet, there may be another reason.⁷⁹ The women are introduced immediately after the moment that Jesus died (15:33-39). At this point it is made manifest that Jesus is not a Messiah with any worldly power, but rather a suffering one, which, in fact, is the main theme of the Gospel. Similarly, in 15:40-41, it turns out that the disciples who truly understand what following Jesus means are not the specified male Twelve, who thought themselves to be the authorised followers of Jesus,⁸⁰ but who in fact betrayed him (Judas), denied him (Peter) and ran away when he was arrested.⁸¹ Instead, the until then unknown and implied women followers at this point of Mark's story illustrate that discipleship has nothing to do with power, but with the utmost willingness to follow and to remain of service, even when it is dangerous to do so, which Mark articulates by situating the women looking on from afar (cf. 14:51, 54).⁸²

Thus Mary Magdalene, Mary of James, Mary of Joses and Salome exemplify Markan discipleship and by doing so they are special among the other disciples. Nevertheless, when Mary Magdalene, Mary of Joses and Salome find Jesus' tomb empty and receive the revelation from the young man in white, they run away as well (16:8). In the end they fail as disciples just as the other disciples have.

79. In addition to Fander, 'Frauen in der Nachfolge', 431.

80. Cf. 9:30-40; 10:32-45.

81. 14:10-11, 33-40, 43-45, 50-52, 66-72.

82. E.g. Schottruff, 'Maria Magdalena', 6 and Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 320. Others oppose this, for example Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 1157-1158, who argues that Mark sheds an unfavourable light on the women being distant (Psalm 38:12) and silent, whereas the centurion is close and confesses Jesus as God's Son. Melzer-Keller, *Jesus und die Frauen*, 55-56, suggests that Mark with the words 'looking on from afar' shows the women's willingness to follow and to serve to be incomplete. According to S. Légasse, *l'Évangile de Marc. Lectio Divina Commentaries 5*, Paris: Du Cerf 1997, 984, Mark thus clearly labels the women as 'counterexamples' to the readers. However, J.R. Donahue, 'Windows and Mirrors: the Setting of Mark's Gospel', in: *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 57 (1995), 1-26, describing the setting of persecution of Mark's Gospel, argues that, for instance in the story of Peter's denial, the readers 'would inevitably hear (...) echoes of narratives of the trials of the various Christian martyrs, especially in Rome, where such trials characterised the persecution under Nero' (19). This being the case, the first readers would also relate to the disciples' flight at Jesus' arrest, the caution of Peter and the women keeping far off, and the courage involved to draw near again.

To the readers, however, Mary Magdalene, Mary of James, Mary of Joses and Salome remain special. Especially to the readers, both women and men, who decide to become disciples like them, following Jesus and serving him even when it is dangerous to do so, these women are a compelling inspiration to overcome anxiety and failure,⁸³ to remain disciples no matter how frightening this may be, finding courage in the knowledge that the suffering Messiah was raised to life.

CONCLUSION

This article shows that whenever the Gospel of Mark uses the word 'disciples' the author means women as well as men. In Mark women and men appear to be disciples on an equal basis. Women, notably Mary Magdalene, Mary of James, Mary of Joses and Salome, even exemplify Markan discipleship. I interpreted Mark accordingly, not only relying on internal, but also on external evidence; taking into account early scriptural references to women who are explicitly called 'disciples' of Jesus and recent research on the historical situation of women within early Judaism. I conclude that it is quite plausible that Jesus' disciples, historically speaking, were women as well as men. In my opinion Schüssler Fiorenza's 'discipleship of equals' does not only belong to the world of a 'different historical imagination', but can also be viewed as part of historical reality.

83. For this meaning of the sudden ending of Mark see Schottroff, 'Maria Magdalena', 20-25 and J.D. Hester, 'Dramatic Inconclusion: Irony and the Narrative Rhetoric of the Ending of Mark', in: *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 57 (1995), 61-86.