

# He Told Us to Remember: How Feminist Scholars Remind Us of What the Academy Forgot

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One woman—silent, decisive, insightful—poured oil over the head of Jesus, and for this act, Jesus said she would be remembered all over the world. But the academy doesn't always agree. Some biblical commentaries relegate her to the Other — she is mute in the text and therefore scholars remove her agency entirely, viewing her only through the lens of how she is interpreted by other men in the text, by the male spaces through which she moves, and even their own patriarchal assumptions. Others, however, recognize that she — and not the disciples — is the true first believer. But it is the feminist scholars who lift her up off the flatness of the page and infuse her with breath and life, with agency and intention. This paper will briefly explore how the traditional academy has treated the woman who anoints Jesus in Mark 14:3-9. Then we will examine in depth how three feminist scholars, Michele Connolly, Elaine Wainwright, and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendell, interpret her as disruptor, healer, and holistic Other respectively. Finally, I will discuss the impact these different readings have had on the way we read the text today.

In the very first book I bought for my seminary, *A Survey of the New Testament*, by Robert H. Gundry, there is, at the back of each chapter, a handy little list of important people, places, and terms to remember. Interestingly, at the back of the chapter for Mark, there is

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nary a woman in the list, much less the woman Jesus said would be remembered throughout the world. Apparently, the academy has a slightly different criteria for remembering and deeming important, and a mute woman who makes a single appearance with a jar of oil doesn't make the cut. That same book gives no more than a paragraph to her – and shares it with Judas's plotting. This tiny, fifteen line paragraph even goes so far as to remove any sort of inspired and intentional motivation from the woman's actions, saying, "Jesus interprets the perfuming of his head by a woman in the house of Simon the leper as an advance preparation of his body for burial. (But there is no need to suppose that she herself understood the deed as anything more than an act of devotion.)"<sup>2</sup> In this assessment the woman is othered in every possible way, and all personal agency is removed. She is not a person of her own; she is a woman in someone else's house, moving through male space, and her intentions do not originate with her, but rather with how they are given meaning and interpreted by Jesus. This reading implicitly gives unearned authority to the male disciples in its assumption that she could never understand what the men in the room did not.

But not all scholars disregard the woman with nard. In their *New Bible Commentary*, D.A. Carson and R.T. France grant her agency and relate her actions to Jesus's kingship. "Every king in Judah was anointed before his coronation, and this was to be his anointing, not by a prophet but by a woman. But it was more, for it was a symbolic preparation of his body for burial. This woman knew that her king must die; she had understood the gospel."<sup>3</sup> Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan take it a step further, saying, "She alone, of all those who heard Jesus's three prophecies of his death and resurrection, believed him and drew the obvious conclusion...She is, for Mark, the first believer. She is, for us, the first Christian. And she believed from

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<sup>2</sup> Gundry, Robert H. *A Survey of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 176. I'd also like to tell you that this paragraph made me so angry that I wrote a letter of complaint to the publisher.

<sup>3</sup> Carson, D.A. and R.T. France. *New Bible Commentary*. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1994), 971

the word of Jesus before any discovery of an empty tomb.”<sup>4</sup> This is a bold statement, given that tradition and the academy – though perhaps not Mark – would have us think that of course, it was the male disciples who were the first believers.

Feminist scholars have provided a deeper, richer reading of the woman with nard, granting her agency, intention and wisdom that far exceeds any given to her by the traditional academy. Here, we will discuss specifically three treatments of the woman with the nard: Michele Connolly’s assessment of her as holy disruptor; Elaine Wainwright’s treatment of her as healer within the Markan health care system; and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel’s discussion of her as holistic Other.

Australian feminist Michele A. Connolly sees women in Mark as disorderly disruptors of the male space and divine order. She views Mark’s Gospel as a “space sacred to males”<sup>5</sup> in which he portrays Jesus as “...performing the service of bringing God’s order to a world wracked by the disorder of evil.”<sup>6</sup> She acutely notices two important facts: one, that each woman in the story only has one appearance and thus are unable to impact the larger narrative arc; and two, that most women in Mark are silent. Their general isolation means that they are unable to support each other in the text, and their muteness means that we rarely receive their point of view.<sup>7</sup> Such is the case with our subject, the woman who anoints Jesus with nard.

If Jesus is performing a holy service to bring God’s order to the world, Connolly contrasts the women of the Markan Gospel as disruptive of this holy order; in her view, women are always associated with some sort of disruptive disorder in Mark’s narrative. Most of them, however, perform redemptive actions in the form of acts of service appropriate to the traditional gender norms for women.<sup>8</sup> In

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<sup>4</sup> Borg, Marcus J. and John Dominic Crossan. *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’s Final Days*. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006), 104

<sup>5</sup> Connolly, Michele A. *Disorderly Woman and the Order of God*. 112.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Connolly, Michele A. *Disorderly Woman and the Order of God*. 113.

<sup>8</sup> Connolly, Michele A. *Disorderly Women* 112.

other words, they get back in their female lane. According to Connolly, “Women’s service is approved by the narrator when it is on behalf of others...; when it is for themselves or against Jesus, it is reproved.”<sup>9</sup> Connolly asserts that in the Markan world, one of the greatest acts of service women can offer is to facilitate male bonding, and it is often in this capacity that Connolly sees the women of Mark as disruptive—usually, because they are disrupting the male domain of space and therefore inserting themselves into the relationship between the male disciples and Jesus. She says, “It is not difficult to see that long before a woman makes a brief, anonymous, mute appearance in Mark, the story-world has been overwhelmingly marked as a male-dominated space. In this space, there is an entire cosmos of influential males.”<sup>10</sup> It is into this sort of space—the home of Simon the Leper, that we find our woman with the expensive jar of nard, ready to definitively disrupt the male sphere and turn it into a holy altar of anointing.

If our silent and mysterious woman is crashing a party, Connolly agrees with other scholars about what kind of party it was — and what that means for women. The fact that Jesus is portrayed as “reclining” indicates that it was a “symposium” of sorts — a formal dinner in which he was teaching the disciples. Women at these types of dinners “were considered to be promiscuous, sexually, so that this space was a ‘borderland space where gender was being negotiated’.”<sup>11</sup> As Connolly paints the scene, “Jesus is static, reclining, while the woman is upright, moving with intent.”<sup>12</sup> While other women in the Markan world are designated in some way by their association with males, this woman (like the woman with the blood and the Syrophenician woman) is simply introduced to us as a woman, lacking any known familial ties. It is important to note, too, that the original language used indicates that, despite Gundry’s treatment of her as a woman belonging to the house of Simon the leper, she actually came to the party, uninvited, from outside.<sup>13</sup> As she moves,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Connolly, Michele A. *Disorderly Women*, 115

<sup>11</sup> Connolly, Michele A. *Disorderly Women*. 157

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Connolly, Michele A. *Disorderly Women*. 158

intentionally, to Jesus, she violently breaks open the alabaster jar and pours the entire contents over Jesus's head in a sensual (as in, of the senses, of the body) act of intimacy and authority.

The reaction from the room is quick and loud. In fact, the verb used to describe their reactions indicates strong *physical* expressions of anger—essentially, they began to physically restrain her.<sup>14</sup> Connolly points out that the disciples most likely believed that her action was an attempt to “supplant them in the relationship with Jesus, the leader, the alpha male”, and that this was all the more provocative because they would be unable to compete with a female for this status.<sup>15</sup> Connolly agrees with some other scholars that the woman's forceful destruction of the alabaster jar “speaks prophetically of the irrevocable destruction of Jesus's body”, but it also “hints ominously at the damage that has occurred to the master-disciple bond, despite all the intense nurture it has received through Jesus's teaching of this all-male group on the journey to Jerusalem.”<sup>16</sup> In Connolly's view, the woman who anoints Jesus truly does supplant the male disciples through her actions, demonstrating a deep understanding of who Jesus is and what he is here to do. Jesus's approval of her confirms this. The disciples would like to blame her for her perceived misbehavior, “Since women are trafficked as building blocks of male bonding, they are often blamed for the break up of male relationships.”<sup>17</sup> In truth, she was only illuminating their own misunderstanding.

If the woman with the nard was, in Connolly's view, a disruptor, scholar Elaine Wainwright views her as a boundary-crossing healer. Like Connolly, Wainwright views the woman as being the first to recognize who Jesus is; but she also understands that he is in need of healing, and she crosses over into male spaces to carry out this healing work. Wainwright demonstrates this by examining how ointments like nard were understood and used in ancient times, as well

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<sup>14</sup> Donahue, John R. and Daniel J. Harrington. *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Mark*. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002) Loc 387

<sup>15</sup> Connolly, Michele A. *Disorderly Women*, 159

<sup>16</sup> Connolly, Michele A. *Disorderly Women*. 160

<sup>17</sup> Connolly, Michele A. *Disorderly Women*. 161

as by examining the way space was colonized by men and negotiated by women, specifically in the home.

Location, to Wainwright, is important. The scene takes place in Bethany, close to, but not in Jerusalem and its multitude of dangers. "Jerusalem is...a place of death threats, of fatal bodily harm, while Bethany is a retreat from these. It is a borderland space in which...transformative healing can take place."<sup>18</sup> But it's not just the city that is important to Wainwright – it's also the space of the home, and the setting of this "deipnon", or formal, symposium-type dinner. The home has been throughout Mark's gospel a place of healing, as has Bethany itself. The home is the domestic sphere – the women's space – and yet here, it is colonized by men and their male-only symposium. As we have already discussed, these dinners were a place in which the male / female boundary was being negotiated, as any women present were often considered promiscuous.<sup>19</sup> It is into this borderland that this unnamed woman comes, uninvited. According to Wainwright, "...not only has this unknown and unnamed woman transgressed the predominantly male space, but she has counter-vened the honour code by acting decisively in this public space in relation to the male body of Jesus."<sup>20</sup> She is reclaiming the domestic space as a place "where male and female bodies can be transformed by healing action, and where a place has been created for the possibility of a woman's action in relation to the male body of Jesus to be healing."<sup>21</sup>

Another aspect that points to this anointing of Jesus as a healing action is the ointment itself. Fragrance was gendered in ancient times, and ointments used for good health. Interestingly, scents considered primarily as female – nard being one of them – were often passed around at symposiums like this one for their healing effect on the head and brain. Traditionally, it was after the meal was completed and the ointment passed around that discussion could begin.<sup>22</sup> "Reclining at the table for the symposium following the

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<sup>18</sup> Wainwright, Elaine. *Women Healing / Healing Women*. Loc 131

<sup>19</sup> Wainwright, Elaine. *Women Healing / Healing Women*. Loc 132

<sup>20</sup> Wainwright, Elaine. *Women Healing / Healing Women*. Loc. 133

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*

deipnon and participating in the passing around [of the ointment], men can be healed of various bodily ailments but most particularly those associated with the head or brain, the bodily zone which together with the heart and eyes, [are associated] with 'emotion-fused' thought."<sup>23</sup>

So with the threats of death echoing from the streets of nearby Jerusalem, this woman compassionately provides a healing to Jesus, who is suffering from intense emotional anxiety. Says Wainwright:

She reaches out across the space in which healing can happen; and takes into her hand the rich earthly resources of healing ointments, associated with women but appropriated by men for their healing and enjoyment. Her action is a borderland one which links the male and female world by pouring out her resource over the head of the male Jesus enveloping him in the earth's healing resource and women's healing power....Those at the table with Jesus name the woman's action as waste...clearly failing to recognize the pain in the body of Jesus and contrasting their response to that of the woman healer who is perhaps a member with them in the healing *baisileia* movement accompanying Jesus.<sup>24</sup>

The response of the men in the room highlights the challenge the woman posed through her negotiation of gendered space, and using gendered tools to heal. Wainwright believes the woman's actions would have been understood specifically as healing, which further contrasts the lack of understanding in the male disciples (and explains their strong negative response). That they would refuse to understand that Jesus was destined to die would mean that they were also unable to comfort him in his pain. In an act of great compassion, this woman drenches his body in an oil meant to calm and heal deep emotional turmoil. Jesus confirms this, when he calls her action a "good work that has been done *in me*." He is saying that something inside him has been changed, been healed, by her action. "In this borderland story, a woman healer takes the initiative in reaching out beyond socio-cultural

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Wainwright, Elaine. *Women Healing / Healing Women*. Loc 134



boundaries to offer healing to Jesus.”<sup>25</sup>

Wainwright recognizes another dimension to the woman’s action, but deems it problematic to her thesis: the fact that the woman’s anointing of Jesus prepared his body for burial. Jesus himself (according to Mark) interprets her action in this way. Wainwright says, “Her healing has been claimed, not only in relation to its effects on the head, eyes and heart, the emotion-fused region of the one suffering the anguish of death threats, but for the body of Jesus in preparation for burial.”<sup>26</sup> But she believes that preparation for death is antithetical to the Markan theology of wellness, rife with miraculous healings, “...as death and burial would seem to be the enemies of the healthcare system.” She seems to miss the fact that perhaps in her action, the woman was performing the ultimate healing – because according to Mark, Jesus didn’t stay dead, did he?

Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel notices what Wainwright does not – that while we can acknowledge that the woman anointed Jesus as preparation for death, the act also pointed to the subsequent resurrection (the ultimate healing). Moltmann-Wendel’s treatment of this Markan story is more concerned with uncovering the identity of the woman herself than it is will defining her actions or their meaning. Ultimately, it seems that she concludes the woman to be wholly (and, dare I say, in my opinion – gloriously) Other. Moltmann-Wendel locates this woman as bold and outside the circle of disciples (even female ones); she is uniquely compassionate, defiant of tradition, and prophetically wise. Moltmann-Wendel essentially gives her the outsider status of the magical woman – the crone whose power lurks in healing, earthy herbs; in deep, empathic insight; in authoritative ownership of her own abilities.

Moltmann-Wendel finds in the Markan landscape an isolated, visceral and fully human Jesus. “More than any other evangelist, Mark...depicts Jesus as human, lonely, torn apart, prey to his body and

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<sup>25</sup> Wainwright, Elaine. *Women Healing / Healing Women*, Loc 3498

<sup>26</sup> Wainwright, Elaine. *Women Healing / Healing Women*. Loc 3463



his anxieties.”<sup>27</sup> The disciples she discerns as too concerned with success to understand that “this hopeless revolution might end with suffering and death.”<sup>28</sup> And she faults the host, Simon, with the failure to provide the expected hospitality, which should have included an anointing of Jesus as well, albeit with much less ointment.<sup>29</sup>

Like Wainwright, she, too, understands the oil to be gendered and decidedly female, saying that, “In the Roman Empire [oils] were used to an extent which provoked moral displeasure. They were often regarded as ‘unmanly’, as a sign of femininity, and were condemned by ‘real men’.”<sup>30</sup> However, Moltmann-Wendell believes this is a more Westernized view of perfumes like nard, stating that in the West, “anointing has always been connected with cosmetics, with the care of the sick and with loving actions, and has been commended to women as their very own sphere.”<sup>31</sup> But this was not always the case, and Jesus and the other Jews in the room would have understood this. While it’s true that women used oils for cosmetic purposes, for healing, and for burying the dead, men used them to anoint kings. And, as Moltmann-Wendell points out, “...no woman ever anointed an Israelite King.”<sup>32</sup>

So who is this woman in Moltmann-Wendell’s view? She summarizes her as a confidant, independent, compassionate woman as follows:

She is bold and unashamed, tender and compassionate; presumably a solitary figure, more radical than the group of women around Jesus, but close to them. It does not trouble her to break with tradition and any sense of propriety. She goes against accepted manners to do something good for Jesus. She anoints him in the same way as one anoints a dead body, and in so doing shows up the disciples, who are in love with

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<sup>27</sup> Moltmann-Wendel, Elisabeth. *The Women Around Jesus*. (New York: Crossroad, 1980), 95

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> Moltmann-Wendel, Elisabeth. *The Women Around Jesus*, 96

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Moltmann-Wendel, Elisabeth. *The Women Around Jesus*, 97

success and who still cannot see that the way of Jesus will lead to death. She does not want to delay him on this way, but simply to take her place beside him. She is not confused and anxious, but full of sympathy, full of compassion.<sup>33</sup>

She has, in Moltmann-Wendell's view, taken on the male role: she has not only anointed the dead, but she has chosen a king. In so doing, she emerges from the text as seer, the wise woman, the priestess or witch who knows what she should not know and heals what she should not be able to heal. Moltmann-Wendell even goes so far as to say that the alabaster jar "recalls the magical jug or pot which is 'always to be found in the hand of the feminine mana figure, the priestess or later the witch'".<sup>34</sup> Moltmann-Wendell contends that "commentators who deal with this Marcan story today still continue to lose some of their masculine self-confidence, and the unknown woman continues to shake the patriarchal dominance of theology: a woman knew of the messianic secret before all the disciples."<sup>35</sup> Because of their fear, they relegated her to the silent background and bring her under control by changing her name and her status (to sinful woman) in later Gospels. Moltmann-Wendell, however, restores the woman's agency, wisdom and power through her reading.

For so long in the academy, women were treated by scholars much the way they had been treated by Gospel writers: as flattened, non-dimensional characters who were there primarily to serve a purpose to a narrative. The impact of this can not be ignored, because as this attitude translates from classroom to pulpit, women in real life have been treated as non-dimensional and there to only serve a purpose. Just like in the scripture, women in real life were subjugated, silenced, and relegated to the background. Feminist scholars such as Connolly, Wainwright, and Moltmann-Wendell do a great service not just to women but to the Christian faith, as well, when they lift these women up out of flatness of the page, mold them with the skin and

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Moltmann-Wendell, Elisabeth. *The Women Around Jesus*, 98

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

bone of a fuller dimensionality, giving them agency, intent, and purpose. In these characters, the faithful, regardless of where they fall on the gender spectrum, can now find a richer, deeper faith — a faith that is more complete. Each of these scholars' views bring a new aspect of potentiality to the characters, but it is Moltmann-Wendell who, in her non-specificity, brings the fullest life to this character as a sage woman of magic and wisdom. For it is in this ultimate, holistic Othering of the woman with the nard that we can find a multi-dimensional character: she is the boundary walking healer who disrupts and negotiates male colonized space; she is compassionate sage who sees what others can not; she is the first to see the truth and the only one mature enough to accept its inevitability. She is medicine woman and psychic, priest and prophet.

Mark's Jesus recognized the woman with the nard for who she was: the first person who believed him. It's taken the academy some time to catch up. For many years, this mysterious woman has been relegated to the background of the story, her agency stolen and her insight ignored. In an effort to keep the disciples not only front and center in the story, but also possibly to protect their position as most knowledgeable of Jesus by sheer proximity (despite Mark's efforts to paint them otherwise), scholars have gone so far as to insist she had no intent other than to show her devotion to Jesus behind her actions. But feminist scholars have looked at her with a new lens, sensing her agency and intention as disruptor, healer, sage. By doing so, they have given us a fuller, more complete image in which to see ourselves and our faith. For when women are represented and understood as fully dimensional, it allows all of us to be more fully human ourselves.

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