

**Article by Father Alberto Maggi, published in “Emmaus”, year XVI, 15th March 2001**

## WOMEN IN THE GOSPEL

In a world where it was assumed that *“he that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the Law and at the last will inherit Gehenna”*, people probably did not appreciate Jesus Christ’s revolutionary attitude to women, as it appears in the Gospel of John where the disciples, who surprised Christ and the Samaritan woman in conversation, *“were amazed that he was talking with a woman”* (Jn 4,27).

Why ever should one speak with a woman? Isn’t it true that tradition teaches that *“a woman has only to learn how to use the spindle”* and that *“a woman must stay at home”* while *“it is a man to leave the house and learn from men”*?

Women were excluded from having any part in religious instruction. According to the Rabbis, this was due to the fact that, concerning God’s Words, the Bible says *“Teach them to your sons”* (Dt 11,19). If the Lord had intended to extend teaching to women, he would have added *“and to your daughters”*, but He didn’t.

Scribes said that *“It is better that the words of the Law be burned, than that they should be given to a woman”*, since God *“didn’t speak with women except for the right one, and, also in that case, He had a reason for doing so”*.

In fact, after Sarah had unwittingly lied *“because she was afraid”*, she laughed when she was told that she would become pregnant (Gen 18,1-15), the Lord was offended and spoke to no woman ever again.

Jewish women were marginalized from their first appearance, not only in the case of the religious sphere. In fact, according to the Book of Leviticus, the birth of a girl leaves her mother unclean for about three months (Lv 12,-25). Because of their physiology, women were constantly unclean (Lv 15,19-30), and they were therefore considered the human beings farthest from God.

In no culture has the birth of a girl ever been a cause for celebration (*“Best wishes”* and *“May you have male children”*); the arrival of a girl was seen as a catastrophe in the Judaic world view. The author of Sirach says: *“A daughter is a treasure that keeps her father wakeful, and worry over her drives away rest: Lest she pass her prime unmarried, or when she is married, lest she be disliked; While unmarried, lest she be seduced, or, as a wife, lest she prove unfaithful; Lest she conceive in her father’s home, or be sterile in that of her”* (Sir 42,9-10).

This pessimistic view was confirmed in the Talmud: *“The world cannot exist without men and women, but happy is the man whose children are males and unfortunate is*

*the man whose children are females*”, and codified in a benediction recited three times a day in which Jewish men thank the Lord in this way: “*Blessed be the Lord who did not make me a heathen, who did not make me a woman, who did not make me an uneducated person*”.

If a family already had a couple of girls, the arrival of another girl was feared. For this reason it was customary to *expose* the new-born girl, that is, she was abandoned outside the village: “*you were thrown out on the ground as something loathsome, the day you were born*” (Ez 16,5). When a girl was kept in her family, she was brought up to become her father’s and brothers’ servant and then, when she was about 12 years old, that of her husband and – finally – of her sons.

In this cultural context, it is surprising that women in the gospel are given such a prominent role. Almost all male characters in the gospels are negative, while all women are presented positively, apart from the two women mentioned by the evangelists in relation to power: the woman who holds power, Herodias, guilty of adultery and murder, and the ambitious mother of Zebedee’s sons who desires power for them.

The women in the gospels are portrayed as comprehending and receiving the teaching of the Lord: from his mother – who is great not for the reason that she gave birth to Jesus, but because she became a disciple of her son – to Mary of Magdala, the first to witness and foretell the resurrection of Christ.

In the Hebrew language there is no term for female disciple. The term was intended only for men and, in those days, tradition taught that “*a disciple of wise men must not speak with a woman in public, although she be his wife, daughter or sister*”. But for Jesus “*there is neither male nor female*” (Gal 3,28), there is a human being deserving of respect and dignity independently of sexual identity.

For this reason, going against tradition and the moral code, Jesus Christ included in his group “*some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities*” (Lk 8,2) and, in the gospels, it is women who are the privileged subject of the Lord’s actions. Jesus reveals his identity as the long awaited Messiah to the Samaritan woman, a human being who, as a woman, adulteress and unclean, was considered unworthy of receiving such revelations. As well, the only fact that the Lord expressly wishes to be spread abroad is the anointing of Jesus by a woman: “*Amen, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed to the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.*” (Mk 14,9).

The male disciples disappeared from the scene at the moment of the crucifixion, so the only witnesses of his death were women: “*There were also women looking on from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of the younger*

*James and of Joses, and Salome. These women had followed him when he was in Galilee and ministered to him. There were also many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem. (Mk 15,40-41).*

The evangelists say that women *followed* him and *ministered* to him.

No male disciple performs this kind of ministry.

In the religious view of that time, God dwelt in “*inaccessible light*” (1 Tm 6,16). Those who were closest to him were the *serving angels*, the only ones who were always before the Lord to serve him.

In the gospels, only the angels and women (“*the angels ministered to him*”, Mk 1,13) *serve* Jesus. According to the evangelists, women are not only equal to men, but their role is superior to the male role: the same as that of the angels. The action of “*announcing*”, an exclusive prerogative of the angels – God’s *messengers* – is, in the gospels, the privilege of women. For this reason, it is only women who are entrusted by the *Angel of God* with the annunciation of the Resurrection: “*Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.' Behold, I have told you.*” *Then they went away quickly from the tomb, fearful yet overjoyed, and ran to announce this to his disciples.*” (Mt 28,7-8).

And it is a woman – womankind was considered responsible for death in the Old Testament (“*In woman was sin's beginning, and because of her we all die*”, Sir 25,24) – who is the first to witness the Life: “*Mary of Magdala went and announced to the disciples, «I have seen the Lord!»* (Jn 20,18).