The Jesus Movement as Renewal Movement Within Judaism

To speak about the Jesus movement is to speak about a Jewish movement that is part of Jewish history in the first century C.E. It is therefore misleading to speak about "Jesus and his Jewish background" as though Jesus' Judaism was not integral to his life and ministry, or to describe the behavior of Jesus' disciples over and against Jewish practice as though the first followers of Jesus were not Jews themselves. Such statements reflect both rabbinic Jewish and Christian historical sources, virtually all of which were written in a period when the separation and schism between Judaism and early Christianity was an accomplished fact. Such historical reconstructions of Christianity over and against Judaism can be continuing resources for Christian anti-Judaism because they perceive Christian origins in light of the historical fact of Christianity's separation from and partial rejection of its Jewish roots and heritage.

Such an anti-Jewish sentiment and historical misperception is especially deeply ingrained in popular consciousness. In my classes, whenever students are supposed to elaborate the positive aspects of the Jesus movement they always resort not to Jewish faith and life but to general philosophical principles and theological universal arguments. However, when speaking about the "opponents" of Jesus and his movement they virtually never mention the Romans. Instead they always mention the "Jews"—without the slightest recognition that Jesus and his followers were Jews.

One of my friends spoke about Jesus, the Jew, to an adult education class in her parish. She encountered vehement objections to such a notion. Finally, after a lengthy discussion a participant expressed...
the religious sentiment underlying it: "If you are so insistent that Jesus was Jewish, then you are probably right. But the Blessed Mother for sure is not . . . ." My friend told me this story after I had come exasperated from a college class, where I had been unable to convince a student that Saint Paul was a Jew. In a Protestant college class a Jewish friend attempted to show that the miracle stories of Jesus have the same literary form as those told by the rabbis. At the end when he tried to draw the conclusion from this form-critical exercise for understanding the Gospel stories, the students objected: the Jewish tales are just stories, but those in the Gospels have really happened. Everyone is aware of such anti-Jewish sentiments among Christians and easily could supply more such stereotypes.

Women in Judaism Before 70 c.e.: Perspectives

Feminist Jewish scholars such as Judith Plaskow have pointed out that Christian feminist literature and popular reasoning perpetuate these anti-Jewish notions when extolling Jesus, the feminist, over and against patriarchal Judaism, or when pointing to the extinction of goddess religion by Israelite patriarchal religion. Plaskow has argued correctly that the rabbinic statements often adduced for the reconstruction of the time of Jesus should be appropriately read alongside the statements of the so-called Fathers, whose misogyny is widely acknowledged. She warns that Christian feminists' radical image of Jesus depends on an extremely negative depiction of the Jewish background, because the only way to depict him as a radical—that is as overthrowing tradition—is to depict the tradition as negatively as possible. Because despite the evidence that he in no way reinforced patriarchy, there's also no evidence that he did anything radical to overthrow it. So the only way you can make that argument is by depicting Judaism negatively.

Christian feminists cannot take such a Jewish feminist warning seriously enough. At the same time it puts Christian feminists into a serious quandary. Can they—in order to avoid being labeled anti-Jewish—cease to analyze critically and denounce the patriarchal structures and traditions of Christian faith and community whenever it becomes obvious that they share in the dominant patriarchal Jewish structures of the first centuries? In other words, can feminists relinquish their search for the liberating elements of Christian vision and praxis that are formulated over and against the dominant patriarchal structures of Judaism? Would that not mean also an abandonment of feminist Jewish roots and of our Jewish forebears who entered into the movement and vision of Jesus of Nazareth?

Because of the long anti-Semitic history of Christianity and the anti-Jewish presupposition of much Christian (including feminist) scholarship and popular preaching, one cannot insist too much on the historical insight that Jesus belongs first of all to Jewish history. Similarly, his first followers in the Jesus movement and in the missionary Christian movement were Jewish women as well as men. Christian feminist theology, therefore, can reappropriate the earliest Christian beginnings of the discipleship of equals only if and when it understands and explicates that Christian roots are Jewish and that the feminist Christian foundational story is that of Jewish women and their vision.

To rediscover "Jesus, the feminist," over and against these Jewish roots of the early Christian movement can only lead to a further deepening of anti-Judaism. Equally, to rediscover Jesus, the feminist, over and against Jewish but not over and against Christian patriarchy would only mean a further strengthening of Western religious patriarchy. To rediscover Jesus, the feminist, over and against Jewish life and beliefs would involve relinquishing the history of those Jewish forebears who entered into the vision and movement of Jesus. The discipleship of equals called forth by Jesus was a Jewish discipleship.

But in seeking not to be anti-Jewish we cannot cease analyzing and identifying the dominant patriarchal structures of the Greco-Roman world into which Christianity emerged. In doing so we must also examine the patriarchal structures of Judaism in order to see why Jewish women entered into the vision and movement of Jesus. To relinquish the critical impact of their story within the patriarchal context of their own culture would entail relinquishing women's Jewish and Christian heritage. Therefore, to reconstruct the Jesus movement as a Jewish movement within its dominant patriarchal cultural and religious structures is to delineate the feminist impulse within Judaism. The issue is not whether or not Jesus overturned patriarchy but whether Judaism had elements of a critical feminist impulse that came to the fore in the vision and ministry of Jesus. The reconstruction of the Jesus movement as the discipleship of equals is historically plausible only insofar as such critical elements are thinkable within the context of Jewish life and faith. The praxis and vision of Jesus and his movement is best understood as an inner-Jewish renewal movement that presented an alternative option to the dominant patriarchal structures rather than an oppositional formation rejecting the values and praxis of Judaism.
Rather than reading the texts on women in Judaism as accurate historical information about the status and role of women in actual life, I would suggest that we subject them to a feminist methodological approach. As yet no Jewish feminist critical reconstruction of first-century Judaism exists, nor are feminist critical analyses of Jewish literature between the Bible and the Mishnah available. Moreover, Jewish feminist theology is still in the process of developing a feminist understanding of Torah and tradition which, while declining to take theological statements of Jewish men at face value, nevertheless spells out its allegiance to Jewish women of faith. In the meantime, feminist theology as a critical theology of liberation cannot cease to do the same for Christian Scriptures, traditions, and women's heritage. However, insofar as the Christian past is bound up intrinsically with its roots in prerabbinic Judaism, we must seek to reconstruct the historical experience of those Jewish women who stand at the beginnings of Christianity. Such a historical experience is, as we have seen, available only in and through Jewish or Christian male texts and historical sources.

The following methodological rules for a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion also apply, therefore, to the interpretation of texts speaking about women in Judaism.

**Texts and historical sources—Jewish as well as Christian—must be read as androcentric texts.** As such they are reflective of the experience, opinion, or control of the individual male writer but not of women's historical reality and experience. Such isolated statements should not be construed as the negative and positive tradition about women in Judaism. For example, it is methodologically not justified to declare, on the one hand, Rabbi Eliezer's infamous statement that "if a man teaches his daughter Torah it is as though he taught her lechery" as representing the normative negative tradition, while, on the other hand, explaining that the example of Beruria, whom was held up as an example of how to study Torah, is "the exception that proves the rule."

The glorification as well as the denigration or marginalization of women in Jewish texts is to be understood as a social construction of reality in patriarchal terms or as a projection of male reality. While J. Neusner has elucidated such an approach for the rabbincic literature, the same could be shown for wisdom and apocalyptic literature. It must, however, not be overlooked that 'intellectuals' who often belonged to the middle class were responsible for these literary expressions.

The formal canons of codified patriarchal law are generally more restrictive than the actual interaction and relationship of women and men and the social reality which they govern. Although in rabbincic Judaism women are categorized with children and slaves for legal religious purposes, the biblical stories about women indicate that women were not perceived as minors or slaves in everyday life. Biblical women such as Ruth, Esther, Hannah, or the mother of the seven sons mentioned in 2 Maccabees are characterized with typical female roles and behavior, but they are not minors or imbeciles. Although the "praise of the good wife" in Prov 31:10–31 is given from a male point of view, her economic initiative and business acumen are taken for granted.

Women's actual social-religious status must be determined by the degree of their economic autonomy and social roles rather than by ideological or prescriptive statements. As a rule, prescriptive injunctions for appropriate "feminine" behavior and submission increase whenever women's actual social-religious status and power within patriarchy increase. Moreover, women's independence and autonomy are generally limited not only by gender roles but also by social status and class membership. We can therefore assume that Jewish women shared the privileges and limitations placed on women in the dominant culture of their time. For example, in the Jewish colony at Elephantine women shared full equality with men; they were enlisted in the military units, were conspicuous among the contributors to the temple fund, and shared in all other rights given to women by Egyptian law. Like the Seleucid or Ptolemaic princesses, Queen Alexandra reigned for nine years in the fashion of Hellenistic queens, and the sister of the last Maccabean king, Antigonus, defended the fortress of Hyrcania against the military onslaught of Herod the Great.

Furthermore, the historical-theological reconstruction of the Jesus movement as an emerging inner-Jewish renewal movement and its attractiveness to women not only faces difficult hermeneutical problems, it must also contend with a serious lack of sources, especially for the pre-70 period. Therefore, Jewish and Christian scholars are prone to reconstruct early Judaism and Christianity not only in terms of what has survived as "normative" in their own respective traditions but also as two distinct and oppositional religious formations. Since "rabbinic" Judaism and patriarchal Christianity were the historical winners among the diverse inner-Jewish movements, such a reconstruction insinuates that only these represent pre-70 Judaism in general and the Jesus movement in particular.

Yet such reconstructions are questionable: in the period before the siege and destruction of Jerusalem, "normative" Judaism was not yet in existence, and the Jesus movement was still a renewal movement embedded in its Jewish social-religious matrix. A person could unde-
stand herself as a faithful member of Israel and a follower of Jesus at
one and the same time. Moreover, the little information about pre-70
Judaism which survived in apocalyptic-esoteric sources and in the
writings of Philo and Josephus, was selected, edited, and transmitted
by early Christians. Finally, most of the Jewish-Christian sources
are lost which affirmed the continuity between Judaism and Christianity,
not only with respect to the Scriptures but also with respect to Jewish
ethical and liturgical traditions. 16

If, however, our general picture of pre-70 Judaism is blurred, and
that of early Christian origins is equally vague, then the picture of the
position and function of women in the multifaceted Jewish move-
ments at the beginning of the common era must remain even more in
historical darkness. Yet the available material still gives us some clues
to such a picture. The following must therefore not be misunderstood
to be even a partial reconstruction of women in pre-70 Judaism. It
only points to some “shades” that allow us to see the overall colors in
a somewhat different light.

The Dominant Ethos: The Kingdom and Holy Nation of Israel

Although Exod 19:6 is only very rarely quoted in the literature of
the first century C.E., 20 the common ethos or life praxis of Israel as the
“kingdom of priests and holy nation” determined all groups of first-
century Judaism. 21 All Jewish groups and factions of Greco-Roman
Palestine were concerned with Israel’s life and existence as God’s
holy people who were entrusted with the commandments of the
covention, a whole system of mitzvoth, the revealed rules for salvation.
Temple and Torah were therefore the key symbols of first century
Judaism.

Indeed the worldview of the Jew . . . depended on his [sic]
understanding of Torah. But a fixed written scripture requires
interpretation, and in that world the authority to interpret Torah
meant power; it meant control of redemptive media. . . . But the
terms of Torah serve as symbols in their sacraliry . . . for the
realities which they expressed were the realities of living men
[sic] in living groups who experienced their present situations in
the light of the realities of tradition. 22

The foremost witness and testimony to Israel’s enduring covenant
with God was the sacred Temple in Jerusalem. Its rites and liturgies
testified to Israel’s loyalty to the commandments and stipulations of
this covenant which made the whole land and nation of Israel a
“kingdom of priests” which could not properly be governed by pa-
gans. Although the Romans sought to avoid offenses against the
religious beliefs and sacred rites of the Jews, their presence in and
occupation of Palestine was the greatest offense to God’s rule and
empire established in the covenant with Israel. Therefore, the various
Jewish movements and groups in Palestine were convinced that the
imminent departure of the Romans was certain and God’s interven-
tion on behalf of Israel was immediate.

Exegetes generally agree that the central perspective and “vision”
of Jesus is expressed by the tensive symbol basileia (“kingdom,” “em-
pire”) of God. 23 Jesus and his movement shared this symbol, and the
whole range of expectations evoked by it, with all the other groups in
Palestine. Jews expected either the restoration of the Davidic national
sovereignty of Israel and abolition of Roman colonialism or an apoca-
lyptic universal kingdom of cosmological dimensions with the holy
city and Temple as its center. Many groups hoped for both at the
same time.

An expectation of such an intervention in the not too distant
future based on belief in a revelation of its imminence creates the
apocalyptic consciousness. Clearly all Jews, perhaps most Jews,
were not apocalypticists . . . but apocalypticism . . . was within
the range of normal views of what could happen. It was an inte-
gral part of the social-psychic repertory. 24

Such an apocalyptic hope for both national liberation and sover-
eignty, as well as for transformation of the whole creation by God’s
intervention, is articulated in the first-century apocalypse the Assump-
tion of Moses:

And then his [God’s] kingdom shall appear
throughout all his creation.
And then Satan shall be no more
and sorrow shall depart with him . . .
For the Most High will arise, the eternal God alone
and he will appear to punish the gentiles.
Then Thou, O Israel, shall be happy . . .
and God will exalt thee
and he will cause thee to approach the heavens of the stars. . . 25

The Kaddish, a prayer used in Jewish synagogues at the beginning of
our era, testifies how widespread was such a hope for God’s immedi-
ate intervention:
Magnified and sanctified be his great name
in the world that he has created according to his will.
May he establish his kingdom in your lifetime and in your day
and in the lifetime of all the house of Israel,
even speedily and at a near time.²⁶

Similarly the followers of Jesus prayed:

Father, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come.

The different groups within Judaism answered the burning question of every Jew—What must I do to enter the kingdom of heaven?—quite differently, precisely because no single “orthodox” answer existed at the time.²⁷ The priestly establishment and aristocracy sought to preserve Israel’s national existence as the people of God by preserving the Temple and the capital through collaboration with the Romans. The Essenes established separate communes in towns and cities throughout the country, held everything in common, employed a different ritual of purification, devoted themselves to agricultural labor, and were very strict in their interpretation of Torah. The community of Qumran, for example, withdrew into the desert to create a “holy people” to replace the Temple with its illegitimate rituals and priesthood until the Temple’s sacredness would be restored and Israel would be liberated in the final “holy war.” The Sicarii gathered for military rebellion the impoverished and disenfranchised, the people of the countryside plagued by high Roman and Jerusalem taxes, to liberate Jerusalem and Israel from Roman occupation and desecration. The Pharisees did not separate from the people but sought to realize their vision of a “holy people of priests” by transferring cultic purity and priestly holiness to everyday life. Their chief concerns were for the preservation of the cultic purity of the table community and especially for the observation of the dietary laws. In contrast to the common people they were meticulous in paying their Levitical and priestly tithes, in keeping the sabbath observance and purity laws. Some formed urban religious communities (havuroth) whose members ate their food in rigorous levitical cleanliness and kept company only with those who observed such strict observance of the priestly purity laws. Politically they were split, some participating in the revolutionary unrest, others advocating a politics of pacification.

The apocalyptic prophets who, according to Josephus, appeared in pre-70 Judaism sought to reenact the Exodus by leading people into the desert. John the Baptizer announced God’s wrath and judgment and called the people to undergo a baptism of repentance. Apocalyptic scribes and wisdom teachers not only collected prophetic oracles and the sayings of the fathers but also wrote and collected whole new books of revelation and wisdom. The Sadducees, who were most influential among the upper classes, the landholders, and merchants, claimed to be the legitimate heirs of Israel’s covenant and therefore insisted that since only the written Torah had the authority of revelation, it had to be strictly adhered to. They rejected as innovation the Pharisaic insistence on both written and oral Torah, and rejected all claims to revelatory authority alongside the written Torah as deception.

All these diverse Jewish renewal movements of the time²⁸ were strongly concerned with how to realize in every aspect of life the obligations and hopes of Israel as the kingly and priestly people of God. They sought to hasten God’s intervention on behalf of Israel by scrupulously doing the will of God as revealed in Temple and Torah. Some stressed and strongly utilized the cultic priestly traditions, some claimed prophetic authority, some reenacted the Exodus, and still others integrated wisdom teachings with an apocalyptic perspective. Regardless of differences in lifestyle and theological outlook, however, all these groups were united in their concern for the political existence and holiness of the elected people of Israel. The proclamation of the basileia of God by Jesus and his movement shared this central theological concern for the renewal of the people of Israel as God’s holy elect in the midst of the nations. However, the Jesus movement refused to define the holiness of God’s elected people in cultic terms, redefining it instead as the wholeness intended in creation.

Regarding the role women had in these different groups and movements of the time, one finds no direct information, either in our sources or in the scholarly elaborations of these sources. Since the Sadducees and priestly aristocracy acknowledged only the written Torah as Scripture but not its oral traditions and subsequent interpretations, they presumably defined the role of women according to the written Torah. Probably this was the case, especially with respect to the cultic purity rules for worship and with reference to marriage legislation.

Our information about the group around John the Baptist is scant. Matt 21:32 states that “tax collectors and harlots” believed John. However, the parallel in Luke 7:29f does not mention harlots as “having been baptized with the baptism of John.”²⁹ The account of John’s
beheading in Mark 6:17–29 certainly has a historical basis but has been filled out with historically less reliable lurid details. 30 Herod was not a king, and he was totally dependent on Rome. Moreover, a young woman with Salome's high social status would not have been a “dancing girl” at Herod’s parties. Finally, the characterization of Herodias as “his brother Philip's wife” is ambiguous because Herod had two brothers named Philip.

The Qumranites in turn were inspired by the ethos of the holy war and true Temple, and therefore established a male military camp of priests with strict purity rules and social stratification for full members of the group. Whether or not they engaged in short-term marriages for the sake of the procreation of children, however, is debated. Women's and children's skeletons have been found, but it is not clear what role they had in the community. According to the Manual of Discipline, “All that present themselves are to be assembled together, women and children included. Then all the provisions of the Covenant are to be read out loud to them, and they are to be instructed about all its injunctions” (1QSa 1:4f). 31 The Damascus Rule also mentions “women and children” several times. 32 According to Josephus the Essenes declined to bring wives or slaves into the community because they believed “that the latter practice contributes to injustice and that the former opens the way to a source of dissension” (Antiquities XVIII.21). 33 Philo's presentation of the Essenic attitude toward marriage and women is colored by his own derogatory perspective:

They eschew marriage because they clearly discern it to be the sole or principal danger to the maintenance of the communal life, as well as because they particularly practice continence. For no Essene takes a wife, because a wife is a selfish creature, excessively jealous and adept at beguiling the morals of her husband and seducing him by her continued impostures. ... For he who is either fast bound in the love lures of his wife or under the stress of nature makes his children his first care ceases to be the same to the others and unconsciously has become a different man and passed from freedom into slavery. [Hypothetica 11.14–17]

That Philo's description is antimarriage rather than antiwoman, however, can be seen from his description of the ascetic Therapeutides who are just as committed to their vocation and the study of the Scriptures as the men. 34

Wisdom and apocalyptic literature also developed a negative understanding of women. They were the occasion of sin for angels as well as for men, especially for the wise. Middle-class intellectual men, thus, were warned to be very cautious and suspicious in their dealings with women. However, feminist analysis has shown that such an attitude of middle-class men is not typically “Jewish” but can be found in different ages and various societies. The negative statements of Philo and Josephus might have the same sociological roots. 35 Although the attitude the various groups of “revolutionaries” had toward women is unknown, according to Josephus the women of Jerusalem defended the city against the Roman army, and Romans considered Damascus unsafe because too many women of the city had converted to Judaism. Since these groups recruited their support from the common people and the impoverished of the countryside, their attitude toward women might not have been as strict as that of other groups.

We do not know for sure whether the Pharisees admitted women to their ranks and especially to the table community of the havuroth, 36 but then we know very little about these Pharisaic associations on the whole. As we have seen, according to Neusner, the system of Mishnah came to its conclusion only toward the end of the second century, while the system's generative ideas must have emerged some time before the turn of the first century. These generative ideas are basically congruent with those of the Damascus Rule and the Manual of Discipline in Qumran. According to Neusner this Mishnaic system is thoroughly androcentric, because “in the nature of things” women—like the earth, time, fruits, bed, chair, table, and pots—“are sanctified through the deeds of men.” 37

At the same time, the book of Judith, which was not accepted in the rabbinic canon, must have appealed to the theological imagination of various Jewish groups of the time. As a fictional account written sometime during the first century B.C.E., 38 the book espouses not only wisdom, Exodus, pharisaiic, and zealotic motifs but also calls upon God as the “God of the lowly, the helper of the oppressed, the protector of the forlorn, the savior of those without hope” (9:11). Its theology is consciously modeled after the Exodus narrative where by “the hand of Moses” Israel is liberated (Exod 9 and 14). 39 Its review of Israel's history serves as a remembrance of God's previous interventions in hopeless situations. Such a remembrance engenders the hope that God will again act on behalf of the covenant people. Just as according to Wis 11:1 Sophia-Wisdom “made their affairs prosper through the hand of the holy prophet” so the Lord will again take care of Israel "through the hands" of Judith (8:33; 9:10; 12:4; 13:14, 15; 16:6). Her scrupulous observation of the dietary prescriptions
(10:5) helps her to win the victory over the enemy. Judith’s victorious act and faith are modeled after Moses, who liberated his people from Egypt’s oppressive power, after Jael’s victory over Sisera (Judg 4:21) and David’s beheading of Goliath (1 Sam 17:51).

The heroic biography of Judith tells us several things about the position and role of women at the time when the book was written and read. Judith had inherited her husband’s considerable estate and had managed it through a woman steward (8:10). She was free to reject remarriage and, like the Thracides, to dedicate her life to prayer, asceticism, and the celebration of the sabbath. She had the authority to summon the elders of the town and to rebuke them. She censured their theological misjudgment and misconduct in the face of the enemy: “Listen to me, rulers of the people of Bethulia! What you have said to the people today is not right!” (8:11). No mention is made that she was veiled when leaving her house. To the contrary it is stressed that all who saw her were struck by her beauty:

> When they saw her, and noted how her face was altered and her clothing changed, they greatly admired her beauty. [10:7]

In a similar fashion Holofernes and all his servants said:

> There is not such a woman from one end of the earth to the other, either for beauty of face or wisdom of speech! [11:21]

At the news of her victory the high priest and the senate of Israel come from Jerusalem “to see” Judith and to greet her in blessing:

> You are the exultation of Jerusalem, you are the great glory of Israel, you are the great pride of our nation! [15:9]

The victory march to Jerusalem is described as a “victory dance” of the women of Israel crowned with olive wreaths and following Judith. Like Miriam, Judith sings a “new song” leading all the women in the dance.

> And she went before all the people in the dance, leading all the women, while all the men of Israel followed, bearing their arms and wearing garlands and with songs on their lips. [15:13]

Judith continued to feast with the people in Jerusalem for three months, before returning home to her estate. She set her maid free, but remained unmarried, although “many desired to marry her.” Like the patriarchs of old she lived as a famous woman to the advanced age of 105 years. Before her death she made a will and distributed her property to her husband’s and her own kin and was mourned for seven days by the house of Israel. Such final acts of largesse and features of greatness were typical of the ending of heroic biography.

It would be a serious mistake, however, to read such heroic biography in moralistic terms. True, Judith is a woman who fights with a woman’s weapons, yet far from being defined by her “femininity,” she uses it to her own ends. Far from accepting such circumscription by feminine beauty and behavior, she uses it against those male enemies who reduce her to mere feminine beauty and in so doing seriously misjudge her real power. Intelligent wisdom, observant piety, shrewd observation, and faithful dedication to the liberation of her people are Judith’s true definition and personal assets. Her guileful remarks, her enticing beauty, and her treacherous planning are highlighted in the story in an ironic fashion.

> And Holofernes said to her, “God has done well to send you before the people, to lend strength to our hands and to bring destruction upon those who have slighted my Lord. You are not only beautiful in appearance but wise in speech.” [11:22–23]

The male enemies walk into her trap because they are beguiled by her attractiveness and femininity, but have not the faintest idea of her religious and national self-identity and strength. In taking her just as “woman”—and no more—they walk into the trap and their own destruction, which they want to avoid by all means:

> Who can despise these people, who have women like this among them? Surely not a man of them had better be left alive, for if we let them go they will be able to ensnare the whole world. [10:19]

Because the male enemies see women only as appendages and assets to men, they do not recognize that their true foes are not the men of Israel who are characterized as weak and timorous. Holofernes and his servants rightly assume that they will have a major part in the dramatic story, but, because of their masculine arrogance and stupidity, they do not recognize that their part is the “villain’s role.” Only when one sees the “feminist” irony of the story can one perceive Judith’s greatness and appeal to the Jewish imagination of the time:

> Judith is no weakling. Her courage, her trust in God, and her wisdom—all lacking in her male counterparts—save the day for Israel. Her use of deceit and specifically of her sexuality may
However, Judith’s dramatic victory is seen as the victory of all the people. It reveals the God of the oppressed and hopeless as the “God with us” (13:11). The risk, wisdom, and courage of a woman have saved the people of God, once more. The woman Judith does not become a victim and does not allow her people to accept the role of victim. In the name of God she struggles against the political power of oppression successfully. Wisdom has prevailed over brute power; the military helplessness of Israel over the military prowess of the oppressor; persistence and the faithful, intelligent courage of a woman over the timid resignation and the stupid boasting of powerful men. Anyone who read this story at the beginning of our era must have immediately understood it as a mirror image of Israel’s situation under Roman occupation. In such a hopeless situation the image of a wise and strong woman could incite Israel’s imagination and engender hope and endurance in the religious-national struggle. This story of a woman could have appealed to the Essenes, the Pharisees, and to the revolutionary-prophetic groups. The first Christian writer to mention it is Clement of Rome, who points to the example of the “blessed Judith” in order to show that “many women, empowered by God’s grace, have performed deeds worthy of men” (1 Clem 55.3.4). It seems greatly misleading, therefore, to picture Jewish women of the first century in particular, and Jewish theology in general, in predominantly negative terms. The book of Judith—whether written by a woman or by a man—gives us a clue to a quite different tradition and situation in first-century Judaism.

The Basileia Vision of Jesus as the Praxis of Inclusive Wholeness

The book of Judith mediates the atmosphere in which Jesus preached and in which the discipleship of equals originated. Jesus and several of his first followers were at first disciples of John the Baptist and received his baptism of repentance. Jesus, however, seems to have separated from the group around John because of a prophetic-visionary experience which convinced him that Satan’s power was broken, the eschatological war was won (Luke 10:18). Where John announces, “The axe is laid to the root of the trees” (Matt 3:10), Jesus proclaims: “the basileia of God is in the midst of you” (Luke 17:21). The difference between John and Jesus is not a “break” but a shift of emphasis. While John announces God’s judgment and wrath preceding the basileia and eschatological restitution of Israel, Jesus stresses that, in his own ministry and movement, the eschatological salvation and wholeness of Israel as the elect people of God is already experienced availability. His reply to John’s question, “Are you the one who is to come? . . .”, underlines this experiential aspect of the basileia by evoking a whole range of Isaianic images:

Go and tell John wha: you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. [Luke 7:22 (Q)]

This section of Q about the relationship between John and Jesus not only emphasizes that Jesus restores the humanity of people but also stresses that different interpretations of the eschatological situation result in very different lifestyles. John’s lifestyle is that of an apocalyptic ascetic while Jesus is seen by people as “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 7:34 [Q]). The pre-Markan collection of controversy dialogues explicitly mentions that the disciples of John and the Pharisees were fasting while the disciples of Jesus did not do so (Mark 2:18ff). The oldest stratum of the story argues that guests at a wedding feast do not fast. The experience of the basileia’s salvation in the presence and ministry of Jesus does not allow for traditional ascetic practices. Only at a later time does the Christian community reintroduce the practice of fasting, justifying it with reference to the absence of Jesus.

It is the festive table-sharing at a wedding feast, and not the askēsis of the “holy man,” that characterizes Jesus and his movement. Its central image is that of a festive meal. The parables speak of the basileia of God in ever-new images of a sumptuous, glorious banquet celebration. Just as the Essenes and Pharisaic associations, the Jesus movement gathered around the table and shared their food and drink. Yet while the Pharisees sought to realize Israel’s calling as a “nation of priests” by carefully observing the ritual purity of the “holy table” and by eating their meals “like priests,” Jesus and his movement did not observe these purity regulations and even shared their meals with “sinners.” The central symbolic actualization of the basileia vision of Jesus is not the cultic meal but the festive table of a royal banquet or wedding feast. This difference in emphasis was
probably one of the major conflict points between the Jesus movement and the Pharisaic movement. None of the stories told by or about Jesus evidences the concern for ritual purity and moral holiness so typical of other groups in Greco-Roman Palestine. While Jesus shares their vision of Israel as the “elect people and nation of Yahweh” (Exod 19:5f), he does not share their understanding that the “holiness” of Temple and Torah is the locus of God’s power and presence.

Although Jesus and his movement shared the belief of all groups in Greco-Roman Palestine that Israel is God’s elect people, and were equally united with the other groups in the hope of God’s intervention on behalf of Israel, they realized that God’s basileia was already in their midst. Exegetes agree that it is the mark of Jesus’ preaching and ministry that he proclaimed the basileia of God as future and present, eschatological vision and experiential reality. This characteristic tension between future and present, between wholeness and brokenness is generally acknowledged, even though it is interpreted or resolved differently. In my opinion, however, this tension can only be perceived and maintained when the reference point of the tensive symbol basileia is the general Jewish ethos of the time, and when the history and community of Israel is its focus. The Jesus movement in Palestine does not totally reject the validity of Temple and Torah as symbols of Israel’s election but offers an alternative interpretation of them by focusing on the people itself as the locus of God’s power and presence. By stressing the present possibility for Israel’s wholeness, the Jesus movement integrates prophetic-apocalyptic and wisdom theology insofar as it fuses eschatological hope with the belief that the God of Israel is the creator of all human beings, even the maimed, the unclean, and the sinners. Human holiness must express human wholeness, cultic practice must not be set over and against humanizing praxis. Wholeness spells holiness and holiness manifests itself precisely in human wholeness. Everyday life must not be measured by the sacred holiness of the Temple and Torah, but Temple and Torah praxis must be measured and evaluated by whether or not they are inclusive of every person in Israel and whether they engender the wholeness of every human being. Everydayness, therefore, can become revelatory, and the presence and power of God’s sacred wholeness can be experienced in every human being.

Since the reality of the basileia for Jesus spells not primarily holiness but wholeness, the salvation of God’s basileia is present and experientially available whenever Jesus casts out demons (Luke 11:20); heals the sick and the ritually unclean, tells stories about the lost who are found, of the uninvited who are invited, or of the last who will be first. The power of God’s basileia is realized in Jesus’ table community with the poor, the sinners, the tax collectors, and prostitutes—with all those who “do not belong” to the “holy people,” who are somehow deficient in the eyes of the righteous. It is like dough that has been leavened, but not yet transformed into bread, like the fetus in the womb, but not yet transformed in birth to a child. The future can be experienced in the healings, the inclusive discipleship, and the parabolic words of Jesus, but Jesus still hopes and expects the future inbreaking of God’s basileia, when death, suffering, and injustice finally will be overcome and patriarchal marriage will be no more (cf. Mark 12:18–27 and parallels). Jesus’ praxis and vision of the basileia is the mediation of God’s future into the structures and experiences of his own time and people.

However, this future is mediated and promised to all members of Israel. No one is exempt. Everyone is invited. Women as well as men, prostitutes as well as Pharisees. The parable of the “Great Supper” (cf. Matt 22:1–14; Luke 14:16–24 [Q; Gosp. Thom. log. 64]) jolts the hearer into recognizing that the basileia includes everyone. It warns that only those who were “first” invited and then rejected the invitation will be excluded. Not the holiness of the elect but the wholeness of all is the central vision of Jesus. Therefore, his parables also take their images from the world of women. His healings and exorcisms make women whole. His announcement of “eschatological reversal”—many who are first will be last and those last will be first (Mark 10:31; Matt 19:30; 20:16; Luke 13:30)—applies also to women and to their impairment by patriarchal structures.

That the wholeness and well-being of everyone reveals God’s presence and power comes to the fore especially in those basileia sayings that are considered mos: “authentic”: the beatitudes and eschatological reversal sayings, the table community of Jesus with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus’ “breaking of the sabbath law,” and his authoritative reinterpretation of the Torah in the antitheses. It must be noted that I am not seeking to “distill” the most “authentic” tradition of Jesus-sayings in such a way as to separate Jesus from his own people, Israel, and his first followers. The Jesus movement is not conceivable without Jesus, of course, but it is also inconceivable without Jesus’ followers. Since I am interested in laying open the tension points of the Jesus movement with the dominant patriarchal culture in which it took shape, it is important to see who the people are for whom the basileia is claimed. Such tension points should not be misconstrued as anti-Judaism, however, since Jesus and his followers
were Jews and claimed their election as the Israel of God. Of course
the alternative basileia vision of Jesus and his movement created ten-
sions but so did those of Amos and John the Baptizer, for that matter.

The earliest gospel strata assert again and again that Jesus claimed
the basileia for three distinct groups of people: (1) the destitute poor; (2)
the sick and crippled; and (3) tax collectors, sinners, and prostitutes.

1. Jesus announces that the basileia is given to the impoverished,
while Q already claims the “beatitudes” for the Jesus community.
That the first beatitude promises the basileia to the socially impover-
ished of Israel is underlined by the second and third: “Blessed are
those that hunger, for they shall be satisfied.” Blessed are those who
weep now, for they shall laugh.” How dire the poverty of women
was may be illustrated by the story of the poor widow who “gives her
whole living” to the Temple treasury. “Her whole living” was “two
copper coins which make a penny” (Mark 12:41–44).54 Most of those
who are poor, who do not know where they will get food to still their
hunger, who cry and hear the crying of their children, then as now,
are women and children dependent on women. It is not clear
whether or not the “woe” sayings against the rich (some of whom are
women), which parallel the beatitudes in Q, are original or were
added later.55 Nevertheless they underline the eschatological reversal
brought about by the basileia. The pre-Markan reversal saying Mark
10:25 also emphasizes that such an eschatological warning was ad-
dressed to the rich very early: It stresses that it is impossible for some-
one who is rich to enter the basileia of God. This eschatological re-
versal is also announced in the pre-Lukan song of Mary, the Galilean:

God has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree;
God has filled the hungry with good things,
and has sent the rich empty away. [Luke 1:52f]56

Thus the oldest traditions elaborate concretely Jesus’ reply to John
that “the poor have good news preached to them.” Those who are
dying of starvation and are desperate because they see no way out of
their poverty into the future are promised the basileia. The promise of
the basileia to the beggared and destitute affirms that God will make
their cause God’s own concern. God is on their side against all those
who trample down their rights. The understanding that God is on
the side of the impoverished has its roots in the covenant of God with
Israel. Even though in antiquity—as today—poverty was seen as a
personal failure (thus justifying despisal of the poor), in Israel pov-

erty was understood as injustice. Since Yahweh is the owner of the
land and has given it into the care of all the people, the poor of Israel
are cheated out of their rightful inheritance. Therefore, the prophets
ever tire of announcing that God is on the side of the poor and will
take up their cause (Deut 15:7–11; Amos 2:6–8). The promise of the
basileia to the poor, among whom are also women, should therefore
not be misconstrued as a future consolation prize but as proclamation
of the poor’s rights and of God’s justice. In other words, the poor do
have a share in God’s future, while the rich and prosperous do not
because they are consuming their inheritance now. Neither the mag-
nificat of Mary nor the beatitudes speak of punishment for the rich
but rather of eschatological reversal. This life and the life of the basileia
are seen as a continuous whole.

The Q community added a fourth beatitude that refers all the beati-
tudes to the Christian community.57 It pronounces blessing for those
members of the Jesus movement who are persecuted, reviled, hated
and excluded from their Jewish communities. Those who have been
declared as no longer belonging to the elect people of Israel are told
that they will share in the eschatological salvation. However it is clear
at this stage that the members of the Jesus movement are still socially
poor, destitute, and starving. Only Matthew’s beatitudes expand the
concept beyond social poverty to a religious attitude that can be
shared by poor and rich.

2. The basileia of God is experientially available in the healing activ-
ity of Jesus. While there is much discussion as to whether miracles are
scientifically possible and whether the miracle stories are historically
“authentic,” there is insufficient attention paid to the vision of being
human that is realized by the power of God active in Jesus. The
basileia vision of Jesus makes people whole, healthy, cleansed, and
strong. It restores people’s humanity and life. The salvation of the
basileia is not confined to the soul but spells wholeness for the total
person in her/his social relations.58 The exorcisms of Jesus acknow-
lledge that there are dehumanizing powers in this world that are not
under our control. However, Jesus is not so much concerned with
their polluting power as with their debilitating dehumanizing power.
What we today call oppressive power structures and dehumanizing
power systems, apocalyptic language calls “evil spirits,” “Satan,”
“Beelzebul,” demons. Therefore, if Jesus in the power of God casts
out evil spirits and overcomes the evil powers that keep people in
bondage, then the liberating power of God, “the basileia [has come
(eiphasen) upon you]” (Luke 11:20).59 If the pre-Lukan tradition iden-
tifies Mary of Magdala as a woman “from whom he has cast out seven
demons" (cf. Mark 16:9 and Luke 8:2), then she is not thereby characterized as a "sinner," but as someone who has experienced the unlimited (seven) liberating power of the basileia in her own life.

Those who were maimed, crippled, and sick were either poor or became impoverished through death and illness. The story of the woman "who had a flow of blood for twelve years" (Mark 5:25–34) shows this dramatically.60 "She had spent all that she had" by consulting "many physicians" but "she was not better but rather grew worse." These few terse words narrate forcefully the economic impoverishment of the incurably ill. However, this woman’s predicament was not just incurable illness but also permanent uncleanness. She was not only unclean herself, but polluted everyone and everything with which she came in contact (Lev 15:19–31). For twelve years this woman had been "polluted" and barred from the congregation of the "holy people." No wonder she risked financial ruin and economic destitution to become healthy, and therefore cultically clean, again. Jesus calls her "daughter" of Israel and announces: Go in peace, that is, be happy and whole (shalom). You are healed.

This story was probably interlinked with the story of the daughter of Jairus, one of the rulers of the synagogue, not only because of the catchword twelve but also because it proclaims the same understanding of wholeness and holiness. Jesus touches the dead girl and thus becomes "unclean" (cf. Num 19:11–13). Yet the power of the basileia does not rest in holiness and cultic purity. The girl gets up and walks, she rises to womanhood (Jewish girls became marriageable at twelve). The young woman who begins to menstruate, like the older woman who experiences menstruation as a pathological condition, are both "given" new life. The life-creating powers of women manifested in "the flow of blood" are neither "bad" nor cut off in death but are "restored" so that women can "go and live in shalom," in the eschatological well-being and happiness of God.61

The synoptic sabbath healings of Jesus present a special difficulty to exegesis, because they seem to narrate occasions where Jesus "willfully" breaks the sabbath commandment of the Torah.62 Exegesis are at pains to explain that the pre-Markan (Mark 3:1–5) and pre-Lukan (Luke 14:1–6) sabbath healings attempt to elucidate Jesus' general theological principle that "to do good," "to heal," and "to save life" overrules the sabbath Torah. Yet such a principle would have been conceded by all the other Jewish interpreters of the law who agreed, more or less, that one is allowed on the sabbath to "save the life" of either humans or animals. Moreover, the healing stories do not support the general theological maxim implied in the question of the controversy dialogue. The man with the withered hand as well as the man who had dropsy were not critically ill and easily could have waited one day longer to be healed. The offensiveness of the sabbath healings lies precisely in the fact that Jesus breaks the sabbath law even though it is not called for at all. To have him do so merely to teach his opponents a lesson appears to me to be later Christian interpretation.

I would suggest that Luke 13:10–17, the story about the "double bent woman," rather then Mark 3:1–5, represents the oldest tradition of the sabbath healings. Exegesis rule this assumption out on form-critical grounds when they argue that the controversy-dialogue in this story is not interwoven with the controversy of the scholastic teaching dialogue, but only later appended to it. Yet it is possible that the healing story (Luke 13:10–13) was originally independent and was expanded to a dialogue at later stage. The dialogue does not argue that "in order to save life" Jesus broke the sabbath Torah—the woman was bent for eighteen years—but it argues that he did so in order to make her whole and "free her from her infirmity." The reference point is not that one was allowed to save an animal in danger on the sabbath but that it was necessary to water ox and ass on the sabbath. To be sure, some Jews might have disputed such a "lax" interpretation of the sabbath Torah although it must have occurred. However, what is "disturbing" here is not a "lax" or "strict" interpretation of the law, but the fact that Jesus' response seems not to have heard the objection of the "ruler of the synagogue," whose precise point was that there were six days on which one could come to be healed, leaving no need to "come on the sabbath day to be healed." The dialogue starts and leads us to seek for another "clue" to understand the story. It forces us to ask, why did Israel observe the sabbath?

Sabbath observance was the ritual symbolization of Israel's election as a holy people since the exile. In the pre-Christian book of Jubilees, which also had great influence in Qumran, the sabbath is kept in heaven and on earth as a sign that the Jews are God's people and Yahweh is their God. Israel keeps sabbath by abstaining from all work, and so "to eat and to drink, and to bless Him who has created all things as he has blessed and sanctified unto Himself a peculiar people above all peoples" (Jub 2:20f). While his opponents insist on a complete "rest from work" on the sabbath day (cf. Luke 13:14), Jesus made it possible for the woman and the people to fulfill the purpose of the sabbath rest from work: the praise of God, the creator of the world and the liberator of this people. The woman who "was made
straight” “praised God,” while the common people (ochlos) were happy (echairen) about all the “glorious things that came into being through him. Therefore, the woman can truly be called “a daughter of Abraham” (cf. Luke 3:8 [Q]: children), a full member of the sanctified people of Israel.

A last aspect of this healing story is significant. The illness of the woman was caused by Satan. This daughter of Israel was in a bondage that deformed her whole bodily being for eighteen years. In helping her, Jesus freed her from Satan’s power and restored God’s creation. Jesus acted according to the intention of the sabbath Torah. Therefore, joy and praise are appropriate. Jesus’ sabbath healing is not an offense against the sanctified people of Israel, but rather enables the daughter of Abraham, together with the community of angels, to celebrate God, the creator of all people and the liberator of the chosen people of Israel.

This interpretation is confirmed by the pre-Markan controversy dialogue Mark 2:23–28. The statement that “the Human Being [Son of Man] is lord even of the sabbath” (2:28) probably is a later addition by the church that transmitted this story. The saying that “the sabbath was made for human persons but not humans for the sabbath” is most likely an original saying of Jesus that is the climax of the whole story. In this story it is not Jesus but his disciples who are accused of breaking the sabbath. It is not illness but hunger that leads them to do so. Jesus points to David and his followers who not only broke the sabbath law but ate sacred bread (although they were not priests). While the reference to Scripture reasons with the Pharisees, Jesus’ word in v. 27 stresses the deepest intention of the sabbath law: it is created so that people can praise, in festive eating and drinking, the goodness of Israel’s creator God. The disciples of Jesus, who, like the very poor, have no food but the ears of grain that they pluck and eat, do fulfill the intentions of the Torah. They keep the sabbath, that is, they eat to the praise of God, although they have almost nothing with which to do so. The story then tells what it means that the “sabbath came into being for human beings, and not humans for the sake of the sabbath.” It would be misleading to insist on only one half of the sabbath commandment—the command not to work—while perverting the other—eating and drinking in honor of God—by letting people starve.

3. While the sick and possessed are easily seen as belonging to the poor and starving to whom the basileia is promised, exegetes usually see the moral but not the social predicament of tax collectors, sinners, and prostitutes. They almost unanimously agree that the historical

Jesus and the earliest Jesus movement in Palestine associated with tax collectors, sinners, and prostitutes, although we have only scant traditions for this information. Yet we can still trace redactional tendencies in the traditioning process and in the Gospels that seek to make this accusation against the Jesus movement more understandable and acceptable. Jesus’ movement and praxis included everyone. Even prostitutes and tax collectors shared in its community gathered around the table. This historical praxis is still reflected in the Markan (2:15) and Lukan (15:2) redactional overlay as well as in the Q tradition (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34). It also comes to the fore in the provocative saying: “Truly I say to you, the tax collectors and harlots go into the basileia of God before you” (Matt 21:31 [5M]).

Usually the designations tax collectors, sinners, and prostitutes are understood in a moralizing sense. Yet sinner is not an inclusive concept for tax collectors and prostitutes. The tradition, especially in Luke, shows the tendency to identify the prostitute with sinner, but these two notions are not interchangeable. It is also important to recognize that in a patriarchal society prostitution is the worst form of “pollution” (sin) for a woman, although prostitution is an essential function of patriarchy. Since prophetic times the notion “prostitute” had acquired religious theological overtones in Israel, insofar as the “harlot” was the paradigm of the “unfaithful people Israel” and of their “whoredom” with other gods in pagan idolatry. That the harlots will enter into the basileia ahead of the faithful and righteous Israelite is outrageous, to say the least.

The phrase “tax collectors, sinners, and prostitutes,” however, characterizes not just a morally reprehensible group of people but even more a class whose destitute, they must engage in “dishonorable” professions in order to survive. Although because of Luke 19 we have an image of tax collectors as “rich,” most of the tax collectors who did the actual work were impoverished, or were slaves employed by a “tax agency,” and quickly dismissed if problems arose. Palestine was plagued by a very oppressive tax system: Roman tax agents gathered, as direct taxes, the produce and toll tax; servants of the high-priestly aristocracy of Jerusalem collected the tithe as their direct share in the harvest, leaving very little for the country priests and levites; indirect taxes, import and export taxes, and taxes on all produce and leases in Jerusalem were farmed out to the highest bidders. Since the custom and toll taxes could be collected, even when one was merely going from one village to the other, harassment by tax collectors was not only annoying but also very expensive, especially since tax collectors had to take in more than the official fee i
they wanted to make a living. Levi was probably such a subordinate tax collector because he actually sat at the tollbooth (Mark 2:14). Throughout antiquity tax collectors were likened to robbers and thieves, and treated with contempt for their coarseness. Their harassment and extortion were notorious. In Judaism tax collectors were, in a special way, “unclean,” and often hated as agents of Rome’s colonial power.

As is the case today, so in antiquity most prostitutes were impoverished unskilled women. Found mostly in the cities, they often lived in brothels or houses connected with a temple. Prostitutes usually were slaves, daughters who had been sold or rented out by their parents, wives who were rented out by their husbands, poor women, exposed girls, the divorced and widowed, single mothers, captives of war or piracy, women bought for soldiers—in short, women who could not derive a livelihood from their position in the patriarchal family or those who had to work for a living but could not engage in “middle”- or “upper”-class professions. In Palestine, torn by war, colonial taxation, and famine, the number of such women must have been great.

The notion of “sinner” can have a whole range of meanings. It can characterize people who did not keep the Torah, whether in the stricter Sadducean or the wider Pharisaic senses; those who, in our terms, were criminals (in Israel, political and religious law were one and the same); or those who worked in disreputable jobs such as fruit-sellers, swineherders, garlic peddlers, bartenders, seamen, public announcers, tax collectors, pimps, prostitutes, servants, and other service occupations, all of which were deemed “polluting” or “unclean” by theologians and interpreters of the Torah. All categories of sinners were in one way or another marginal people who were badly paid and often abused. The few “rich” tax collectors or prostitutes were exceptions and, as such, proved the oppressive character of the societal-religious system.

The story of the woman who washed Jesus’ feet (Luke 7:36–50) has a very complex tradition-history that is far from being adequately resolved. It seems that already at a pre-Lukan stage of the tradition, some elements in the story of the “woman anointing Jesus’ head” (Mark 14:3–11; John 12:1–8) had been taken over into the narrative. Such elements are probably the “alabaster flask of ointment” (7:37c), the anointing (7:38c), and the name of the Pharisee, Simon. Moreover, the parable might originally have been told independently, but if such was the case it must have been taken into the story at a very early stage. It seems, however, that the contrast between the Pharisee and the woman, as well as the emphasis on the forgiveness of sins, is the work of redaction, since later Christian authors emphasize the enmity between the Pharisees and Jesus’ disciples. Luke especially stresses over and over again that “Jesus called sinners to repentance.” Therefore, it was probably he who characterized the woman as “a woman of the city, a sinner,” that is, a prostitute.

The original story is neither a story about a rich prostitute nor about a prostitute at all. The relationship between Jesus and the Pharisee is that between friends and colleagues, and Jesus is assumed to be “a prophet” as we see in the earliest Q christology. I would therefore suggest that the original story may have read as follows:

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him and Jesus went to the Pharisee’s house and sat at table. And behold a woman having learned that he was sitting at table in the Pharisee’s house, and standing behind him at his feet weeping, began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it he said to himself: “If this man were a prophet, he would have known what sort of a woman this is who is touching him; that she is a sinner.” In response Jesus said to him: “I have something to say to you,” and he answered, “What is it, Teacher?” “A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay he remitted their debt, graciously. Now which of them will love him more?” And turning to the woman he said to her: “Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace (shalom).”

Some such story must have circulated very early among the Jesus disciples, probably claiming Jesus himself for its message. The story does not say what kind of sinner the woman was—she could have been a criminal, a ritually unclean or morally bad person, a prostitute, or simply the “wife of a notorious sinner.” That the early Christian movement soon saw both this story and the story of the woman with a flow of blood as “baptismal” stories is evident from the formulaic statement “your faith has saved you” which alludes to early Christian baptismal tradition. That this statement is a later addition in both stories is obvious, however, since “the faith” of the woman was not mentioned previously. The stories assert, then, that Jesus and his movement invited into their table community not only women but even notorious and well-known sinners. Sinners, prostitutes, beggars, tax collectors, the ritually polluted, the crippled, and the impoverished—in short, the scum of Palestinian society—constituted the majority of Jesus’ followers. These are the last who have become the
first, the starving who have been satisfied, the uninvited who have been invited. And many of these were women.

But how could Jesus have been a prophet of God, and his movement a prophetic movement in Israel making the basileia experientially available, when this inclusiveness ran counter to everything previously thought to be the will of God revealed in Torah and Temple? Was it not Beelzebul/Satan in the guise of God’s prophet who was at work? That the praxis of Jesus and his disciples offended the religious sensibilities not only of their fellow Jews but also of later Christians is apparent when one examines the understanding of sin and forgiveness. While the earliest Jesus traditions eschew any understanding of the ministry and death of Jesus in cultic terms as atonement for sins, it was precisely this interpretation which soon took root in some segments of the early Christian movement. Yet such an interpretation of Jesus’ death as atonement for sins is much later than is generally assumed in New Testament scholarship.69 The notion of atoning sacrifice does not express the Jesus movement’s understanding and experience of God but is a later interpretation of the violent death of Jesus in cultic terms. The God of Jesus is not a God who demands atonement and whose wrath needs to be placated by human sacrifice or ritual. C. Ochs has elaborated that the patriarchal God of Abraham and of Christians is judgmental and demands the sacrifice of the only son.70 Although such an interpretation of the death of Jesus is soon found in early Christian theology, the death of Jesus was not a sacrifice and was not demanded by God but brought about by the Romans.

The Sophia-God of Jesus and the Discipleship of Women

The Jesus movement articulates a quite different understanding of God because it had experienced in the praxis of Jesus a God who called not Israel’s righteous and pious but its religiously deficient and its social underdogs. In the ministry of Jesus God is experienced as all-inclusive love, letting the sun shine and the rain fall equally on the righteous and on sinners (Matt 5:45). This God is a God of graciousness and goodness who accepts everyone and brings about justice and well-being for everyone without exception.71 The creator God accepts all members of Israel, and especially the impoverished, the crippled, the outcast, the sinners and prostitutes, as long as they are prepared to engage in the perspective and power of the basileia. Conversely, it is stressed: “No one is good but God alone” (Mark 10:18b; Luke 18:19b).

1. This inclusive graciousness and goodness of God is spelled out again and again in the parables.72 It has already been shown that the parable of the creditor who freely remits the debts of those who cannot pay articulates this gracious goodness of God by stressing that women, even public sinners, can be admitted to the Jesus movement in the conviction that “they will love more.” The double simile of the shepherd searching for the lost sheep and of the woman searching for her lost silver coin, in all likelihood was already taken over by Luke from Q in its present form.73 The Q community used these similes to reply to the accusation that “Jesus receives sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2; cf. Mark 2:16b for a similar accusation), justifying it with the application that “in heaven there is joy over the sinner who repents.” The original form of the double story was probably parable rather than simile, since it did not include this explicit “application” to the situation of the community. Like the original story, this application stresses the joy of “finding the lost” but no longer emphasizes the search. As Jesus might have told this parable, it would have jolted the hearer into recognition: this is how God acts—like the man searching for his lost sheep, like the woman tirelessly sweeping for her lost coin. Jesus thus imagines God as a woman searching for one of her ten coins, as a woman looking for money that is terribly important to her. In telling the parable of the woman desperately searching for her money, Jesus articulates God’s own concern, a concern that determines Jesus’ own praxis for table community with sinners and outcasts. The parable then challenges the hearer: do you agree with the attitude of God expressed in the woman’s search for her lost “capital”?

The basileia parable of “the laborers in the vineyard” (Matt 20:1-16) articulates the equality of all rooted in the gracious goodness of God.74 Its Sitz im Leben is similar to that of the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin, namely, the Jesus movement’s table sharing with outcasts. The social world of the parable is that of a first-century Palestinian landowner who, in order to save money, hired laborers day by day and hour by hour during the harvest. To a contemporary hearer of this parable the householder would clearly be God, and the vineyard, Israel. The contrast between the parable’s world and the actual labor practices and exploitation of the poor laborers—daily or hourly—underlines the gracious goodness and justice of God. Those who are last receive a whole day’s payment. Yet the story does not end here, for it also expresses the offense taken by some of the first