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Women Workers in the New Testament

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Alice Matthews

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Women Workers in the New Testament

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People everywhere have always worked. And when we turn to the New Testament we find women engaged in all kinds of employment. For some it was the work of bearing and rearing children. For others it was bringing aid to folks in need. And for still others it was as businesswomen engaged in profitable enterprises. For many it was some form of ministry for Christ and his kingdom.

Women Happily Accept Significant Work (Luke 1)

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When we open the Gospel according to Luke, we immediately meet an elderly woman named Elizabeth, the wife of a Jewish priest, and a young girl named Mary, engaged to marry a carpenter. Barren Elizabeth is now six months pregnant in her old age and will later give birth to John the Baptist. Mary, likely in her early teens, is also pregnant, but uniquely by God's Spirit, not by sex with any man. After her encounter with God's angel and her agreement to become the mother of God's Messiah, Mary journeys on foot the seventy miles from the province of Galilee in the north to the highlands of Judea to visit her cousin Elizabeth. For both women their pregnancies were supernatural.

We may not think of bearing and rearing children as "work" and wonder why an article on women in the workplace should begin with two pregnant women. But in both cases, these women were partnering in God's work to invade a broken and sinful world and reverse the grip of evil on people's lives. This partnership required real work. There would be physical work in bearing and rearing these special boys, to be sure. But Mary and Elizabeth embraced the prospect of this work joyfully. Mary captured the significance God intended for her work in her song that we call the Magnificat:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. For he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant...He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. **(Luke 1:46-53)**

Giving birth was not the only meaningful work Mary did in her lifetime. She also played a role in Jesus' adult ministry. Yet the part of her story that inspires us today is how she trusted God's purposes despite the difficult work it would mean for her.

Women Make Jesus' Work Possible (Luke 4:14-19)

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Jesus, now in his thirties, "filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone" (**Luke 4:14-15**). Going throughout Galilee's cities and villages proclaiming God's Good News (**Luke 4:18-19**), "the twelve [male disciples] were with him as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources" (**Luke 8:1-3**).

These women, healed in some way by Jesus, were part of that traveling band following the Lord around Galilee. The women's self-appointed work was to care for Jesus' physical needs in his travels. Given the patriarchal society of first-century Palestine in which women were most often sequestered, have you ever wondered how these women could travel with Jesus and his followers without creating any hint of scandal? The fact that they had wealth made them benefactors with the freedom to come and go in public without being censured. If you've ever wondered how Jesus and his followers could survive for three years without an obvious source of income, look no further than to these wealthy women.

Jesus' Teachings Include Women

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The four gospel accounts of Jesus' earthly ministry contain the mention of more women than virtually any other secular writing of that era. In them we hear Jesus praise women for their faith (the Canaanite woman in **Matthew 15:28**; Martha in **John 11:26-27**) or for their generosity (a poor widow's gift, **Mark 12:43-44**). He included them in his teachings (about a woman baking bread, **Matthew 13:33**; or a woman hunting for a lost coin, **Luke 15:8-10**). Contrary to custom, he spoke freely to women in public (**John 8:10-11**) and taught theology to them (**Luke 10:39**). He entrusted them with the message of the resurrection while the male disciples hid in fear of the Jewish authorities.

In contrast to some of the disciples, no woman deserted him, betrayed him, or failed to believe his words. Because of their faith, their understanding, and their fidelity, women were often examples to the men. And after his ascension to God's heaven, these same faithful women were with the men in prayer in an upper room in Jerusalem, waiting for the promise of God's Spirit to prepare them for ongoing ministry.

Some folks suggest that because we don't hear of these women later in the New Testament, they were never more than benefactors to Jesus in his earthly ministry. But neither do we hear of all but two of the disciples in the rest of the New Testament. Yet we know the strong tradition that Thomas went to India as an

evangelist and church-planter. We assume that all of them (except the suicide Judas) scattered in every direction, carrying the Gospel of Jesus to the ends of the known earth.

The book of Acts carries, initially, the work of Peter as leader of the early church in Jerusalem (with the baton soon passed to James, the brother of Jesus, not James the disciple). Then the story picks up with the apostle Paul, working sometimes with Barnabas, sometimes with Silas. And it is here that we find the fascinating stories of women in a variety of professions who became followers of Jesus and ardent workers in the new churches scattered around the Roman Empire.

This is the true story of five working women, whose original professions were totally diverse, but who ended up in the same surprising position. Our authority for their stories is the apostle Paul. We find their stories in two places: in Luke's account of the early Christian churches, in particular as he traveled with the apostle Paul, then in the letters of the apostle.

The Businesswoman Lydia (Acts 16)

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Our first story is about a woman in the northwest Turkish town of Thyatira, known for its guilds of craftsmen, especially the guild of the professionals knowledgeable in the production and sale of expensive purple dye. Lydia was a member of that guild. We don't know how it was that a woman had become one of those professionals, but when we first meet her, she had crossed into northeastern Greece and had established her business base in the Roman city of Philippi. As a seller of rare and expensive purple dye, Lydia must have had enough wealth to buy into that franchise.

We learn in Acts 16 that, while born and reared to believe in the gods and goddesses of Thyatira, Lydia did not worship the pantheon of gods venerated in her hometown. Instead, she had become a "God-fearer." She had already taken a major step away from her religious upbringing and had investigated Jewish claims of one God and wanted to know more. (Many God-fearers became Jewish proselytes.) We first meet her at Philippi's riverside with a group of women who had come together there to pray. It was there that Paul and Silas met her and talked with her about Jesus, and there she became the first convert to Christianity in Greece.

Convinced of the truth of the Christian gospel and believing that it was for everyone, she bore witness to her entire household and with her, they were all baptized. The apostles stayed on with her for several weeks, instructing her and her household in what she needed as a new follower of Jesus. There in her large house she began the first Christian church on Greek soil, welcoming other new believers into the fellowship of faith.

Lydia was successful both in her professional work and in her social or spiritual work nurturing the nascent Greek church. Most likely the knowledge and connections she cultivated as a trader helped her in her church work, and vice versa. In Lydia we see a woman whose skill and interest is not confined to one limited area. Indeed, we see that both her position in commerce and her knowledge of faith made her uniquely qualified to spearhead the church in Greece.

The Intellectual Damaris (Acts 17:17)

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As the apostle Paul continued his ministry in various Greek cities, he ended up one day in the unique city Athens, known for its university and its intellectual climate. In Acts 17 we watch him wandering through the city, astonished by all the idols and shrines to an endless list of gods and goddesses. We read in **Acts 17:17** that “he began to interact with the Jews and Gentile God-worshippers in the synagogue. He also addressed whoever happened to be in the marketplace each day. Certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers engaged him in discussion.” Out of that he received an invitation to address the Areopagus, the leading council of Athens. As he spoke of Jesus, some ridiculed him, but others believed. Among the believers was a woman named Damaris.

In the culture of that city, women lived sequestered lives. But one group of women was exempt from that. These were the intellectual courtesans, high-class prostitutes attached to rich men in the city. These women were able to hold their own intellectually, carrying on esoteric debates on philosophical subjects. The Bible doesn't tell us specifically that Damaris was a courtesan, but the fact that she was allowed to be present at Paul's meeting with the leading men of the city strongly indicates that possibility. Both her freedom to be in public and her ability to follow Paul's conversation with the leading men enabled her to understand and to embrace the gospel Paul taught. She became one of the new converts to Christianity in the city of Athens.

New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham tells us that any time we come across the name of someone in the book of Acts or in the apostle's letters, it's there because that person had become widely known among the Christian churches as teacher and leader. Because we know Damaris's name, we also know that she was well-known for ministry in the churches. As an intellectual herself, she had the ability to reach the intelligentsia in Athens.

If Damaris began her career as a high-class escort and ended it as an evangelist, we might wonder what change this brought to her income, influence, or working conditions. The answers might be lost to history. At the very least we can say that God may lead a woman to change careers, and he certainly entrusts important work to women from a diversity of backgrounds.

The Businesswoman Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2)

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The apostle Paul left Athens and moved on to Corinth. This city was radically different from Athens. Located on the narrow neck of land joining a large southern peninsula to the mainland of Greece, Corinth had two ports: one on the west coast on the Adriatic Sea and one on the east coast on the Saronic Gulf. A Roman city (like Philippi) in Greece, it was a bustling commercial city with a very diverse ethnic population and a plethora of temples to every known god or goddess (including Egyptian deities). Once in Corinth Paul settled down for eighteen months, preaching and starting new Christian churches.

It's there that we meet Phoebe. While in Corinth Paul had written a long letter to the Christians in the city of Rome, and he needed someone to carry the letter to them. It appears that Phoebe traveled for business purposes and offered to take the letter on her next trip to Rome. So we meet her in Paul's letter where he

describes her to the Christians in Rome:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well. (**Romans 16:1-2**)

Note the two words Paul used to describe her. In the church she was, first, a deacon, a term Paul uses for only five people in his letters: himself, Tychicus, Epaphras, Timothy, and Phoebe. Whatever he and the other three men were doing as deacons, we can assume that Phoebe was also doing in the churches.

But Paul then uses a second word to describe her. Our translation (NRSV) calls her a “benefactor,” but the Greek word in Paul’s letter was *prostatis*. According to the lexicographer Thayer, the first meaning of that word was “a woman set over others.” The Greek word was in the feminine form of the masculine word *prostates*, usually translated leader. It referred to “one who preaches, teaches, and presides at the Lord’s Table.” Obviously Phoebe, the business woman was more than merely a benefactor. She was a leader of the church in Cenchreae.

Like the businesswoman Lydia, Phoebe used her wealth and influence to grow the Christian church. She even leveraged a business trip to spread the gospel. But she didn’t just carry a man’s message. Phoebe was a church leader in her own right. Today, women are often denied equal responsibility both in businesses and in churches. However, this was not the precedent set by the earliest Christian churches.

The Tentmaker Priscilla (Acts 18:2)

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In Corinth Paul needed a means to support himself, and fortunately, he had a trade: he made leather tents for the Roman government and private parties who ordered them. Once in Corinth, he collaborated with a couple who also made leather tents: Priscilla and Aquila. (The Roman government required leather tents for housing its military on bases all over the empire. A canvas tent would not do, especially in northern climates. Furthermore, Paul could carry with him the few tools for leatherwork, but would not have been able to carry necessary equipment for working with canvas. Canvas was usually used for boat sails.)

While scholars believe that Priscilla was a Gentile (and from the Roman aristocracy), she had married Aquila, a Jew from the Turkish province of Pontus. They lived in Rome and were part of the folks who worked with the apostle Peter in his evangelism there. But the Roman emperor (around 51-52 A.D.) ordered that all Jews be expelled from Rome. Corinth was the nearest major city outside Italy, so as refugees, they had settled there. And there they connected with the apostle Paul.

This tentmaking couple became so valuable to the apostle Paul that when he left Corinth to begin missionary work in Ephesus, he took Priscilla and Aquila with him. This couple is mentioned six times in the New Testament, and in all but one case, Priscilla’s name is given first. This wasn’t simply a matter of courtesy in the first century; it indicated her primacy in their work together. Eventually, when the exile of Jews from Rome was lifted, they returned to their home in the capital city and once again became active in starting new churches there.

Priscilla is often thought of as a tentmaker, but clearly she was many other things in her lifetime too: a businesswoman, a refugee, a traveling evangelist, and a church planter. While we often hear stories about complex men in the Bible, in Priscilla we see that women too are multitalented, multifaceted, and capable of working in a variety of different environments.

The Jewish Palace Insider and Benefactor Junia (Romans 16:7)

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Biblical scholars have puzzled over the years about Paul's reference in **Romans 16:7**: "Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was." Who were these folks? Paul was clear that they were related to him, that they had shared prison time with him, they were prominent apostles, and they had become believers before he had. Who could fill that bill?

That points to someone who was Jewish, had known Jesus in his earthly ministry (the requirement for the title apostle), and had signed on as a Jesus-follower before Paul himself. Now they were in Rome.

In his book *Gospel Women*, noted biblical scholar Richard Bauckham untangles the knots in this mystery for us, starting with one of the women healed by Jesus, mentioned in **Luke 8:3**. She was Joanna, the wife of Chuza, the business manager for king Herod Antipas. It turns out that the name Joanna is the Hebrew equivalent of the Roman name Junia. Could Joanna in the gospels be the same person as the apostle Junia? Look at some of the possible clues leading to that conclusion.

The name Chuza is not a Jewish name, and he is thought to have been Nabatean (King Herod Antipas had other connections to the Nabatean royal family). But as the king's finance minister living in the new Roman-style palace in the royal city of Tiberias, he needed a Jewish wife connected to a wealthy Jewish family. Enter young Joanna (probably just entering puberty when she was married to the much older, mature man, Chuza). While king Herod Antipas had some Jewish blood, his kingship depended on Rome, so palace life in Tiberias followed Roman practices. Joanna would likely have been given a Roman name (Junia) and would have been formed in Roman ways of acting and thinking.

We first meet Joanna in the Bible, however, not as part of the royal household, but as a woman in need of healing. Luke tells us that after Jesus healed her, she became part of his traveling band of women caring for the physical needs of the Savior. In short, she became one of his benefactors, providing funds for the support of his group.

What the Bible does not tell us is whether or not Chuza had died and Joanna was widowed, but scholars surmise this likely was the case (given the probable disparity in their ages). Nor does the Bible tell us that in traveling with Jesus' band, she might eventually have remarried, becoming the wife of Andrew, one of Jesus's disciples. If, however, this was the case, it would answer to all of the clues given in Paul's greeting to this couple in **Romans 16:6**. We know that Peter first carried the Gospel to Rome, and to bring along his brother and fellow disciple, Andrew, is logical. So as Paul's letter to the Romans was read to the assembled Christians, he addressed this apostolic pair by their Roman names – Andronicus and Junia.

Paul doesn't tell us that back in Palestine they had been Andrew and Joanna, but all of his clues fit that possibility.

Pinpointing the identity of Junia leads us through some fascinating detective work. It is unfortunate though that we often have to struggle to uncover the significant work of women throughout history. In all fields of human achievement, the contributions of women have often been either swept under the rug, or ascribed to males whom we see as more likely sources of innovation, intelligence, or heroism. Women still struggle to be acknowledged for their work. And yet, God has always seen the value of women workers. Throughout the New Testament God chose women as well as men to understand his message and to work for his purposes.

Conclusions About Women Workers in the New Testament

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Women as well as men were leaders in those first-century churches. That practice was a radical departure from pagan philosophical notions accepted at that time. So the wider culture began pushing back against women leaders in the churches. Centuries earlier, Aristotle had taught that a woman was a "failed male" with a "flawed anatomy." She should not lead. One by one, the later Church Fathers imbibed Aristotle's idea and began closing the door to leadership for women. By the third century, women were effectively locked out of any kind of Christian leadership.

But that did not stamp out the first-century vision of men and women working side-by-side in ministry. We have their record in the New Testament, in the stories of Mary, Mary Magdalene, Lydia, Damaris, Phoebe, Pricilla, and Junia. From these stories we can reconstruct a history of women working both in the church and in the marketplace for God's purposes. Thanks be to God.

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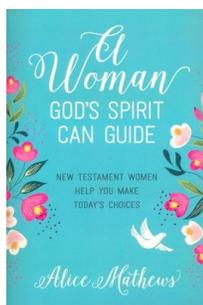
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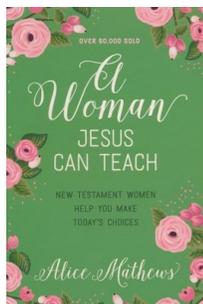
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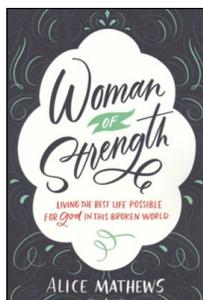
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