

## BOOK REVIEW

Susan Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel* (JSNT Sup Series, 266; London and New York: T. & T. Clark [Continuum], 2004). xi + 228 pp. Pbk. \$39.95.

Susan Miller teaches New Testament at the University of Glasgow. Her book is a theological study of Mark's treatment of women. It has feminist concerns, and interacts with such authors as E. Schüssler Fiorenza, J.J. Schmitt, M. Fander, W. Munro, H. Kinukawa, J.L. Mitchell, J. Dewey and others. Unlike some feminist treatments, however, Miller's work is empathetic to the text. She attempts to find out why Mark includes the accounts of women that are in the book, and the role of these women in Mark's theology.

An inductive investigation of Mark's theology is outside the scope of this book, and it is not clear how Miller has arrived at her view of it. She sees Mark's theology as based on an apocalyptic world-view. Reality is the cosmic struggle between good and evil, and Jesus conquers evil first by his miracles, and ultimately by his death on the cross. The disciples are caught up in this struggle and often fail because of misunderstanding Jesus and his mission. Jesus inaugurates a new creation, which will be a new mode of existence and will be celebrated in the messianic feast. Thus, Miller pays particular attention in her analysis to these theological themes of discipleship and the new creation. Under each passage featuring women, she discusses first how the women are portrayed socially, politically and religiously, secondly how they contribute to Mark's theology of discipleship, and thirdly how they contribute to his apocalyptic world-view, the themes of redemption and new creation, and life in the new age.

Two sets of presuppositions control Miller's approach. The first is that Mark is a 'skilfully crafted narrative' and should be read and interpreted with a sophisticated literary approach. This means that literary

techniques such as repetition, chiasmic structure and intercalation are significant for the narrative, and, she would argue, also for the theology. The second is that Mark was written for a particular community and reflects the situation and concerns of that community, including fear of persecution and debates about the Gentile mission. The entire Gospel is on one level a parable for the community.

At times this approach leads to interpretations that sound almost allegorical. For example, the fact that Jairus's daughter walks after Jesus raises her is linked to the fact that Jesus walks on water, and that he is to go to Galilee after the resurrection. Similarly, 'the presence of the mother and father of the girl at her raising points to the two figures who will accompany Jesus at his death' (p. 63). The story of raising Jairus's daughter has thus become a kind of parable meant to represent facts about the death and resurrection of Jesus himself. In other cases, it is the situation of the Markan community that is being represented. The story of the Syrophenician woman and her daughter is about 'the difficulties with the Gentile mission [that] are current debates for Mark's community' (p. 109). The woman is a prophetic figure declaring that the time is ripe for the Gentile mission, and Jewish opposition to this is signified by the fact that the boat carrying Jesus and the disciples is blown off course as they are going to Gennesaret. Sometimes this approach almost obscures any idea that these are stories of real women who encountered Jesus. The hypothesis that there is a Markan community whose situation can be discerned in the text of the Gospel is a use of mirror-reading which has few controls, and may be open to abuse.

Each incident in Mark's Gospel involving women has a separate chapter in the book. These are:

Healing Simon's mother-in-law (1.29-31): She represents all who seek healing from Jesus. The healing is depicted as a conflict between Jesus and the forces of evil. When delivered, she serves Jesus. This is a model for discipleship, and her healing is a sign of the new creation. The meal she serves foreshadows the messianic feast.

Jesus' break with his family (3.20-35): Mary appears to be in charge of the family delegation trying to control Jesus. Jesus' enemies try to do the same, but in a more severe manner. Jesus' family misunderstand his mission, but he has a new family of

those who do God's will. Women are full members of this family, and they are part of those sitting around him heeding his teaching. This foreshadows the new eschatological group of Jesus' followers, with equal status for men and women.

Healing the woman with the flow of blood, and raising Jairus's daughter (5.21-43): Jesus overcomes the impurity, sickness and death of these two women, demonstrating the power of the new age. There is a big contrast between rich Jairus and the outcast woman. Jesus calls the woman 'daughter' giving her status in the family. She is a good discipleship model because she seeks Jesus out, has courage to approach, and has faith. She is also a type of Jesus in her suffering. The food to be given to Jairus's daughter signals the messianic feast at the end of the age.

Herodias and her daughter (6.14-29): These are the only women to be depicted negatively in Mark, the evil counterpart of the bold women who act in faith. There is an anti-feast in Herod's party, and the self seeking of Herod contrasts with the self giving of Jesus. The women are rich, and their violent opposition to John foreshadows Jesus' own death.

The Syrophenician woman and her daughter (7.24-30): This is a positive depiction of a Gentile woman. She insists that blessing extend to Gentiles, and a share of the feast which signifies the Lord's Supper and the messianic feast (even if by crumbs under the table) should start coming to them. Together with other material in Mark, her story shows the importance of the Gentile mission.

The poor widow (12.41-44): She is at the bottom of society, and never actually interacts with Jesus. She contrasts with rich Herod in giving all, not half, of what she has. She is a model for the disciples in this.

The woman who anoints Jesus (14.3-9): Like a prophet she anoints Jesus and reveals his kingship and Messiahship. This foreshadows the new creation through Jesus' death. Her love contrasts with the plots of the males. Her waste of the perfume is like Jesus' 'waste' of his life on the cross, but his life, like the perfume, is of great worth. As a disciple she gives all and identifies

with his agenda. This also takes place at a feast foreshadowing the messianic feast.

The woman who challenges Peter at his denial (14.53-54, 66-72): Jesus is tried by the highest authority in the nation and confesses, but Peter denies when confronted by the lowest slave girl. Peter's failed discipleship is a warning to all disciples.

The women at the crucifixion and burial (15.40-41, 47): Why is the ministry of this group to Jesus mentioned so late in the text even though their ministry started close to the beginning of the story? These women seem to have left family to follow Jesus, and they served meals to him. They act as foils to the men who don't want to serve but to be great. Mentioning them at the cross emphasizes the link between their service and that of Jesus.

The women at the tomb (16.1-8): The anointing of women frames the passion narrative, and their role as witnesses frames the burial. They are the only witnesses among Jesus' followers of his death, burial and resurrection, yet they flee the tomb and do not obey the command to tell the disciples. It is left for the audience to continue where the women have left off. The fear of the women may reflect the fear of the Markan community under persecution, and the hope is left open that they, like the woman with the flow of blood and Jairus, will overcome their fear and confess Jesus.

In accordance with their status in a patriarchal society, most of the women remain unnamed, except for Mary the mother of Jesus, Herodias (because of her high social status), and Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Joses, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, because of their pivotal role as witnesses of the crucifixion, burial and resurrection of Jesus. However, the women do act with independence in approaching Jesus and are included as mothers and sisters in Jesus' new family (3.34-35), a family with no Father but God. Miller concludes, 'Mark's portrayal of women expresses an inclusive understanding of discipleship...the religious and social boundaries between Jews and Gentiles, and women and men are broken, and Mark points forward to a new egalitarian community' (p. 203). Thus, in answer to the feminist questions about the roles and status of women, Mark clearly subverts the hierarchy and patriarchy of human society. Women are not presented as role models of good wives and mothers, but as good disciples.

As disciples, the women serve Jesus (this frames the Gospel in 3.31 and 15.41), and, unlike the male disciples, are faithful to him even when his mission seems to have failed, being present at the cross, burial and tomb. However, they flee in fear from the tomb and do not pass on the message of the angels. Thus both men and women are ultimately unfaithful as witnesses. We know, however, that the resurrection story must have been told somehow by the very fact that the Christian movement continued to exist.

Without much discussion of the issue, Miller firmly adheres to the view that Mark intended his Gospel to end at 16.8. This gives a definite slant to the interpretation of the entire role of women in the Gospel, since the story ends with the women's failure. If we postulate that the ending Mark wrote or intended to write is missing, however, our conclusions on this issue could be different.

As for the role of the women stories in Mark's theology of the new creation, the way Jesus overcomes demons and disease for some of them is proleptic of the new creation in which no evil or disease will remain. This is true of the healing of men in the Gospel as well. Women and men have equal status with Jesus and this is a characteristic of the new age. Women lack status and authority in the earthly scheme of things, so they form relationships based on mutuality and demonstrate the true nature of power as they remain faithful to Jesus even in his death.

Miller interacts with a vast amount of scholarship, both on women in the Bible and in Mark, and on the study of Mark as a whole. Sometimes the text is so dense with references that it is hard to tell what Miller herself is arguing for. She places the pericopes of her focus firmly in context with extended discussions of the prologue, and of passages throughout the Gospel that make the same points as the women stories.

Ultimately, Miller is to be commended for giving a theological reading that aims to be faithful to the text, and with faith rather than gender liberation as a priority. Both male and female are liberated by Jesus. Women are portrayed in the context of humanity generally, and of Mark's theology. By including stories of women, Mark has clearly shown that the Church, like Jesus, must include women as full members in the household of faith.

Lois Fuller

McMaster Divinity College / Emmanuel Bible College