The gospel of Luke portrays, through examples, women in the early church. Although the culture of the first century Greco-Roman world often minimized the role of women, Luke makes sure to give voice to their role in the early church. In this paper I will argue that the gospel of Luke supports woman as praiser of God (Luke 1: 46-55), woman as prophet (Luke 2: 36-38), and woman as minister (Luke 8: 1-3). Mary as praiser of God, Anna as prophet, and the ministering Galilean women (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna) will be discussed. These biblical stories are paralleled with the stories of men within the biblical text. This parallelism supports the popular notion that Luke regarded women and men as equals.

This paper will further note how Luke’s readings also limit women. Mary is not given the Holy Spirit as is Zechariah during their time of praise; Anna is not able to prophesy speaking publicly to others as does Simeon; and the ministering Galilean women are not commissioned by God and do not engage in public ministry of the word as the twelve disciples do. This contrasting perspective will be discussed, offering further insight into the role of women in the Luke text.

The gospel of Luke has a distinct identification with people who are poor and marginalized. Within the context from which Luke was written, during the first century Greco-Roman period, women were considered part of the marginalized. Dowling has noted that the Greco Roman philosopher Aristotle described women as an inferior class: “The male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject.” Dowling also presents a contrasting idea regarding the status of women, noting

1 Elizabeth V. Dowling, *Taking Away the Pound: Women, Theology and the Parable of the Pounds in
that women’s experiences and treatment were based on their social location. In the ancient Greco-Roman world the status and power of women varied considerably, being influenced by such factors as class and location. Nevertheless, treating women as inferior was an ethical issue during this period as well as an issue within the Christian community.

The gospel of Luke was written to account for the “ethical integrity of the Christian community and to account for the relative paucity of treatment of the development of the early church, of its problems, and of the lives of the apostles.” It was written to give the early church direction. The status and role of women in the Church, the issue of women’s rights, was a highly charged one. Why was this a highly charged issue? There may have been a number of women within the Christian community who were schooled in scripture. Gospel listeners of scripture in the church may have been both men and women. It would have been imperative to have women within the gospel who modeled the role of Christian women, setting an example for women in the first century Christian church.


that Luke’s gospel shares a free liberated stance towards women, others note that there is still a patriarchal framework that does not equally include women. This paper seeks to explore both perspectives.

Throughout the gospel of Luke a rhetorical-structural device is used, paralleling the role of men and women in the text. “Luke’s rhetorical-structural device is the use of thematically related or contrasting recitals and sayings, either juxtaposed or distributed in his narrative. Doublets or triads are most frequent.” The pairing suggests a measure of equality between men and women that was unique during the time of Jesus. This gender pairing could model “women and men standing together side by side as equals before God; equal in honor and grace, blessed with the same gifts and with the same responsibilities as Christian persons.” The parallel could also be used to clearly state the distinction between the two genders as it related to roles within the Christian church. Parallel accounts in Luke are shown with Mary and Zechariah, Anna and Simeon, the Galilean women, and the 12 disciples. Though the “Lukan author does not totally reject the patriarchal framework of his or her culture, Luke does present a transformed vision which incorporates women in various ministerial roles.” Mary, Anna, and the Galilean women serve as examples.

Luke 1: 46-55
Mary’s Song of Praise

And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 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. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever (NRSV).’

In Luke 1: 46-55 Mary sets an example, especially for women, for believers to praise God. These verses are connected to a parallel account within the text. “In the first chapter of this gospel, Luke pairs off and contrasts the elderly Zechariah, father to be of John the Baptist, with the young maiden Mary, mother to be of Jesus. While Zechariah hesitated to doubt at hearing the angel’s good news, Mary permits the creative message of God to take life within her. Both the man and the woman were afraid upon receiving the angel’s message. The woman, however, said ‘yes’ and gave life.”¹¹ Mary works through her fear, and her strong faith in God allows her to overcome this fear. She sings a song of praise, celebrating what God has done. “Mary’s song is a celebration. She focuses on the effect of God’s actions on her personal life. Her focus then broadens to God’s actions for all those who fear God. As such, God’s action in the life of Mary reflects God’s action in the life of God’s people. Her individual song of praise becomes a communal theme that celebrates reversals in society. She praises the God who brings

down the powerful and raises the lowly, who fills the hungry and sends the rich away empty.”¹²

The Magnificat also has Old Testament connections. It is compared to the Song of Miriam in Exodus 15: 20-21, where Moses’ sister sings and leads the song of praise after the escape from the Egyptians. “Both women speak prophetically, celebrating what God has done for them personally, and bearing witness.”¹³ Mary’s song may also be aligned with the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2: 1-10.¹⁴ Mary is aligned with memorable women in the Old Testament biblical tradition. This connection to women in the Old Testament could be very significant for the early Christian church in understanding the importance of Mary as well as that of other women within the early Christian church. Within the Magnificat, Mary acts as praiser, while also modeling an example of faith in God for women and men in the church.

Luke 2: 36-38
Jesus is Presented in the Temple: Anna as Prophet

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem (NRSV).

In Luke 2: 36-38 Anna, as prophet, is presented as a major participant in the presentation of the baby Jesus at the temple. Anna and Simeon (Luke 2: 25-35) are one of the gender pair parallels within the Lukan narrative. Both are portrayed as faithful

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and inspired. Simeon is inspired by the Holy Spirit, and Anna, as prophet, is inspired by God. After Circumcision and Naming, Mary and Joseph took Christ up to Jerusalem to be offered to God. Simeon and the Holy Spirit blessed God and the Christ Child. Anna, the Prophetess, sees the Messiah and confirms him. She is presented as an outstanding model of what it means to be an Israelite who is faithful. Anna is singled out as a proclaimers of salvation, giving thanks to God speaking about the redemption of Jerusalem.

Anna’s credentials are not to be overlooked. She also sets a powerful example for women within the early Christian church. “Her advanced years make her a reliable figure of wisdom and maturity. Living with her husband seven years makes her an ideal wife.”

Worshipping at the temple night and day with fasting and prayer makes her a model Christian who actually practices spiritual disciplines that could be connected to discipleship. She is the ideal believer who can be linked to a set of women, including Mary, who are liberative and lifegiving.

Anna was not identified only as the poor and oppressed widow, one of what may have been a prevalent marginalized group during the time Luke was written. Rather, she is seen as Anna the widow who ministers to them. Within the gospel of Luke there are numerous mentions of widows. The “Lukan incidents of widows may reflect the growing numbers and importance of widows in the ministry of the church during the first

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Consecrated widows whose roles included fasting, prayer, making clothes, and doing good works, were important.\(^\text{19}\) Anna was the prototype for such women.

**Luke 8: 1-3**  
The Ministering Galilean Women: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna Accompany Jesus

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, \(^2\) as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, \(^3\) and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources (NRSV).

In Luke 8: 1-3 Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna are mentioned. Jesus had cured some of the women of their evil spirits and infirmities, which lead them to support the mission. These women and others were recipients of Jesus’ mercy who put their faith in action by supporting Jesus’ ministry with their resources. Though there is not one direct parallel with this text, the Galilean women could be paralleled with the three male disciples in the inner circle of men closest to Jesus. This inner circle included: Peter, James, and John.\(^20\)

During the time of Jesus’ ministry there was a need for resources. The women shared their time and, talent through providing meals and clothes and other needed domestic services. The traditional roles they played were seen as a form of ministry being performed for Jesus and for the Christian mission.\(^21\) These women might have also shared their financial resources to support Jesus and ministry. Some scholars do

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indeed note that the women’s support was financial. Within the biblical text the word ‘hyparchonton’ is used. This word, in Luke and Acts, is affiliated with resources, possessions, property, money, or goods. However, there is the question of women’s ability to have their own money and property independent from a man during the first century, when patriarchy was dominant. In using their financial resources they would have stepped from the traditional role of women. “Some women did inherit money, worked a job, and or had their own business and money.” These women may have also been single or widowed. Nevertheless, they still donated their resources to the ministry.

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna are bearers of a distinctive message regarding women in the first century Christian church. The Galilean women used their resources to support the ministry of Jesus Christ. In doing this they also acted as ministers serving Jesus and attending to the needs of others within the Christian community.

**Limitations of Women in Luke**

The gospel of Luke uses women as examples of Christians within the early Church. Mary as praiser, Anna as prophet, and the Galilean women as ministers all reflect the Lukan writers’ desire to emphasize the role of women within the early Christian church. There are several parallels between the accounts of women and men in the Lukan text. The stories of Mary and Zechariah, Anna and Simeon, and the Galilean women and the disciples model this. However, there are also some distinctions

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made within these same texts that actually separate men and women.

This is explicit when comparing Mary’s Song of Praise (Luke 1: 46-55) to Zechariah’s Praise and Prophecy (Luke 1: 67-80). There is no mention of Mary as prophet or the presence of the Holy Spirit. However, the text notes in Luke 1: 67, that “Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy.” The stories parallel each other, but there is a clear distinction recognizing Mary as praiser magnifying God and Zechariah as prophet filled with the Holy Spirit.

The parallel accounts of Anna the prophet (Luke 2: 36-38) and Simeon the righteous and devout also model an unequal distinction between men and women within the text. Again the text does not speak of Anna being filled with the Holy Spirit as is the male prophet Simeon. Within the text Simeon speaks for himself, stating in Luke 2: 30-32, “For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” However, Anna does not speak for herself. “There is the voice of the Lukan narrator. Her words are not recorded and consequently her action has not made sufficient impact to be recognized.”

25 Luke 2: 38 notes, “At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.” There is also no reaction to her prophecy, but there is a reaction by Joseph and Mary to Simeon’s prophecy. Anna has no audience other than the reader. This interpretation of this Lukan text could assume, “a private, quiet stance for women in the Greco Roman world; public prophetic stances belong to men.”

Though there is not an explicit parallel account with the three ministering Galilean women in Luke 8: 1-3, they are sometimes compared to the male disciples of Jesus: Peter, James, and John. Comparison is made, however, there are some distinctions that does not focus on equality of the two genders. In Luke 9: 1-2 Jesus called the twelve disciples together and gave them power over all demons. The male disciples were sent to mission and to preach the word. Women and male disciples had differing roles in the mission of Jesus. “Unlike the twelve there was no call for the ministering Galilean women to become disciples or of them being sent on mission.” Neither did they have access to the public ministry preaching the word. The women gave monetary support out of thanks and also gave other personal gifts to the ministry of Jesus Christ. The women may have also been cooking, cleaning, and sharing other labors behind the scenes to support Jesus and the disciples.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, Luke does give voice to women in the gospel. The gospel of Luke portrays women as examples in the early church. Mary as praiser of God, Anna as prophet, and the ministering Galilean women all set an example of the ministerial leadership qualities that women have within this gospel and the church. Through parallel accounts with male’s Luke also makes it clear that men and women have distinct roles and are given different gifts concerning ministry within the first century church. These distinctions can be limiting for women seeking to engage in public ministries.

This gospel was written for the first century church. However, Luke may very

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well be speaking to the Christian church today through the scriptures. It is imperative to acknowledge that both men and women have ministerial abilities. The challenge comes in faith communities understanding of whether men and women are to engage in ministerial leadership equally. This was a struggle for the Christian church in the first century to understand. Over 2000 years later this is still an issue area that churches seek to understand.
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Bibliography