

The Friend at Midnight: A 'realistic' reading as a feminist tool

**Author:**Charel D. du Toit¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of New Testament and Related Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Charel du Toit,
u11291852@tuks.co.za

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The voices of women have historically been muted in biblical texts from their ancient to more modern interpretations. This article will attempt to 'unhide' the voices of women in the Parable of the Friend at Midnight by using a combination of social-scientific criticism and a 'realistic' reading as a methodology to inform an understanding of how 1st-century Mediterranean audiences would have understood women to be present in the parable where modern audiences might not. In the 1st-century Mediterranean world, women were key figures in facilitating group hospitality values, the baking and supply of bread, and caring for children. These women, however, are not directly mentioned in the parable and often excluded in modern commentaries. This contribution aims to pave a way forward for modern New Testament commentaries to not only include but also focus on the roles and importance of women in the parable of the Friend at Midnight.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The interdisciplinary nature of this article contributes to the debate on the roles and importance of women in the church by investigating the value that women had in the parables of Jesus. By reading women as present in the text, emphasis is given to the voices of women in the Bible and the importance of their representation today.

Keywords: historical Jesus; 1st-century Mediterranean; feminism; social-scientific criticism; equality; realistic reading; women's history; parables; Friend at Midnight; women.

Introduction

This article offers a 'realistic' reading of the parable of the Friend at Midnight to bring the roles and 'voices' of women to the foreground of the text. These 'voices' are seldom, or never, 'heard' in the interpretation of parables. However, before the 'unheard' voices of women can be addressed, the author will first provide a brief summary and explanation of what is meant by a 'realistic' reading of the parables.

A 'realistic' reading proposes a threefold approach when interpreting the parables of Jesus. Firstly, the distinction between the gospels and Jesus is to be taken seriously. Each gospel author provides their own interpretation of the parables; however, a 'realistic' reading attempts to read the parable narratives as an everyday scene, free of allegorisation, playing out in 1st-century Palestine. The aim is to understand how the (original) rural audience of Jesus understood the parable. Secondly, a conscious attempt should be made to avoid anachronism and ethnocentrism. To date, a social-scientific approach remains the best method to attempt to accomplish this task by taking the 1st-century culture in which the parables play out seriously. Finally, all available documents and papyri should be consulted to identify the possible social realities in which the parables play out. This process emphasises a thorough investigation of the socio-cultural setting of the parables in order to come as close as possible to what Jesus intended with his parables (Van Eck 2011:12; Waetjen 2001:716).

By using a 'realistic' reading, the parables become stories about everyday events and are not dependent on the allegorical interpretations provided by the gospel authors. How the 1st-century audience of rural Palestine heard and understood the parables becomes the main focus (Dodd 1961:10; Van Eck 2016:19). In so doing, 'a vineyard or a shepherd in a parable of Jesus is just a vineyard or a shepherd' (Kloppenborg 2014:490). This places emphasis on the 1st-century societal context found in the parables.

For the purposes of this article, a 'realistic' reading will be used to focus on the roles and 'voices' of women in the parable of the Friend at Midnight, on how they were understood to be present even though the text does not mention them specifically. Afterward, the reader will be invited to

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imagine a new understanding of the parable, given the social and historical scripts highlighted by the reading. This new way of reading the parable will bring the 'hidden' voices, roles and importance of women to the foreground to give a more complete and inclusive view of history.

Background

The traditional interpretation of the parable of the Friend at Midnight, judged by the Jesus Seminar (Funk et al. 1993:327) to be an authentic parable of the historical Jesus, seems to be concerned with prayer and addresses how the Pharisees prayed in public and how it was deemed hypocritical by Jesus, as portrayed in Matthew 6:5. The parable is also often coupled with the parable of the Persistent Widow in Luke 18:1–8 (Boice 1983:153; Capon 2002:252; Forbes 2000:72; Liefeld 2000:241; Lischer 2014:67; Oesterley 1936:225; Pentecost 1982:69; Schottroff 2006:189; Zimmermann 2015:294).

Interpretations have typically focused on the role and function of men in the parable. When the subject of hospitality values is discussed, men are at the centre (Forbes 2000:74; Huffard 1978:158; Pentecost 1982:70). When commentators and exegetes discuss the topic of the bread that needs to be borrowed in the parable narrative, women seldom feature and are often merely mentioned as those responsible for baking bread in the household (Forbes 2000:74; Herzog 1994:203; Jeremias 1972:157; Levine 2014:215; Lischer 2014:67). Moreover, the topic of children and the father's relation to his children are almost never discussed within this parable, although the parable itself clearly and, perhaps, deliberately includes children in direct relationship with the father in Luke 11:7 (τὰ παιδιά μου μετ' ἐμοῦ εἰς τὴν κοίτην εἰσίν) (Capon 2002:255; Forbes 2000:75; Herzog 1994:206; Jeremias 1972:157; Levine 2014:215; Liefeld 2000:246).

Very often little to no significant attention is given to women in the parable. Even when traditional women-centric roles are discussed, such as taking care of children, the baking and providing of bread to households, and hospitality rites, women are still often omitted or glanced over as an afterthought by interpreters, exegetes and biblical commentaries. This article will investigate the critical roles that women played in the rearing of children, the baking of bread and the application of hospitality rites. Further, it will be argued that the 1st-century audience of the parable understood women to be present in the parable although modern readers and interpreters often fail to do so.

Women and children

Children were often compared with women because of their perceived common frailty. They were also believed to frighten more easily than men and were understood to embody human fear (Betsworth 2015:9; Wiedemann 1989:18). Andocides (*On the Mysteries* 130), a 4th century BCE Athenian politician and orator, found women and children comparable when reflecting on the meaningless, entertaining, and

frivolous talk that a person can hear being 'uttered by insignificant boys and women raging over the entire city' (Andocides 1982:437; Neufeld & Daniels 2020:110).

Strange (1996:6) draws attention to the lack of women's voices concerning ancient textual sources about children and how women thought and felt about children.¹ Lacking female-authored texts and voices is indeed a concern; however, the author of Luke also omits the existence of the neighbour's wife in the parable, mentioning only the neighbour and his children who are in bed: καὶ τὰ παιδιά μου μετ' ἐμοῦ εἰς τὴν κοίτην εἰσίν (Lk 11:7). This glaring omission might imply that the man was divorced or widowed and living alone with his children, or perhaps his wife was asleep somewhere else or not in the house. However, these scenarios are quite unlikely. Husbands who went through a divorce or were widowed were typically required by their community to remarry, and it was highly unlikely for a man to live alone with his children and without a wife. Women also played a major part in the rearing and education of children (Instone-Brewer 2002:124; Loader 2012:102; Stambaugh & Balch 1986:84; Treggiari 2003:175). Seeing that the friend can approach the neighbour freely might imply that he is in good standing within the community and, therefore, likely has a wife along with his children.

Concerning sleeping arrangements, Balch and Osiek (1997:41) refer to the gender of spaces² in the 1st century and how family activities and private spaces were considered to be the domain of women. Yet in Jewish households, the entire house was also divided into male and female spaces; a trait that Tacitus (*Hist.* 5.4–5; Tacitus 2014:340–342) critiques when discussing the Judeans, offering many negative stereotypes: In *Histories*, he notes that Judeans 'keep themselves separated in meals, they keep their distance in sleeping arrangement' (Bazzana 2020:228) and 'separate themselves at banquets, and do not sleep in the same bed' (Duling & Rohrbaugh 2020:101). However, in poorer families where space and rooms were limited, the husband and wife would often sleep together in the woman's quarters or in the dining area. In these families, after the conception of a child, the entire family would sleep together³ on the floor, on carpets, and in the same room. Co-sleeping can also be traced back to 1st-century Egyptian women, who would sleep with their

1.Children were needed to look after parents in their old age and a family could, therefore, easily have between four and five children. However, children were expensive and many poor families could not afford multiple children (Strange 1996:5). In the parable, it is possible that the neighbour who denies the friend help could, therefore, have not been too poor as Luke 11:7 refers to him as having more than one child (τὰ παιδιά μου).

2.All spaces in the Graeco-Roman world were gendered to some extent. These divides had clear borders between public (male) and private (female) spaces and is reflected in biblical texts such as 1 Timothy 5:14 and Titus 2:3–5, which appeals to the traditional role of women as household caretakers, raising children, and submitting to their husbands (Ferguson 1987:58; Saller 2003:190; Trümper 2012:290–291). Demosthenes (in *Neaer.112*) clearly emphasises the importance of women in the household by referring to them as the 'faithful guardians of our households' (Demosthenes 2015:928).

3.The reason for this sleeping arrangement was because children were seen as incredibly fragile and susceptible to death in their early years. Parents would sleep with children to protect them from both natural and mystical evils. The evil eye was often used to curse a family who were blessed with children in jealousy. One account even points to the evil eye being responsible for two-thirds of all deaths in a Palestinian village. Parents would protect their children by fastening shiny amulets to them as to divert the gaze of the evil eye and children were kept dirty to not tempt the evil eye by displaying a beautiful child (Garroway 2018:128).

infants. Subsequently, they would be held responsible and accused of smothering the child if the child died during the night (Thoman 2006:408).

Women felt an especially strong bond to their babies and were expected to do anything to protect the new life with all the maternal, and even mystical, tools at their disposal (Garroay 2018:125, 135–136). In the Roman domicile, children seem to have been valued more and been more visible than their Jewish counterparts. Roman children sometimes slept with their parents, or nurses and tutors, but would also have access to their own spaces, with babies often sleeping in rocking cradles or even separate rooms (Nissin 2016:46).

Wives exerted considerable influence in the households and possessed real power although noticeably different from that of the husband. The responsibility of parenting young children is an excellent example of the power and critical roles of wives. As Pilch (1993:105) strikingly puts it: 'Fathers in the Mediterranean antiquity would have no role in parenting any children until puberty'. Indeed, where children were concerned, daughters would have little to no contact with their father, given that they were educated solely by their mother and other women. As for sons, they would only begin to spend time with their fathers around the age of seven or eight. Up until this age, sons were also raised by women (Campbell 1964:159; Malina 1990; Patai 2014:34; Pilch 1993:105).

Therefore, it would be more than likely that, even if the father was in bed with his children before answering the call at the door, which would classify this family as being quite poor (with no separate space for the wife and children), the 1st-century hearers of the parable would surely not only have understood a woman to be present in this scene but would also have understood her critical value, especially if the children had not reached puberty yet.

Women, bread, and honour

Within the social context of the parable, the community must accept the arriving guest, not as an individual, but as a representative of another group or a potential member of the community he is entering. Therefore, the correct hospitality rituals must be followed when presenting food to the guest, thereby extending hospitality. This includes having bread ready so that the visitor can be welcomed with a meal upon arrival. However, if there was not enough bread for the arriving guest, the responsibility of hospitality shifts from the neighbour who was to welcome the guest with bread to the friend he implores to help. By shifting his hospitality responsibility, the neighbour requests the friend to fulfil his own duties (Bailey 1976:122). However, this is not considered to be a problem or abnormal behaviour, seeing that the guest is visiting the entire community, not only the neighbour and, therefore, the honour of the entire village is at stake (Van Eck 2011:10).

The focus of the parable, seemingly, remains only on men and their responsibilities to the group and to each other.

However, the house (*oikos*) and food preparations were chiefly the domain of women, of whom we hear nothing in the parable (Ferguson 1987:58; Instone-Brewer 2002:5–6; Knust 2011:64; Kraemer 1992:143; Levine 1994:22; Loader 2012:12; Osiek 1998:300, 2019:508; Saller 2003:190; Vearncombe 2020:50–51). Moreover, the stakes are quite high for both the guest and the community that he enters because a 'guest never leaves the host with the same status upon arrival, for the stranger guest will leave the host as either friend or enemy' (Malina 1993a:106).

Shifting attention to the roles of women, although not mentioned in the parable, it was not only the husbands who would go out in search of bread whenever a guest would arrive in a community. Wives would also go out to the other houses requesting bread, crockery and other elements needed for the meal to be served. In this way, a wife would also take direct responsibility and action with regard to the hospitality of the group (Bailey 1976:120–123; Herzog 1994:204; Huffard 1978:157–159).

Women possibly had a stake in the honour and shame dynamic of the household, especially with regard to their own honour and positive shame (Neusner 1984:59). Roberts (2020), when reflecting on the unique way that the honour and shame value functioned between women, notes:

Ethnographical work among contemporary Mediterranean cultures suggests that women in these cultures have their own system of honor and shame that, although not completely disconnected from the men's system of honor and shame, are quite distinct from male honor and shame. For example, anthropologist Unni Wikan found that the women in the Omani town of Sohar were not as preoccupied with the shame of sexual promiscuity as men in the town were and that the women determined the relative honor of other women more upon the values of loyalty and *hospitality*. (p. 86; emphasis added)

Although not directly applicable to the 1st-century Mediterranean, this view does give valuable insight into a possible alternative way of understanding the honour and shame value between women. Moreover, in the parable, women had indirect influence over the honour status of not only the visiting guest but also the neighbour and the friend he bothers late at night. The reason why the neighbour would identify the friend to ask for bread would have been informed by systems that women controlled: the production of bread, the maintenance of the household and the information on where to find bread in the middle of the night.

Women were responsible for the baking of bread and, most likely, baked bread collectively. The finished bread was required to be whole and unbroken when served. The women of the village would typically follow some sort of schedule and bake bread for the entire week⁴ with the use of a

4. Jeremias (1972:157) believed that the bread would be baked anew each morning to supply the households with new bread for the day, whereas scholars such as Levison (1925:457) and Oesterly (1936:221) believe that, because of the financial constraints of a typical peasant family, bread was baked only once a week and kept in a basket until the family's supply ran low. Meyers (2002:24) agrees with this, noting how it would make more sense for multiple families to stoke one big fire rather than a series of individual household fires for small household ovens. It would benefit the whole community if less fuel was used.

community oven (Bailey 1976; Huffard 1978:157; Scott 1989:87). Because of this communal gathering, women in the village would also have knowledge of who would have remaining bread⁵ (Ebeling 2010:48–49, 53; Jeremias 1972:157; Meyers 2002:24).

Notably, the *Tosefta* (*T. Pesahim* 2.1; *T. Sheviit* 6.2) indicates that although bread was consumed every day, it is doubtful that the women of the village would bake fresh bread each day. Apart from the back-breaking work that bread production required, fuel for fire was expensive to buy, and the process of baking bread was extremely time consuming. Therefore, in the time of Jesus, bread would be baked once a week and dried in the sun (or next to the fire) to prevent it from going bad. The bread would be dipped into water, wine, vinegar, fish-sauce, oil or stew when consuming it and, even though bread would eventually become mouldy, it would be consumed all the same (Weingarten 2018:3–4).

It is important to understand that bread production was the domain and responsibility of women, that is, a gendered space that belonged to, and was dominated by, women. They were in control of this vital domestic resource, indicating their power in household domestic life (Meyers 2001:436–437). But women were not only the creators and suppliers of bread, they were also responsible for ‘allocating space for bread production⁶ and other activities. They controlled household space’ (Meyers 2002:24–25). This is further emphasised in the *Mishnah* (*M. Keubot* 5.5): ‘These are the works which the wife must perform for her husband: grinding flour and baking bread’ (Danby 2011:252).

Honour⁷ could be secured by women through the execution of certain values, such as industriousness. By working hard at household tasks, such as the baking of bread, a woman could increase the honour of her family, thereby protecting the honour of the group by doing what is expected of her and fulfilling the tasks that she ‘ought’ to do⁸ (Balch & Osiek 1997:40; Malina 1993b:31–33; Plevnik 1993:100). This is further emphasised by Ben Sira (*Sir* 26:13): ‘The favour of a woman delights her husband, and her skill fleshes out his

5. The process of making bread would often take hours on end and be quite monotonous in nature. This made moments of bread production not only ideal opportunities for sharing information, but also spaces where the young women and girls could be educated and instructed. Women might also have spent hours waiting for their turn to use the oven, and spent that time doing other household tasks such as sowing, needlework and embroidery (Ebeling 2010:50–51).

6. As a result of multiple generational family members staying in one house, households would often reach up to 16 people in one house. This made it important to allocate the oven outside, often in courtyards, closer to other households, making it accessible to the village community for communal baking of bread (Hirschfeld 1995:133, 140–141, 166; Meyers 2002:24–25).

7. Osiek (2008:323–324) believes that honour and shame cannot be understood as static norms. Rather, honour and shame should be understood as a dynamic set of values that change depending on its relation to societal factors. Women could be granted honour by their husbands or other men by adhering to group norms, as described in Proverbs 31:25–31: ‘She is clothed with strength and honour; she laughs at the days to come...her children stand up and give her honour; her husband praises her as well ... a woman who fears God is to be honoured. Give her the fruit of her own hands, and let her deeds praise her at the city gates’.

8. Social networks, such as the group of women baking bread, were also a source of social power for women. In the same way that men gained and challenged honour among other men, women exerted a sense of social power by participating in same-sex activities. Moreover, these social networks were in spaces that men were not privy to, thereby creating a unique space of power dominated by women. This further emphasises the influence that women exerted either directly, or indirectly, on the honour and shame system (Osiek 2008:334–335).

bones’ (Skehan & Di Lella 1987:344). By using their skill to complete and carry out this task of baking bread, women acquired honour, thereby not only contributing to their own community but also providing the means by which the community could successfully fulfil their hospitality rites, such as effectively welcoming a visiting guest. This could then possibly lead to the expansion of the community, by making a friend of the visiting guest. Therefore, the baking of bread was not only a representation of the domain and power of women but, importantly, also a point of honour. The production of bread in 1st-century rural Palestinian villages would have been so commonplace and familiar that it could easily be imagined that the rural 1st-century audience of this parable understood the roles and functions of women when it came to the baking of bread.

What then happens when the friend gives away the family’s bread in Luke 11:8 (διά γε τὴν ἀναίδειαν αὐτοῦ ἐγερευθῆς δώσει αὐτῷ ὅσων χρῆζει)? Van Eck (2011:6–12), using a ‘realistic’ reading and social-scientific criticism, extensively and convincingly argues for an interesting interpretation of the parable of the Friend at Midnight. Because the neighbour openly calls to the friend for help, he makes it clear that friendship and, therefore, honour, is at stake.⁹ Moreover, the honour of the entire village is at stake. With the value of mutuality of friendship in mind, this also meant that this request was not strange or foreign. It is, therefore, of vital importance to understand that the neighbour is, in effect, not asking for bread but rather asking for a friendship to be honoured. The bread then, critically, becomes the device by which honour is shown and the value of friendship and/or hospitality is maintained. Van Eck (2011:11) further concludes that the friend in the parable aims to make a client of the neighbour through this exchange, mimicking the actions of the Temple elite and Roman overlords of that time, who would use hospitality and patronage to their own benefit. This thought-provoking perspective rightly places special attention on the value of honour, and the role that the bread and, therefore, the women play in this parable.

In the parable of the Friend at Midnight, bread is the ‘property’ of women and is baked to their own honour. The friend uses the bread of the women to gain honour for himself in his interaction with the neighbour¹⁰ or, at the very least secure the honour of the entire village. These actions are related to the request of honouring a friendship (Derrett 1978:83–84; Herzog

9. Where client and patron relations played out on an asymmetrical level, the value of friendship was transacted on a symmetrical level with both parties being of roughly equal status or honour. Reciprocity was always expected in the value of friendship; therefore, when a gift was given or a favour done a gift or favour of equal value was expected in return. If one of the parties failed to honour the friendship-reciprocity value they would either be responsible for the breakdown of the friendship, or a new patron and client relationship might be established between them. This places emphasis on the fact that, in the 1st-century Mediterranean, there was no such thing as ‘free gifts’. The value of honour and shame was always at play, even, or especially so, within friendships (Crook & Stansell 2020:205). This is reflected in the work of Hesiod (*Op.* 353–361), the 7th century BCE Greek poet, when he notes that a person should ‘give to whoever gives, and give not to whoever gives not’. Furthermore, ‘the person who takes for himself shamelessly, even if it is an insignificant thing, freezes his dear heart’ (Hesiod 1988:46–47).

10. This idea centres around the interpretation and understanding of the word ἀναίδειαν in the article of Van Eck (2011). The meaning of the word can be interpreted as ‘a lack of respect for convention’, making the popular translation of ‘persistence’ less probable and suggesting ‘shamelessness’ as a better translation (Danker & Krug 2009:24–25).

1994:201–202). Moreover, Van Eck (2011:11) argues an even more intensive point, in that the friend aims to make a client of his neighbour. Would this be the case, the friend then uses the property and honour of the women in his village, including his wife, to increase and secure his *own* honour.

Conclusion

This article invites modern, 21st-century readers and interpreters to imagine anew how a 1st-century hearer would have visualised the setting of the parable of the Friend at Midnight, given the cultural information and cultural scripts constructed above. Based on the described cultural scripts, it is possible to imagine that the friend awaking from his bed to give bread to his neighbour is, in effect, using the property of women to gain honour for himself and make the neighbour a client. The bread that the friend provides was baked by women, mainly for the provision and nourishing of the community. Therefore, it could be seen that the friend, through his actions, reappropriates the women's communal bread for his own, honour-based, purposes.

It is possible to imagine that, behind the men in the parable scrambling and failing to provide group hospitality, and using the labour and produce of women to secure and increase their own honour; were women succeeding in providing for their families, garnering and maintaining honour for their households and community and supplying the very foundation on which the value of hospitality is based. However, even though they are succeeding and providing and also understood to be succeeding and providing by the 1st-century audience, recognition is not given to the roles and importance of women in the text, not even by most modern commentaries and interpreters. When further considering the actions of the friend giving away, or withholding, bread that women baked for the communal village, it becomes clear that where honour is concerned in the 1st-century Mediterranean and, perhaps, even today, 'it belongs to the men' (Levine 1994:26).

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C.D.D.T. is the sole author of this article.

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