

# Unhiding the voices of women in the Parable of the Good Samaritan: A call for academic inclusion

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The parables of Jesus are often susceptible to patriarchal, androcentric interpretations. By using a realistic reading and social-scientific criticism, this article will investigate the voices, roles, and presence of women in the parable of the Good Samaritan, and how the 1st-century audience of the parable would most likely have understood women to be present, even if not mentioned in the parable. Women played critical roles in terms of hospitality, travel, innkeeping, and healing. These roles and voices of women are often ignored by modern interpreters and exegetes. This article not only emphasises the valuable roles that women fulfilled in the time of Jesus but also critiques the lack, or absence, of women as a point of discussion, acknowledgement, and study in most biblical commentaries and books concerning the parable of the Good Samaritan. The aim of this research is to contribute to the unhiding of women voices in patriarchal, androcentric texts thereby reconstructing and deconstructing gender paradigms within biblical scholarship.

**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. This research is also in line with the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5: Gender equality and women empowerment.

**Keywords:** historical Jesus; feminism; social-scientific criticism; equality; realistic reading; early Jesus movement; parables; The Good Samaritan; women; theological education; women's history.

## Introduction

The traditional interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan is one focussed on answering the question of who a person's neighbour is. The parable follows exclusively male characters, namely a Samaritan, a Levite, a Jew, a priest, and an innkeeper. Scholars and interpreters seldom focus on the inn where the Samaritan is left to recover, with even fewer mentioning women, or the roles of women, in the parable. Often women are only mentioned as prostitutes who might have been found within the inn. Academic books and commentaries, when discussing the complexities of the 1st-century inn<sup>1</sup> or tavern, often ignore women, or relegate women to the singular role of inn-prostitute. This article will attempt to unhide the voices of women in the parable of the Good Samaritan by using a realistic reading of the parable and proposes an alternative reading scenario based on the cultural scripts that the reading evokes. I will also briefly discuss the importance of an accurate representation of history, and its possible effect on academic education.

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. Lastly, all available documents and

1. The inn as an institution entered Jewish Palestine society around 63 BCE as a result of the Roman occupation and became a familiar sight in the 1st century under the rule of Herod, who expanded the Palestinian infrastructure and economy. Because the inn entered Jewish society from Roman and Greek spheres, it was often seen as an immoral place of debauchery and dishonest behaviour with many Jews associating the institution with a place where pagan worshippers would sojourn. However, the negative ideas surrounding inns slowly changed in Jewish society and by the 2nd century Rabbi Nehemiah (*Gn Rab.* 54.6), a well-known Palestinian sage, even described inns as a vital public institution of much benefit to travellers. Inns became so popular that the Greek word for inn, Πανδοχείον, even entered the Jewish language as a loanword: *pundaq* (Freedman & Simon 1983:480–481; Rosenfeld 1998:149–152).

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.

By using a realistic reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan, this article aims to shed light on the fact that, although not discussed by many scholars and exegetes, women were present and active on 1st-century Palestinian roadways. Moreover, they played significant roles in the trade of innkeeping and the 1st-century audience of this parable most probably understood these roles and would, therefore, have other feminine images come to mind when thinking of an inn, not merely that of a female prostitute.

## Women and travel

When reading and imagining the parable play out in front of a 1st century audience, either being told by Jesus, or read or recanted by a subsequent tradition, it is important to observe that women were not only present in inns but were also frequent travellers in ancient Palestine and Egypt, occupying the roads of the Roman Empire as part of families and convoys, slaves, craftswomen, and tradeswomen. Surprisingly, it would seem that women often travelled alone, or at least a companion is not mentioned when consulting the Oxyrhynchus papyri. When investigating 2341 of the entries in the Oxyrhynchus papyri dated between the 1st and 4th century CE, in the majority of instances concerning women travellers, no companion is mentioned. This excludes texts related to the slave trade. It would seem that it was not an uncommon sight to see women travelling alone. These accounts include a mother who travels alone to a funeral in another city (P. Oxy 9.1218, l. 6–7: ἡ μήτηρ μου Θαῖσις εἰς Ἀντινόου, δοκῶ, ἐπὶ κηδῖαν ἀπῆλθεν.), an invitation sent to a woman to attend a birthday celebration of the god of the Serapis cult (P. Oxy 1.1121.3–6: πᾶν ποιήσον, κυρία, ἐξελεθει[ν τῆ] κ τοῖς γενεθλείοις τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ] δῆλωσόν μοι ἡ πλοῖφ ἐξέρχ[ει] ἡ ὄνω, ἴνα πεμφθῆ σοι.), and two women who delivered letters to each other by hand (P. Oxy 63.4365) (Blumell 2011:245). It is, therefore, quite possible that women also occupied the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, and were part of the parable narrative.

## Women as innkeepers

Women played significant roles in innkeeping<sup>2</sup> in the 1st century. Running an inn was commonly a family affair with wives assisting their husbands in the management of the establishment. In fact, women would often run inns on their own (Rosenfeld 1998:133, 136). It would, therefore, be easily conceivable that the innkeeper in the parable had a wife and that she, at the very least, assisted him in the chores and operations that the inn required, which would include caring for the injured traveller whom the Samaritan had left with them. Moreover, women would often occupy roles as servers and hostesses to guests (Pomeroy 1995:73, 88–92; Schaps 1981:61–62).

Women in these roles were familiar sights in 1st-century Palestine where inns were a common feature on the imperial Roman roads,<sup>3</sup> and its occupants and owners well known to those who travelled the roads<sup>4</sup> (Balsdon 1962:224–226; Evans 2015:133–144). However, it should be mentioned that women as innkeepers were generally not seen in a positive light. They were seen as uncontrollable and their position as innkeeper extended to them certain freedoms and conduct that was seen as vulgar, irresponsible, and unbecoming of a respectable woman. To this point Horatius Cocles, equates a woman who is an innkeeper to the same status of that of a prostitute (Dyson 2008:175–176; Evans 2015:135; Kleberg 1957:57–59, 120–121). Although this does reinforce a negative view and stereotype of women, it also establishes a basis for women as innkeepers in the 1st-century, allowing them certain freedoms, autonomy, and even a semblance of power, specifically in relation to hospitality rites and authority over finances of the inn.

Women and the roles they fulfilled at inns<sup>5</sup> in the 1st-century receives no attention in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Many commentaries do not mention the roles of women innkeeping, and whenever women are mentioned they are limited to the roles of prostitutes. Prostitution, especially in the context of an inn, was not merely a frowned upon occupation in the ancient world, it was also considered dangerous as this career was devoid of male protectors (Pomeroy 1995:91). Many prostitutes were slaves, trained in

2. Some scholars identify 'beer houses' and 'drinking parlours' as inns. However, these were spaces that would host public festivals and would often be associated with loose and immoral behaviour. Prostitution was also often practised inside these institutions in addition to the sale and consumption of alcohol (Burkert 1991:12–13; Oller 1995:1467–1468). These institutions fail to adhere to all the functions and requirements of an inn, therefore, classifying them as inns would be unsatisfactory to what is defined as an inn in the 1st century (Rosenfeld 1998:134).

3. The road between Jerusalem and Jericho was most probably a Roman Imperial road. Roman sentry posts were erected along the road with a Roman military post where Roman couriers would change horses. Sentry posts were already built on this road by the 1st century, thereby making it very likely that it was common knowledge that the road was dangerous to travel. This would make the road between Jerusalem and Jericho an understandable choice for Jesus to use as a setting for a man to be assaulted in his parable (Wilkinson 1975:17, 21).

4. The inn in the parable was most likely in or very close to the town of Jericho and not found on the open road where it would be, not only more dangerous but also far from the cities that supplied the inn with the needed operational produce and animals (Wilkinson 1975:19).

5. The innkeeper in the parable is identified to be male in the text (τῷ πανδοχεῖ); however, the term 'πανδοκεῖον' can be used to refer to female innkeepers and in the case of Josephus composing a list of unacceptable wives for priests to marry (Ant. 12.2.276) (transl. Whiston 1987:142).

artistic traits that would make them more desirable to those visiting inns. This afforded certain women the means to rise above their station and secure their freedom. A famous example of this is Aspasia, who started as a slave, became a madam (the person running the inn), and ultimately lived with Pericles, the ruler of Athens. She was even praised by Plutarch (2013 [*Them.* 24.3]):

Sources claim that Aspasia was highly valued by Pericles because she was clever and politically astute. After all, Socrates sometimes visited her, bringing along his pupils, and his close friends took their wives to listen to her—although she ran an establishment which was neither orderly nor respectable, seeing that she educated a group of young female companions to become courtesans. (p. 277)

This paints a vastly different picture of not only the inn as an establishment, but most importantly, the lives of women within the establishment. Although the inn was seen as a disreputable institution by most, the same establishment supplied women, who had little hope as slaves and outcasts, with a means to rise above their station and the odds they faced.

Admittedly, there can be little doubt that women did fulfil the role of prostitution within inns and taverns; however, they also had many other important, even critical, roles in inns, which is very seldom discussed. Women were very often innkeepers themselves and it was not uncommon to encounter women running the affairs of the establishment (Rosenfeld 1998:133). In fact, Casson (1994:208) notes that ‘as far back as the earliest days of travel, innkeeping was often a women’s job, and this continued right on into Roman times’ (Casson 1994:208). Female innkeepers were addressed by the title of *domina* and treated with a certain modicum of respect, not only by slaves and other women but also by their husbands (Saller 1998:86). In a poem attributed to Virgil (*Aen. Copa.* 1–20) (1918:449), a female innkeeper is said to have stood outside her establishment advertising how delicious her food is and how cool her inn is inside. In another example, a relief in a town outside of Italy shows that female innkeepers were also responsible for adding up the accounts and determining what was owed by the guests (Casson 1994:206–208).

The tension between the occupation of inn-prostitute and innkeeper is excellently exemplified by Rahab, the person who hides the Israelite explorers in Joshua 2. Rahab is described by the Biblical text as a prostitute (πόρνης), however, Josephus (*Ant.* 5.1.6–8) refers to her on multiple occasions as an innkeeper. Given the cultural scripts supplied above it would seem that there is a link between disreputable occupations in the 1st century, such as innkeeper and prostitute. It could be understood that Rahab was labelled as a prostitute because she ran an inn.<sup>6</sup> This draws attention to the close relationship between innkeeping and prostitution

6. It should also be noted that Josephus might be trying to redeem Rahab in the light of her important role in the genealogy of Jesus, thereby changing her occupation from prostitute to innkeeper. However, innkeeper would hardly be considered a redeeming occupation in the 1st century and the reinterpretation of Rahab as an innkeeper still draws attention to the link between prostitution and innkeeping, especially for women.

and, more notably, how present and important the roles of women were in the 1st century.

Prostitution and/or innkeeping were not the only important roles women occupied within 1st-century inns. Women also fulfilled roles as advertisers outside of the inn and treasurers determining accounts and collecting amounts that are due. Barmaids, cleaning girls, porters that would carry the luggage of guests and show them to their rooms, waitresses, musicians, and dancers providing entertainment to the patrons were all roles that women fulfilled and were found in inns. These women-centric roles were also found in restaurants and entertainment establishments found typically in close vicinity to inns (Casson 1994:206–218).

It would be easy to imagine women playing these important roles in the inn of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Surely women played an important role in caring for the injured traveller and his wounds. They would have entertained the traveller, kept him company, and cared for him for days, or even weeks, until he was fully healed.

## Women innkeepers in Josephus and rabbinic literature

Throughout the writings of Josephus it is clear that women quite commonly took the occupation of innkeepers. These women were also described as belonging to the lower class, as Josephus (*Ant.* 12.2.276) mentions when reflecting on purity laws for priests, and even going so far as to add female innkeeping (not present in the Lv 21:7 version) to the list of forbidden spouses for a priest (Josephus 1987):

From the priests he exacted a double degree of purity. For not only did he debar them, in common with all others, from the aforesaid practices, but he further forbade them to wed a harlot, he forbids them to wed a slave or a prisoner of war, aye or such women as gain their livelihood by hawking or *innkeeping* or who have for whatsoever reasons been separated from their husbands. (p. 142; [author’s own emphasis]).

Josephus was also aware of inns as institutions that were often ran by women. Similarly, the author of the Testament of Judah (*T. Jud.* 23.2) also acknowledges female innkeepers (Charles 1907:201).

Further evidence of female innkeepers are found in the Mishnah (*Git.* 8.9) and the Tosefta (*Yebam.* 1.10) with two very interesting accounts shedding light on the importance and scope of the roles of female innkeepers. Rabbinic literature attributed to the schools of Hillel and Shammai, as well as literature attributed to later generations, portray accounts of the rapid increase of inns. This included female innkeeping (Mishnah 2011:218, 318–319; Rosenfeld 1998:143).

Two interesting and important cases of female innkeepers can be found in the Mishnah, especially in relation to the parable of the Good Samaritan. Firstly, in tractate Yebamot 16:7, a case is discussed of a woman whose husband disappeared

and is then declared to be dead. In the case, as recorded in the Mishnah (2011), Rabbi Akiva and the sages debate and refer to a previous case concerning the testimony of a female innkeeper:

R. Akiva says, 'Not on the evidence of a woman, nor on the evidence of a slave, nor on the evidence of a slave girl, or on the evidence of relatives'. They said to him, 'The story is told that certain Levites went to Zoar, the date town, and one of them took sick on the way, and they left him at an inn. Upon their return they said to the [female] innkeeper, "Where is our friend?" She said to them, "He died, and I buried him." And they permitted his wife to remarry [on the strength of *her evidence*']'. They said to him, 'And should not a well-bred woman [lit.: woman of priestly decent] be equivalent to an innkeeper'? He said to them, 'Were that women the innkeeper, she would be believed. The innkeeper had produced for them his staff, his pouch, and the Torah scroll which he had in his hand'. (p. 245)

Although this case reflects the debate between upper and lower classes in Jewish society, it also gives us critical insights concerning the role and understanding of women as innkeepers in the late 1st, and early 2nd century, the years when Rabbi Akiva was active. According to what we are told, the Levites made a stop at an inn on their journey to Zoar. One of their companions became ill, and they had no choice but to leave him there. This suggests that inns could sometimes serve as a place of refuge in times of distress when no other options were available. The innkeeper in this instance was a woman, and there was no mention of a husband. The Levites spoke with her and she provided lodging for the sick person, likely caring for him until he passed away. She then took care of his belongings until his companions returned (Rosenfeld 1998:144–145).

Secondly, the Mishnah (*Demai*. 3.5) reports of a female innkeeper welcoming a traveller at her inn and cooking the food that he had brought with him on this journey. In this document again no man or husband is mentioned.

These two accounts not only attest to the well-known roles of women as innkeepers, but also sheds light on their roles in caring for their guests, taking an active role in their healing, recovery, and food preparations. With all these hospitality roles in mind, it is very clear that some similarities exist between these accounts and the parable of the Good Samaritan. In the parable of the New Testament, the innkeeper is depicted as a male, but it is likely that his whole family lived on the premises since the inn was situated on the main road. It can be assumed that his wife also helped him in running the inn (Rosenfeld 1998:147). Both the parable of the Good Samaritan and the Mishnah accounts portray the innkeepers, male or female, in a positive light. They do not hesitate to help the travellers in need.

There seems to be precedent for the roles and importance of women, not only in innkeeping in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, but quite possibly also the attitude towards women who worked at, and ran, these establishments. It is possible that the 1st-century audience of this parable

understood that the Samaritan left the traveller at the inn knowing full well that women will take care of his needs, perhaps even performing burial rites if needed. Whatever the case may be, it is evident that women were a crucial and important part of 1st-century innkeeping.

## Call for academic inclusion

A large number of popular books, articles, and commentaries on the parable of the Good Samaritan only focuses on men and the roles that they portray in the narrative, mentioning women only as prostitutes at inns. But in the innkeeping sector, women held a number of significant roles. Some examples of services offered include marketing and entertainment, bookkeeping, and performing the burial rituals for deceased guests. Moreover, women were also frequent travellers in the 1st century and would often be found travelling alone on the roads (Bailey 1983:146–147, 2008:256; Blomberg 2012:296; Forbes 2000:65; Foubert 2016:296; Hendrickx 1986:88; Kendall 2006:188; Levine 2014:97–98; Pentecost 1982:67; Rosenfeld 1998; Scott 1989:200; Snodgrass 2008:271; Webster 2021:50; Zimmermann 2015:311).

Women were active members of this narrative; however, they were excluded from written textual tradition. Nonetheless, the 1st-century audience of the parables and the first hearers of Jesus would most probably have understood women to be present in this narrative, as well as other parables that Jesus told (Du Toit 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). There is sufficient evidence to ask: Why do we, in our academic literature, still primarily refer to the most notable role of women in this parable as being prostitutes? Is this also taught in our universities and seminaries, and preached from our pulpits? This perpetual image and overemphasis on the singular role of women as prostitutes may have a great effect on theological education, which inevitably influence the ecclesial sphere. The unhiding of women's voices and the important roles that they portray not only help to create a more inclusive view of history but may also aid in opposing social injustices, such as the increase of gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa, and complacency in local faith communities when aiming to responsibly address this crisis (Banda 2020:1; Mulder 2013:200). Unhiding of the voices of women is one way in which not only a more accurate, and more inclusive, history is represented but is also a more responsible portrayal of women in theological, educational and academic spheres that inevitably influences faith communities and society.

## Conclusion

This article provides an alternative reading scenario for the parable of the Good Samaritan. A reading where, given all the cultural scripts and research presented, women are not merely prostitutes in the narrative, but rather perform critical and important roles and functions. Without the women in this parable, the narrative would not be possible and the assaulted victim who the Samaritan rescued would not have been cared for. Although women do not take centre

stage, they are the crucial background actors allowing the narrative to function and the parable to reach its intended conclusion.

This inclusive reading presents a more complete and accurate account of history. The further benefit of this reading is that, by un hiding the voices of women, current readings of this parable can include the importance and varied roles of women without an overemphasis on singular, androcentric, and patriarchal roles such as prostitution. This could have important implications for theological, academic education and ecclesial spheres when women are represented more accurately and completely.

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

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