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Women and Men in the Fourth Gospel: A Discipleship of Equals

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In this book Beirne undertakes the analysis of female and male characters in the Gospel of John. Her purpose is “to show the contribution made by women and men, as gender pairs, to the literary and theological development of the Fourth Gospel” (1). To reach this aim, she establishes six “johannine gender pairs” and examines their similarities or contrasting features and their relationship to Jesus. She comes to the conclusion that the Gospel treats men and women equally with regard to discipleship.

The book consists of eight chapters. An introduction (1–41) explains the purpose of the study and the methodology used and gives an overview of contemporary studies related to the theme. The following six chapters are dedicated to the gender pairs in John: the mother of Jesus and the royal official (42–66), Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman (67–104), the man born blind and Martha (105–39), Mary of Bethany and Judas (140–69), the mother of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple (170–94), and Mary Magdalene and Thomas (195–218). The conclusion (219–23) briefly summarizes the results.

The general approach of the study is based on the observation that several studies focus on the role of women in the Gospel of John and draw conclusions concerning their importance as disciples, but none of them actually compares the presentation of women and men. (Unfortunately, Beirne does not mention the work of Collen M. Conway, *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and Johannine Characterization* [SBLDS 167; 1999]. Conway’s study has a similar purpose as Beirne’s and meets some of the shortcomings Beirne observes in contemporary research, although their results differ in some aspects.) In Beirne’s opinion, women and men are portrayed in literary partnership, as gender pairs, in the Gospel of John. In order to establish the gender pairs, she uses

criteria developed in research on the Gospel of Luke, where the existence of gender pairs has long been noticed.

In every chapter on gender pairs, Beirne starts by collecting evidence that the characters really form a pair. If they do not appear in the same scene, she shows that the passages are part of a larger literary unit and connected through common themes. Structural and verbal parallels or contrasting features are pointed out as well. She then analyzes the portrayal of the two persons with regard to their faith response toward Jesus and to the self-revelation of Jesus they cause. Although I am not quite convinced that every gender pair of Beirne really should be considered as a pair, the examination of respectively two characters side by side offers many important insights into the narrative technique and the theological purpose of the Gospel.

Beirne demonstrates that every pair shows a specific stage of authentic Johannine faith. The mother of Jesus and the royal official are examples of authentic faith, while Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman are pictured rather as moving toward mature faith. The man born blind and Martha both make an explicit confession of faith, whereas Mary of Bethany and Judas illustrate sharply contrasting responses concerning the understanding of Jesus' passion and glory. The fifth pair, the mother of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple, form the nucleus of the new community of disciples as perfect believers. Finally, Mary Magdalene and Thomas are portrayed as examples of growth toward resurrection faith. The characters are representative of different responses to Jesus' call, but they are much more than stereotypes: their individual traits engage the reader and resonate or challenge one's own faith response. Of equal importance, however, is the function the characters have as catalysts for Jesus' self-revelation. They induce him to perform "signs" and to teach and are therefore important in demonstrating knowledge about his person and mission.

As the main result of her study Beirne shows that the Gospel of John promotes a genuine discipleship of equals. Women and men are not competing, and, in her opinion, neither gender shows general superiority of any kind, although in some pairs the female partner is quicker to respond and shows deeper understanding. In the faith encounters of the gender pairs there is a variety of responses, but no dualism along the lines of gender. Male and female readers are invited to identify with the characters of opposite gender as well with those of the same gender.

Beirne's study is an important contribution to the research on gender matters in the Gospel of John. She is certainly right to demand that both female and male characters should be taken into consideration to get a balanced view of the treatment of women. Her work proves that it is beneficial to compare characters of the same or different but related

passages. But she has not convinced me that the Fourth Gospel really presents six gender pairs. For some of her pairs the evidence does not seem sufficient to establish the pair. For example, there are connections between the man born blind and Martha, but I think the story of the man born blind shows much closer parallels to the healing of the lame man. Beirne briefly considers and rejects this option (104 n. 3), but she does not take the possibility of parallels by contrast here into account. On the other hand, Martha and Mary could be seen as a pair because the two passages in which they appear as main characters are interwoven.

A more fundamental objection to Beirne's concept of gender pairs is derived from her own results: if the gender of a character has little relevance for the reader and the Evangelist treats them all equally with regard to gender, although highlighting their individuality, why should there be male-female pairs throughout the Gospel? Beirne does not provide reasons for this basic assumption, and she only touches on an examination of a few of the other possible pairs. In my opinion, a mixture of female-male pairs and pairs of the same gender (or relations between more than two characters) would be much more probable. Moreover, all female main characters are seen as part of a gender pair, but some male disciples (e.g., Peter or Nathanel) are not. If this is an intentional part of the Gospel structure, it should have some effect on the overall view of gender in John. Otherwise it rather weakens the concept of gender pairs.

Another critical remark concerns Beirne's perhaps too positive and empathizing view of the characters examined. With the exception of Judas, Beirne values all of them as good disciples and faithful followers even if some have temporary difficulties. The Gospel offers evidence for this, but I think it is sometimes more critical or ambivalent than Beirne's interpretation. On the other hand, Beirne contrasts the disciples with "the Jews" and other persons who are seen very negatively. Again, I believe the Gospel text to be more ambivalent and less dualistic than Beirne pictures it.

On the whole, the study of Beirne is an important contribution to research on the role of women and men in the Gospel of John. Further work will benefit from her results as well as from the questions her thesis raises.