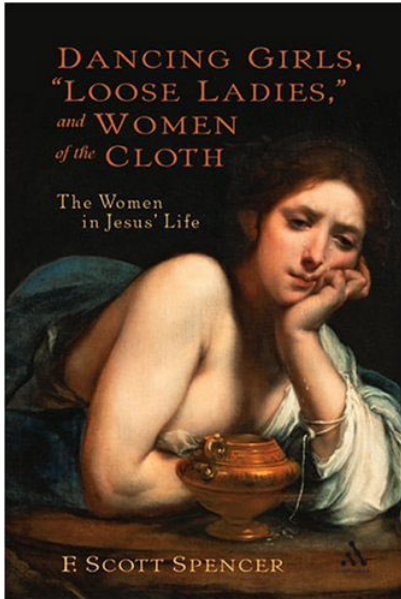


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**Spencer, F. Scott**

*Dancing Girls, Loose Ladies, and Women of the Cloth:  
The Women in Jesus' Life*

New Testament Guides

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The book is a compilation of F. Scott Spencer's research on and exploration of women in the four Gospels and the book of Acts over the past decade. Four of the seven chapters are versions of previously published articles and essays—each expanded and revised—whereas three chapters are published for the first time.

Spencer establishes his methodological framework in chapter 1. He then addresses the portrayal of women in Matthew, Mark, John, Luke, and Acts in chapters 2–7, with the last two chapters on women in Acts. Like many other books from Continuum, the book uses endnotes versus footnotes, a cumbersome format for some readers, especially since Spencer includes useful—and interesting—dialogue and an extensive listing of bibliographical citations. In this vein, a bibliography is not included. The book has a subject index but does not contain reference or author indices, omissions that will disappoint some readers.

Spencer is best known for his use of narrative and social-science criticisms in the investigation of Acts. In chapter 1 Spencer explains that his investigation will employ feminist criticism, a “colorful, sprawling big top under which all voices and viewpoints can be heard” (1). He argues that feminist criticism is an eclectic methodological approach that draws upon a variety of different methodologies, including historical, narratological, sociological, intertextual, cultural, and literary criticisms. With feminist

criticism established as his methodological foundation, Spencer then examines some of the more noteworthy investigations of women in the Gospels and Acts, focusing on Ben Witherington III and Richard Bauckham. In the case of Witherington, he suggests that his positive portrait of women in the Gospels and Acts is “purchased at the price of a legalistic, myopic, and marginalized bowdlerization of Judaism” (8). As regards to Bauckham, Spencer proposes that he does not adequately address issues that inevitably arise when dominant male authors and readers attempt to speak for and about women’s experience, on the one hand, and does not heed appropriate attention to the silence and absence of women in the New Testament narratives, on the other.

Spencer then goes in search of some examples where the methodological miscues of Witherington and Bauckham are not made. Ironically, he finds models more cognizant of and aligned with feminist criticism in the arena of the Hebrew Bible. These approaches, per Spencer, are more effective on several grounds: (1) they recognize that biblical criticism is male-centered and that female readers are needed; (2) the lens of literary criticism provides a solid starting point for interpretation but needs to be supplemented with additional methodological approaches such as deconstruction and feminism; and (3) “the good of the biblical text must be unraveled from the bad, the redemptive from the deconstructive” (17).

Chapter 2 looks at the oft-examined Matthean genealogy, specifically the four women who are included: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah. Spencer contends the focus of recent investigations misses the comic element in each of their stories in the Hebrew Bible by concentrating on interests that are wrong-headed: (1) the women as sinners; (2) their categorization as non-Jews or strangers; and (3) the scandalous, provocative nature of each woman’s story. Spencer examines each of the four women within the context of their Hebrew Bible narratives and concludes that each stands out due to her shrewd dealings with bungling male authorities. Further, despite passive assistance from God (who sits on the sideline in each case), they successfully implement God’s will. He then moves to the Matthean narrative, suggesting Joseph and his actions in Matt 2 mirror the actions of the four women. In particular, Joseph embodies the virtue of becoming a “eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (19:11)” (39), which turns the traditional notion of masculinity on its head.

In chapter 3 Spencer concentrates his analysis of women in Mark on the episode involving Herodias and her dancing daughter. He argues that the intertextual examples of Judith, Jezebel, and Esther serve as a backdrop to the narrative. He also proposes that the two preceding sandwiched episodes of the hemorrhaging woman and Jairus and his daughter (Mark 5:21–43) provide an intratextual frame for the narrative. Specifically, the hemorrhaging woman, just like Herodias and her daughter, manipulates male power to

secure what she wants. Spencer also suggests the episode of the Syrophenician woman with the demonized daughter (7:24–30) falls in line with this same theme: she holds Jesus to his proclamation of loving service. In addition, her status as a foreigner, and her prodding of Jesus, foreshadows the second feeding miracle that takes place in the Gentile region of the Decapolis (8:1–10). This leads Spencer to the conclusion that Mark portrays Jesus as “a developing, maturing figure—open to women’s leadership and guidance” (68), with the hemorrhaging woman and the Syrophenician woman prodding him along in his maturation, development process.

Spencer addresses the various appearances of women in John in chapter 4 from the lens of conversation analysis as developed by Deborah Tannen. He stresses the importance of recognizing linguistic differences between males and females and, in particular, the use of rhetorical power in the discourse. Biblical literature, according to Spencer, is replete with numerous examples of males struggling to attain honor by dominating women and other males in the use of rhetorical discourse. He breaks his analysis into three areas: the influence of setting, status relations, and linguistic conventions. At the end of his analysis, Spencer finds evidence for both volatile masculine and feminine discourse from Jesus in John. He also suggests that Jesus is a more complex figure than the women in the Gospel, although “he is also more unstable, vacillating in each dialogue between asserting his authority and power and protecting his honor and independence, on the one hand, and reaching out in intimacy and empathy and preserving community and solidarity, on the other” (100).

Spencer deals with each of the episodes involving women in John. First, in the case of the wedding at Cana episode, Spencer argues that Jesus’ mother is depicted as a model disciple; when Jesus balks at her request for his cooperation in preserving the dignity of a family wedding due to the shortage of wine, she negotiates a resolution between Jesus and the servants to preserve Jesus’ quest for independence. Second, in line with a number of scholars, Spencer recognizes the betrothal scene (Gen 24:10–61; 29:1–14; Exod 2:15–22) as the intertextual interpretive frame for the episode involving the Samaritan woman. He pinpoints three major topics in the exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman: water, husbands, and worship. He subsequently argues that the Samaritan woman in each of these instances presses Jesus to maintain vital continuity with relatives, past and present, and with realms, material and spiritual. Third, Spencer turns his attention to Martha and Mary and the episode involving the raising of Lazarus. The sisters challenge Jesus’ honor by faulting him for failing his obligations as both Lord and friend. Jesus responds to Martha in a dominant, male-oriented manner, whereas he responds to Mary with sympathetic emotion, action representative of the feminine sphere. Fourth, Spencer asserts that Jesus’ encounter with Mary Magdalene in the garden recalls other “garden scenes” in the Hebrew Bible, specifically Adam and Eve (Gen 2:15–25) and the passionate

lovers in the Song of Songs (4:12–5:1; 6:2–3; 8:13). The personal use of names, Jesus calling Mary by name and Mary designating Jesus as Rabbouni, creates an intratextual connection with the episode of the Good Shepherd (10:3–4). While Jesus spurns Mary’s clinging, he does not reject her. Instead, he redirects her to nurture the community of the living, to which she is the first and prime witness.

In chapter 5 Spencer focuses on the episode of the “loose” woman at the house of Simon the Pharisee. He cites the need to pay special attention to surrounding intratextual connections as well as intertextual linkages with Jewish wisdom literature. The narrative itself positions the woman as a deviant, one who fails to observe proper barriers between the male–female space and who exhibits varying forms of female erotica. Spencer draws a direct connection to the wisdom of God reference in the preceding episode (7:35) and the “loose” woman (*viz.*, the seductive women of Prov 7:10–22; Sir 9:3–9). At the same time, he notes parallels with the female partner in the Song of Songs and even Woman Wisdom in Prov 1–9. In the end, Spencer points out that Simon focuses on the literal meaning of the woman’s actions, failing to comprehend the larger intratextual and intertextual nuances at the disposal of the reader. Spencer concurs with previous findings by Cathleen Corley and Barbara Reid that the emotions and actions of the “loose” woman have intratextual echoes—“loose connections”—in the Lukan passion narrative (chs. 22–24), which he breaks into the two categories of kissing and caressing, and weeping and wetting. As a result, the woman, “though unnamed, unvoiced, and unmentioned” (135), stands as a model disciple for Peter and the other apostles and, in particular, coincides with the characteristics of the Isaianic suffering servant (as is the case with Jesus in the passion narrative). Her actions also stand as “counter-patterns” for the treacherous Judas, cowardly Peter, and fearful followers in the passion narrative. In addition, a narrative trajectory extends from her actions to the anonymous women who follow Jesus from Galilee and reemerge at the cross and tomb, where they prepare spices and anointments for Jesus’ body (23:49, 55–56), although their mission is aborted when there is no body to anoint and they get “shuffled to the background in favor of Cleopas, Simon, and the eleven apostles” (136–37).

Chapter 6 examines the portrayal of slave girls and prophetic daughters in Luke-Acts. Spencer argues women as prophets in Luke-Acts largely receive no voice and are repeatedly overshadowed by men. He aims to discover in this chapter if female slaves encounter the same treatment and discovers they receive comparable treatment to the female prophets. Spencer pinpoints three different episodes involving slave girls for investigation: the unnamed slave girl in the passion narrative (22:54–62); Rhoda, the slave girl of Mary (12:12–17); and the slave girl who is silenced by Paul (16:16–18). Nevertheless, he determines that each of the slave girls has her testimony “squashed or challenged” in some way, and shadows of doubt are even cast on the character and

competence of each girl. The narrative is open-ended in the case of the third slave girl, with readers left to decide if she sincerely wants to honor Paul and his companions or maliciously sets out to expose Paul's monotheistic mission in hopes of stirring up anti-Judaic hostility. Nevertheless, Spencer proceeds to call out lack of concern on the part of the implied author for the slave girl; she may be freed of her oppressive employers, but whether or not she finds a home and fictive family is left to the reader. In the end, Spencer concludes that the citation from Joel in Acts 2 is a failed prophecy in Luke-Acts, as for all practical purposes the liberation of female slaves functions as little more than "window-dressing" in Luke-Acts (159).

The final chapter (7) considers the roles played by the different laboring women in Acts. Spencer identifies the portrait of the ideal wife in Prov 31 and Tobit as likely backdrops to the laboring women in Acts. He concludes that "Luke does not liberate women from domestic duty, but he does significantly ennoble household service" (174). Tabitha is subordinated to Peter, and her almsgiving is matched by the God-fearing Cornelius in the next episode and later by Paul (24:17). In contrast to some who envision Lydia as a prominent member of Philippian society, Spencer draws upon recent work on class distinctions and artisans in Greco-Roman antiquity and places her on the lower ledges of hierarchy, outside the city walls. Priscilla is seen by Spencer as the most liberated of the women in Acts, although her leadership role as an authoritative teacher is not before a public audience but rather as a private tutor.

Spencer presents a provocative and compelling study on women in the Gospels and Acts. The following are several aspects of his investigation that deserve special note. First, in several places Spencer references the passionate lovers in the Song of Songs as an intertextual backdrop to the narrative in the Gospels and Acts. The intertextual relevance of the Song of Songs—and the female lover—has largely not been acknowledged in past scholarly investigations of these narratives. As a result, Spencer identifies intertextuality that produces several interesting readings. Second, just as the female lover deconstructs traditional models of behavior, Spencer argues the female type and antitype in Jewish wisdom literature serves as an interpretive lens for the actions and speech of the different women characters in the Gospels and Acts. Third, while not all scholars will concur with Spencer's reading of the four women in the Matthean genealogy, they will acknowledge that he presents an intriguing counterproposal to the three interpretive stances that exist today. Fourth, Spencer provides an in-depth reading of the "loose" lady in Luke 7:36–50. In particular, the intersection of intertextual, intratextual, and extratextual referents he culls engenders a quite stimulating—perhaps even arousing—interpretation of the text. (However, on the extent of sensual, erotic connotations in Luke 7:36–50, cf. the recent article by Charles H. Cosgrove, "A Woman's Unbound Hair in the Greco-Roman World, with Special Reference to the Story of the 'Sinful Woman' in Luke 7:36-50," *JBL* 124 [2005]:

675–92.) Finally, Spencer presents a critical reading within the context of Greco-Roman—and Jewish—antiquity, exercising readings that “struggle” with the sociohistorical and literary nuances of the narrative. He uncovers instances, as a result, where the narrative conforms to patriarchal structures as well as places where the narrative subverts or runs counter to those same structures.

Despite being a valuable contribution on women in the Gospels and Acts and virtual required reading for scholars and lay people alike who are interested in the subject matter, the book does contain some deficiencies, that I hope the author and publisher will consider addressing if additional versions are released. First, the volume lacks a concluding chapter and ends very abruptly with the analysis of laboring women in chapter 7. A synopsis of the prior chapters and examination of potential trends or trajectories would be a useful addition. Second, on a similar note, the author sets forth “feminist criticism” as his methodological approach in chapter 1, and while feminist criticism is a large methodological umbrella, he assumes different methodological approaches in each of the chapters (although dominated by narrative and sociological approaches). This ad hoc methodological mixture, specifically the use of different terminology, proves somewhat confusing. (Part of this may be due to the fact that four of the seven chapters originated as essays in other publications, and the author apparently chose to make minor changes, if that, when importing them into the book.) For example, in the case of the women in John in chapter 4, Spencer elects to draw upon conversation analysis, whereas he opts to use discourse analysis—as disseminated into biblical studies by Joel B. Green—to examine the episode involving the “loose” woman in chapter 5. In all, the author would present a more cogent investigation by establishing a methodological foundation—and accompanying terminology—in chapter 1 and then using it as the basis for his ensuing analysis. Finally, while the book addresses most of the texts involving women in the Gospels and Acts, it does not cover all of them (e.g., the episode involving Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38–42; the women at the tomb and resurrection in Mark). These additions in a revised edition would prove quite useful and help the author present a more compelling, expansive picture of women in the Gospels and Acts.

The publisher and author are to be commended for their editing and proofing of the manuscript prior to publication. However, there are several errors that should be corrected if an additional edition is released, and I am sure there are some additional ones that I failed to notice. The reference to F. Gerald Downing’s essay “The Woman from Syrophenicia and her Doggedness: Mark 7:24–31 (Matthew 15:21–28)” (75 n. 84) is missing the publication date, and the scripture reference on page 147 should read “(12:13–15; 16:16–18),” not “(12:13–15; 16–18).”

In spite of these minor drawbacks, Spencer provides an interesting and stimulating analysis of women in the Gospels and Acts, and the work should be on the reading list for scholars, ministers, and even many lay people. For those who are interested in an integrated hermeneutic that seeks critically to understand the biblical narratives within a literary and social matrix, the book will be warmly welcomed. Written in an accessible style, thought provoking, and with an easy-to-digest format, the book appeals to both scholars and lay readers alike. While readers will likely not agree with all of his conclusions, they will find that Spencer provides a thorough overview of the different issues related to each issue in purview and presents some compelling—or at the very least intriguing—insights on oft-looked-at narratives and characters.