

The Hermeneutics of Women Disciples in Mark's Gospel: An Igbo Contextual Reconstruction

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THE HERMENEUTICS OF WOMEN DISCIPLES IN MARK'S GOSPEL: AN IGBO CONTEXTUAL RECONSTRUCTION

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE
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BY

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DEDICATION

TO

MY MOTHER, MARCELINA EZENWA (AKWUGO UMUAGBALA)

AND

ALL *UMUADA* IGBO

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION:

Winsome Munro begins her article on “Women Discipleship in Mark?” by noting that the presence of women in Mark’s gospel is not the issue since they are mentioned in no less than sixteen contexts.¹ The detailed chart of the named and the unnamed women in Mark’s Gospel outlined by Willard Swartely confirms this.² Mark includes a story about a woman healed by Jesus (1:29-31) among the narratives he presents as marking Jesus’ first day of ministry (1:21-39). Interestingly, the evangelist also ends his gospel (at its peak) with narratives about women (15:40-16:8). Hence Mk 1:29-31 and Mk 15:40-16:8 could be said to frame Mark’s narratives about women. Within this inclusio the narrator puts the stories of the hemorrhaging woman (5:24-34), Syrophenician woman (7:24-30), the poor widow (12:41-44), and the woman who anoints Jesus (14:3-9). In all these, Mark represents women as models of faith.

This positive portrait notwithstanding, a Markan reader notices some evidence to suggest that Mark has an indifferent attitude towards women as well. As important as the parables are in Jesus’ teaching ministry, there are no parables in Mark in which women play any role. A typical example of this is the parable of a wedding feast that only talks about the bridegroom and the wedding guests, leaving out the bride (2:19-20). Contrast this with Matthew who has eleven women in parables.³ Luke also has the parable of the widow in court pleading her case (Lk 18:1-18) and the woman who sweeps her room looking for her lost coin (Lk 15:8-10). Mark’s negative attitude could also be seen in the way he casts Mary, the mother of Jesus in a dark light (3:21, 31-

¹ Winsome Munro, “Women Disciples in Mark?” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1982): 225-241 [226].

² Willard Swartley M, “The Role of Women in Mark’s Gospel: A Narrative Analysis,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 27, no. 1 (1997): 17.

³ Cf. Mt 13:33 (the woman who mixed yeast with three measures of wheat flour) and Mt 25:1-13 (the ten maidens who went to meet the groom).

35). The manner in which Mark narrates the episode of Herodias and her daughter (6:17-29) also leaves a lot to be desired about his attitude towards women. The two depict women as seductive, manipulative and evil. In contrast, Matthew removes much of this (Mt 14:3-11), and Luke omits the scene entirely.⁴

Despite using the two key discipleship verbs, “follow” (*akoloutheō*) and “serve” (*diakoneō*) to describe the relationship of Mary Magdalene and the other women in her group (thereby giving them discipleship status), the posture Mark accords them at the scene of the crucifixion, “watching from a distance” (*apo macrothen*), makes one wonder if they are different from the male disciples who fled. The climax of Mark’s seemingly ambivalent portrait of women is the manner in which he silences them at the end of the gospel. The reader would have expected to hear that the women joyfully went to disseminate the good news of the resurrection to Jesus’ disciples and Peter as the young man they met at the tomb had directed them to do. On the contrary, the narrator tells us that the three women “went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:8).

This complex portrayal of women by Mark has made the discipleship of women in this gospel a major and an interesting topic of studies.⁵ In their scholarship, scholars have raised questions of historicity, Mark’s redactional motive, characterization of women’s roles, and the relationship of these women with Jesus and the other disciples. The fundamental question is this:

⁴ John J. Schmitt, “Women in Mark’s Gospel,” *Bible Today* 19, no. 4 (July 1981): 228-233 [228-229]. Winsome Munro would also use the last two points to argue about Mark’s androcentric bias against women. See Munro, “Women Disciples in Mark?” 226.

⁵ I am not surprised, therefore, that this observation formed the opening sentence of Puerto Mercedes’ article, “Female disciples in Mark? The “Problematizing” of a concept.” She gave a long list of scholars who have explored the topic to justify this assertion. See Mercedes Puerto N., “Female disciples in Mark? The “Problematizing” of a concept,” in *Gospels: Narrative and History*, ed. Mercedes Navarro Puerto and Marinella Perroni (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 148.

How does one reconcile the positive portrayal of women as models of faith, on the one hand, and Mark's silence about their discipleship, on the other? Are there women disciples in Mark?

This thesis, therefore, is a contribution of an African, specifically Igbo, perspective to the ongoing conversation on Mark's portrait of women. Structurally, the work has two major parts. Part one comprises the introduction, chapter one, and chapter two. Chapter three, chapter four, and the conclusion make up part two. The "scholarship review" in chapter one and the "Igbo cultural study in context" in chapter two establish the foundation for the "exegesis and discussion on Mk 1:29-31 and Mk 15:40-41" that chapters three and four will engage on.

Two pericopae, the story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (Mk 1:29-31) and the account of the women who witness Jesus' crucifixion (Mk 15:40-41), are selected to serve as the lenses for our discussion of Mark's portrait of women. The reason is because of their relevance both at the level of Mark's narrative and Igbo contextualization. Narratively, the two pericopae could be said to frame Mark's narrative about women. The story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law is the reader's first encounter with stories about women in this gospel⁶ whereas the account of the women who witness the crucifixion (and subsequently his burial and empty tomb) marks its climax and the end. Hence, the two can serve as good lenses for looking ahead on what Mark has to say about women and, at the end of the gospel, to look behind to evaluate what he has said or done with them. Thematically, these are the two passages where the Markan terms for discipleship, "serve" (*"diakoneō"*) and "follow" (*"akolouthēō"*) are used to describe women's relationship with

⁶ Mary Rose D'Angelo underscores this point. She observes that Peter's mother-in-law is used to introduce Christian vocabulary of "being raised" in order to "serve" (1:31) and the readers and hearers are invited to place themselves within the narrative from the outset. Mary Rose D'Angelo, "(Re) Presentation of Women in the Gospels: John and Mark," in *Women & Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard, Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 129-149 [140].

Jesus. After Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law of fever we are told that "she waited on them" (*diēkonei autois*). In the case of the women who witness the crucifixion, Mark describes them as those "who, when Jesus was in Galilee used to follow him and serve him." This scene happens to be the only place in the entire gospel where women are represented as appearing in a group. It is here too that women are mentioned by their proper names. It thus marks a great shift in Mark's usual way of presenting women. Lastly, 1:29-31 and 15:40-41 are ideal texts for discussing the tension or ambiguity noticeable in Mark's characterization of women.

At the level of Igbo cultural study the relevance of the story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law and the account of the women who witness Jesus' death is even more appealing. The two texts evoke spectacular experiences to an Igbo reader. The three fundamental principles of Igbo family life – complementarity, inclusiveness, and solidarity – resonate clear and loud in the two passages. The two powerful and influential women institutions, the *Umuada* (daughters of the lineage) and *Ndinyomdi* (wives of the lineage) are easily associated with the two women groups identified in 15:40-41. The symbolism of their presence at the crucifixion communicates much to an Igbo reader. In the two pericopae, too, one can immediately see the ambiguity or tension that is found in Mark's representation of women. An Igbo woman, on the one hand, is glamorously portrayed in the two passages and, on the other hand, cast in a dark shadow. At the end one is left to wonder whether Mark is championing the course of *Umuada* or he is demeaning or embarrassing them.

The outline of the four chapters of the study is as follows: Chapter One is the scholarship review that gives a general overview of the conversations that the scholars have engaged in on the topic. It begins by looking at the initial concerns of the scholars and the questions that occupied their discussions. For instance, how does Mark portray the women in the first place? Are there

women disciples? From these initial concerns the chapter will further explore the question of the approach or the paradigm of investigation. The key issue here is where to look for the women disciples since Mark has no narrative about the call of any woman disciple as it is the case with the men and the term “disciples” is always used in the masculine. Hence, the questions arises as to whether it is just a matter of looking for passages that explicitly declare that women are disciples or are there more to that? How are the key discipleship terms re-interpreted in relation to the way the women relate and respond to Jesus? Lastly in this chapter, an attention is drawn to the question of the concept, “discipleship.” When we talk about discipleship in Mark’s gospel, should we understand it to refer strictly to the Twelve who are officially called and commissioned by Jesus or does it have a wider understanding referring to all who commit themselves to follow Jesus and be part of the new community he is forming? Scholars are calling for redefinition of the term to reflect Mark’s complex and composite portrait of those who follow Jesus. A generic and inclusive understanding is opted for.

One of the things that comes out at the end of the scholarship review in Chapter One is that the discussions represent the Euro-American voices, concerns, and perspectives on biblical interpretation. It also reflects their social locations and world views. In terms of models of biblical hermeneutics, it is evident that the competing umbrella models of biblical criticisms (historical, literary, and cultural) have been brought to bear on the topic. However, there is a corresponding call for voices from the margins to be heard as well. The call draws its inspiration from the postcolonial biblical interpretation that aims at decolonizing the bible and stresses the need for contextualization, diversity, and plurality. In our context, it is an African perspective that we want to bring to the reading and interpretation of Mark’s portrait of women.

Chapter Two of this study, therefore, tries to put African, specifically Igbo interpretation in context. To do this, it first looks briefly at the development of biblical criticism in the second half of the twentieth century as plotted by Fernando Segovia.⁷ It then, in terms of a model of interpretation, situates Igbo reading within postcolonial cultural studies or ideological criticism. As a cultural study, Igbo hermeneutic will articulate creatively the impulses of the three umbrella models of biblical criticism.⁸ In terms of perspective, Igbo family consciousness, the “*Nwanne*”⁹ philosophy of life, is adopted as a hermeneutical tool or lens for an Igbo interpretation. Complementarity (in terms roles family members play), inclusiveness (life lived conjointly), and solidarity (mutual support) would stand out as the guiding principles for interpersonal life in the family. Without presuming that everybody who would read this work is familiar with the Igbo people of Nigeria, the last part of the chapter gives the reader a general picture of the Igbo people, their worldview, and the position and role of women in such cosmology.

The story of the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law (1:29-31) is taken up in Chapter Three. The chapter has three parts. The first is the exegesis of the pericope where we shall seek an informed understanding of the text in its historical and literary context.¹⁰ This would form the basis for the discussions that will follow in the other parts of the chapter. Having established this informed understanding, part two looks at how scholars have interpreted the story using different

⁷ Fernando Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 34-52.

⁸ Here we talk about the historical impulse of historical criticism – its sense of the distance of the text from today’s flesh and blood reader; the formalist impulse of literary criticism – its regard for the principles of narrative (these texts follow certain conventions that are foreign to us); the hermeneutical impulse of cultural criticism – its regard for the context of both text and reader. See Fernando Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 11.

⁹ It is a genderless ideology that reflects the strong family bond that exists between the Igbo as people from the same mother. My *Nwanne* in the Igbo culture is the other whose life and future is tied with mine. Inherent in it is the sense of shared origin, shared purpose, family-hood, togetherness, team work, friendship, and community.

¹⁰ The goal of exegesis is to develop a coherent, informed interpretation of biblical texts that is based on the best knowledge available to the interpreter. See John Hayes and Carl Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner’s Handbook* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 21-28.

models or paradigms of biblical interpretations. The significance of this relatively short story is explored to show how it fits into the larger narrative. Central to the discussion on the story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law is the right rendering of her service to Jesus and those present after her recovery. Is it to be interpreted in terms of discipleship or is it a mere performance of women's domestic servitude? The nuanced interpretation is explored. The feminist rendering is diverse and engaging as well. The last part of chapter three is an Igbo reading, a contextualization of the service of Peter's mother-in-law. As a cultural study it demonstrates how new meaning can emerge through the interaction between this text and a flesh and blood Igbo reader who engages the text in a twenty-first century Igbo social location. The Igbo interpretation engages the text from the perspective of Igbo family / community consciousness. From this perspective the service of Peter's mother-in-law conveys the meaning of Igbo hospitality which is very important in Igbo socio-cultural life. It is a gesture that is highly symbolic.

The last chapter of the thesis, Chapter Four, looks at the second pericope for our discussion: the account of the women followers who accompanied Jesus up to the cross (15:40-41). The chapter follows the same pattern as chapter three. It begins with the exegesis of the pericope which is needed for an informed understanding of the text in its historical and literary context. Part two explores how scholars have looked at some of the historical, literary, and ideological questions the passage raises. For instance, what are the explanations proffered for Mark's delay in disclosing that there are women who belong to the inner circle of Jesus' disciples? The women in the group of Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses, and Salome are described as having been "following" and "serving" Jesus from the time of his ministry in Galilee. What does this say about them as far as discipleship is concerned? Historically, do such women exist or are they Mark's creation for redactive purposes? The last part of the chapter is an Igbo

contextualization of Mk 15:40-41 from the perspective of *Nwanne* philosophy of life. The Igbo solidarity symbolized by the women's presence at the scene of the crucifixion is something that any Igbo reader would not miss in his or her interpretation. Unlike the Euro-American hermeneutics where the identity of the three named women is not clear, Igbo readers would easily identify them as the daughters of the lineage – the *Umuada*. Their presence at the scene of the crucifixion does not surprise an Igbo reader. Rather it is Mark's delay in according the *Umuada* their rightful place in the gospel that baffles such readers.

The conclusion that could be drawn from the study is that the ambiguity apparent in Mark's portrait of women reflects in both Euro-American and African interpretations. The Markan narrator gives a positive portrait of women, on the one hand, and on the other hand, seems to castigate them. The new meanings that results from Igbo perspectival reading confirms that biblical texts can rend themselves to diverse interpretations in different cultures. This in turn is a proof that the word of God is not static but dynamic. In this sense one can concur with Segovia that although biblical texts constitute an "other" to us and follow principles and conventions of another time and culture, at the same time such "otherness" is always apprehended through our own lenses as readers, socially and historically located as we are.¹¹

¹¹ Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 11.

CHAPTER ONE: SCHOLARSHIP REVIEW

The volumes of scholarship that have been written on Mark's portrait of women is evidence that our topic has not only been a topic of study for decades but also one that has evolved and made tremendous scholarly progress.¹² In this chapter, therefore, we shall consider how some scholars have engaged the conversation. It will develop in three stages. (1) It looks at the initial concern of the scholars and the questions that occupy their discussion. For instance, how does Mark portray the women in the first place? Are there women disciples? If so, how do we characterize the role they play? (2) It further explores the question of the approach or the paradigm of investigation. Is it just a matter of looking for passages that explicitly declare that women are disciples or are there more to that? How are the key discipleship terms re-interpreted in relation to the way the women relate and respond to Jesus? (3) Lastly, it considers the question of the concept, "discipleship." Scholars are calling for its redefinition to reflect Mark's complex and composite portrait of those who followed Jesus. There is need for a generic and inclusive understanding. Suffice it to mention that these three stages do not represent a mere linear movement in the scholarship. It is more of a spiral or cyclic development whereby answers to questions give rise to new search. They are interconnected rather being independent parts.

¹² Joanna Dewey gives us an interesting description of the development of Feminist Markan Scholarship: how Letty Russel gathered few of them together in 1974 to brainstorm on the impact of the second wave of feminism on biblical studies. Looking back after three decades she could not but marvel at the evolution of the scholarship. Joanna Dewey, "Let Them Renounce Themselves and Take up Their Cross: A Feminist Reading of Mark 8:34 in Mark's Social and Narrative World." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 34, no. 3 (August 2004): 98-104. Victoria Phillips would see one such achievement in "establishing that Jesus included in his circle of disciples both men and women." But she added that "What to make of this discovery is still being pondered." Victoria Phillips, "Full Disclosure: Towards a Complete Characterization of the Women Who Followed Jesus in the Gospel according to Mark," in *Transformative Encounters: Jesus and Women Re-viewed*, ed. Ingrid, Rosa Kitzberger (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 13.

1.1. Question About Mark's Portrait of Women

That Mark has many narratives about women is not contested. Leonard Swidler's statistics show that "there are twenty passages of a total of 114 verses that deal with one or more women, or with the female"¹³ and one is even surprised to hear that Mark has more actual women in his gospel than the other evangelists.¹⁴ Where scholars diverge, however, is in their interpretation of Mark's portrait of them. Marla Schierling,¹⁵ for instance, gives Mark a totally positive assessment. From a narrative, thematic, and theological point of view, she argues that women are the ones who fulfill the Markan Jesus' criteria for discipleship. She substantiates her claim by critically analyzing five women narratives: the hemorrhaging woman, the Syrophoenician woman, the widow at the treasury, the woman who anoints Jesus at Simon the leper's house, and the women at the crucifixion. Her interpretation of Jesus' key teachings (especially 8:34 and 10:45) on what it means to follow him shows that the male disciples fail completely. In contrast, it is the women who exemplified them. "Service," she says, "can be summed up by three central concepts repeated often throughout the gospel: suffering, following, and denying oneself. Woman meets all three criteria."¹⁶ Her overwhelmingly positive assessment of Mark, I suppose, leads her to avoid any discussion of the narratives that depict women negatively; here one thinks of the narrative about the family of Jesus in 3:21, 31-35 and the story of Herodias and her daughter (6:14-29). She also interpreted the behavior of the women at the tomb - their fear, fleeing, and silence – to be a normal response. It is a sign of their recognition of the presence of God.

¹³ Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Women* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1979), 224.

¹⁴ Winsome Munro, "Women Disciples in Mark?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (April 1982): 226.

¹⁵ Marla J. Schierling, "Women as Leaders in the Marcan Communities," *Listening* 15, no. 3 (1980): 250-256.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 252.

John Schmitt¹⁷ argues in the line of positive assessment of Mark's attitude towards women. However, unlike Marla who refrains from pointing out anything negative about women in Mark, Schmitt sees some evidence to suggest that Mark has a negative attitude towards women as well. He singles out three examples. There are no parables in Mark in which women play any role. A typical example of this is the parable of a wedding feast that only talks about the bridegroom and the wedding guests, leaving out the bride (2:19-20). Contrast this with Matthew who has eleven women in parables.¹⁸ Luke also has the parable of the widow in court pleading her case (Lk 18:1-18) and the woman who sweeps her room looking for her lost coin (Lk 15:8-10). Mark's negative attitude could also be seen in the way he casts Mary, the mother of Jesus in a dark light (3:21, 31-35). Thirdly, is the manner in which he narrates the episode of Herodias and her daughter (6:17-29). The last two depict women as seductive, manipulative and evil. In contrast, Matthew removes much of this (Mt 14:3-11), and Luke omits the scene entirely.¹⁹

Notwithstanding these few points that suggest a negative portrayal, Schmitt's consideration of the narratives about women demonstrates that Mark has projected women as models of discipleship. Four women were beneficiaries of Jesus' healing miracle – Simon's mother-in-law, Jairus' daughter, the hemorrhaging woman, and Syrophoenician woman's daughter. Out of the four, Schmitt points out that the hemorrhaging woman, and Syrophoenician woman, in addition to being favored with Jesus' miracles, are portrayed as models for Christian faith. "Both women are praised and commended for their faith, ingenuity, and perseverance. They are presented as persons

¹⁷ Schmitt, "Women in Mark's Gospel," 228-233.

¹⁸ Cf. Mt 13:33 (the woman who mixed yeast with three measures of wheat flour) and Mt 25:1-13 (the ten maidens who went to meet the groom).

¹⁹ Schmitt, 228-229. Winsome Munro would also use the last two points to argue about Mark's androcentric bias against women. See Munro, "Women Disciples in Mark?" 226.

who really see who Jesus is and who act on that vision.”²⁰ He regards the widow at the treasury, the woman who anoints Jesus, and the three women who witnessed the crucifixion and the empty tomb as admirable women who “have no miracles done for them, yet they performed actions which are either praised directly by Jesus or which are obvious actions appropriate to those who understand Jesus and remain true to him.”²¹ These women contrast with the male disciples whom Mark portrayed as lacking understanding of both who Jesus is and what it means to be his follower. At the crucial moment when Jesus needed them most, the male disciples betrayed him, denied him, abandoned him, and fled.

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza,²² contributing to the debate, starts by reacting to the pervasive apologetic that characterizes most treatments of women in the Bible (in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s). And aiming at a historical-critical reconstruction of women’s history and contributions to the early Christian beginnings, she sees Mark as positively portraying the women especially when compared to the other synoptic gospels. Her special focus is on Mark’s narrative about the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus (14:3-9) and the women at the crucifixion and the tomb (15:40-16:8). Despite expressing dissatisfaction about the anonymity of a woman who carried out such a prophetic sign-action,²³ she hails Mark for not distorting what he got from tradition. This is significant when compared with Luke who changed the anointing from the head to the feet and tagged the woman a sinner (Lk 7:36-50). In her view, Mark’s presentation depicts

²⁰ Schmitt, “Women in Mark’s Gospel,” 230.

²¹ Ibid, 230.

²² Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

²³ Fiorenza lamented that Jesus’ command that this woman’s action be remembered wherever the gospel is proclaimed is not followed. On the contrary, it is Judas who betrayed Jesus that is always remembered. “The name of the betrayer is remembered, but the name of the faithful disciple is forgotten because she was a woman.” (Fiorenza. *In Memory of Her*, xiii).

the woman to be a paradigm for the true disciple. Her action is contrasted with that of Peter. “While Peter had confessed, without truly understanding it, ‘you are the anointed one,’ the woman anointing Jesus recognizes clearly that Jesus’ messiahship means suffering and death.”²⁴ Her action also contrasts that of Judas. Whereas the latter wants to sell Jesus for personal gain, this woman makes great self-sacrifice to prepare the messiah for the upcoming event – his passion and death.

Similarly, contrasting the women of 15:40-16:8 with the male disciples, Fiorenza argues that Mark has projected the women as the real followers who persevered to the end. The leading male disciples do not understand the suffering messiahship of Jesus. As a result, they rejected him and fled when he was arrested. It is the women who dared where the male disciples had failed. For Fiorenza, “They are Jesus’ true followers (*akolouthēin*) who have understood that his ministry was not rule and kingly glory but *diakonia*, “service” (Mark 15:41).”²⁵ So for her, the debate is no longer whether or not Mark portrays women positively, it is rather a question of their role as disciples of Jesus. Her only issue with Mark is that she does not see realized in his narratives the paradigm of a discipleship community of equals she is championing. This she attributes to the androcentric language and bias²⁶ that are rife, not only in Mark, but in the other gospels and in the literatures of his time.

²⁴ Ibid, xiv.

²⁵ Ibid, xiv.

²⁶ Winsome Munro would use this factor to argue that women are anonymous and invisible in Mark prior to 15:40-41. (Munro, “Women Disciples in Mark?” 226-228). To this androcentrism of language, Luise Schottroff adds what she calls “the “equality” that poverty produces.” (Luise Schottroff, *Let the Oppressed Go Free: Feminist Perspectives on the New Testament* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 93).

Many other scholars²⁷ are also of the view that Mark's portrayal of women is positive in the sense of being models for discipleship. However, there are others who argue to the contrary. The argument of two of them will be discussed here. Winsome Munro has a detailed presentation on the topic.²⁸ For her, the issue is not that narratives about women are absent in Mark (since they are there in the tradition that formed part of his story). Actually, they appear in no less than sixteen contexts. Mark's narrative style, however, renders these women anonymous and somehow invisible.²⁹ He was silent about the discipleship of women until a few verses before the end of the gospel while giving the impression, all along, that it is only men who are Jesus' disciples. Munro expresses her concern in these words:

What is problematic is that prior to 15:40 they [women] are visible among all categories of people in the narrative (apart from obviously masculine ones such as scribes, Pharisees, elders, priests, guards, and soldiers) except the inner circle of Jesus' disciples. Yet at 15:40-41 they suddenly appear, unheralded, as among those who habitually followed Jesus from the time of his ministry in Galilee onward and are prominent from that point till the end of the Gospel at 16:8.³⁰

She makes a case that Mark does not mention any woman by name prior to 15:40. The exceptions are Mary the mother of Jesus (6:3-4) and Herodias (6:14-28). Even these ones mentioned, in her assessment, are portrayed negatively. Whereas Mary is mentioned in the context where Jesus was

²⁷ See, for example, Mary Ann Tolbert who holds that women play a central role in Mark's narrative and that, "with the exception of Herodias and daughter (6:17-28) and possibly Jesus' mother (3:31-34), all women characters in Mark are depicted positively." (Mary Ann Tolbert, "Mark," in *The Women Bible Commentary*. ed. Newsom A. Carol and Ringe H. Sharon [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992], 263). See also Monika Fander who argues that Markan women have great importance for Markan theology. For her, they are the true disciples of Jesus. (Monika Fander, "Gospel of Mark: Women as True Disciples of Jesus," in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, ed. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker [Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012], 626-644).

²⁸ Munro, "Women Disciples in Mark?" 225-241.

²⁹ Joanna Dewey makes the same observation with regard to the three synoptic gospels. Women "are seen but not heard." (Joanna Dewey, "Women in the Synoptic Gospels: Seen but not Heard?" *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 27, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 53-60.

³⁰ Munro, "Women Disciples in Mark?" 225.

rejected by his own people, Herodias and the daughter are linked to a legendary tale which makes them responsible for Herod's execution of John the Baptist.³¹

Munro further points out that Mark's bias against women is evident in the manner he reduces their encounter with Jesus to the domestic domain. This is true of Peter's mother-in-law (1:29-31), Jairus daughter (5:22-24, 35-43), the Syrophoenician woman (7:24-30), and the woman who anoints Jesus (14:3-9). The exception to this rule is the woman with the flow of blood who walked out her way to reach Jesus instead of Jesus reaching out to her.³² In the case of the woman at the treasury, it is observed that she played no active role in the scene she appeared, "for she is uninvolved apart from his [Jesus] observing her."³³ While acknowledging the shrewdness of the Syrophoenician woman,³⁴ Munro argues that Mark, on his part, is not interested in her female identity, but in her nationality as a Gentile.

In Munro's analysis, Mark's polemics against women reached its climax in the episode of the empty tomb where he represents them as fearing, fleeing and keeping silent, refusing to proclaim the good news of Jesus' resurrection. By so doing, he denies the three women the mission of being proclaimers of the good news. And more seriously, "[t]hey are rendered apostate along

³¹ Ibid, 226.

³² Mary Rose D'Angelo, in her analysis of the woman with the flow of blood (in conjunction with Jairus' daughter), argues that the larger function of this miracle is that it illustrates a Christology of shared spiritual power, in which Jesus' power is active through the participation of the woman. See Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Gender and Power in the Gospel of Mark: The Daughter of Jairus and the Woman with the Flow of Blood," in *Miracles in Jewish and Christian Antiquity: Imagining Truth*, ed. John C. Cavadini (Notre Dame, Indianapolis: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 83-109.

³³ Munro, "Women Disciples in Mark?", 227.

³⁴ Munro emphasizes the uniqueness of this woman's encounter with Jesus. "[S]he is the only woman with whom Jesus engages in verbal sparring in Mark" and "she alone, in contrast to the worsted scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees, has victory conceded to her, winning an apparent change of stance which brings about the healing of her daughter." (Munro, "Women Disciples in Mark?" 227). Mary Ann Beavis airs the same sentiment when she says that the woman, "is the only person who wins a debate with Jesus in any of the gospels." (Beavis Mary Ann, "Women Listening to the Gospel of Mark," *Bible Today* 44, no. 1 (January 2006): 27.

with the Twelve in that, contrary to the directive to ‘go, tell ...’ (16:17), they say ‘nothing to anyone’ (16:8).”³⁵ She sees it as an utter neglect of the women’s commitment and insists that the notion that fear and silence are a typical reaction to the experience of theophany³⁶ cannot even change it.

Munro is not alone in suggesting that Mark has presented his readers with a negative portrait of women. Joanna Dewey³⁷ is more critical about Mark’s androcentric language which has rendered the women invisible or subordinate to men. She argues that;

Mark’s androcentrism is vividly apparent in his portrayal of the women followers of Jesus. The author mentions Jesus’ male disciples throughout the narrative. At last, fifteen verses before the end of the Gospel, the author states that there were many women who had traveled with Jesus in Galilee, who had followed and ministered, and who had come to Jerusalem with him; that is, there were women disciples.”³⁸

Her point here is that women and their discipleship is not a topic of importance for Mark. He is more interested in the stories of men’s relationship with Jesus and would only talk about women when they are exceptional or needed for a plot. A typical point of reference is the way they were brought in to fill the gap left by the absence of the male disciples during Jesus’ death.

Dewey did a quantitative analysis of the literary portrayal of incidental characters in the synoptic gospels. In the analysis, she tried to compare the vividness or mimetic effect of the male

³⁵ Munro, “Women Disciples in Mark?” 239.

³⁶ Some scholars and exegetes have tried to explain the fear and silence of the three women as something expected in such unexpected situation of epiphany. It can also be an ironic silence – the closest comparison in Mark is 1:44. See Elizabeth Malbon Struthers, “Fallible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark,” *Semeia* 28, (1983): 45; Susan Graham L., “Silent Voices: Women in the Gospel of Mark,” *Semeia* 54, (1991): 154; Dewey, “Women in the Gospel of Mark,” 28; Mercedes Puerto N., “Female disciples in Mark? The “Problematizing” of a concept,” in *Gospels: Narrative and History*, ed. Mercedes Navarro Puerto and Marinella Perroni (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 168.

³⁷ See Joanna Dewey, “The Gospel of Mark,” in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary. Vol. 2*, ed. Fiorenza Elizabeth Schussler (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 470-510; Dewey, “Women in the Synoptic Gospels,” 53-60; Dewey, “Women in the Gospel of Mark,” 22-29.

³⁸ Dewey, “The Gospel of Mark,” 470.

and female minor characters in terms of the length of the pericope and direct speech uttered by Jesus or the character involved. With regard to those whom Jesus healed, she shows that consistently the stories involving men as the central character are longer than those involving women. Similarly, male minor characters are shown talking more than their female counterpart and Jesus speaks more to men than to women.³⁹ The non-healing stories follow the same pattern though, comparatively, they are less androcentric. In these stories it is shown that the men's stories maintain the mimetic emphasis on the men along with Jesus. That is to say that the men characters are shown to be more actively involved in the stories where they appear. Stories are not just told about them but they are presented as interacting with the other actors in the narrative. In most cases, this is not the case with women's stories where the mimetic focus is shifted from them to men. In Dewey's words, "The stories open with the mimetic stress on the woman who is shown in action, and then it shifts to the dialogue between Jesus and others about the woman's action."⁴⁰ For her, it is like women's stories are not meant for them *per se*, but are introduced as occasions for others to discuss them and for Jesus to use such occasion to instruct those around him. Her conclusion is that, "Mark uses these stories not so much to empower women to be followers of Jesus in their own right, as for didactic purposes. He uses the women to encourage his audience, perhaps especially the men audience, to follow in a discipleship of service."⁴¹ According to her, this contributes to the continuing marginalization of women throughout Christian history.

³⁹ Dewey's chart shows that "of three women, one speaks once, one speaks once to herself, and one does not speak at all, an average of 0.67 speeches per healing. Of the ten men, three are silent, three speak once, and four speak three times each, for an average of 1.5 speeches per healing, over twice the rate of the women." (Dewey, "Women in the Gospel of Mark," 55).

⁴⁰ Dewey, "Women in the Synoptic Gospels," 58.

⁴¹ Dewey, "The Gospel of mark," 508. See also, Dewey, "Women in the Gospel of Mark," 29.

1.2. Question about the Approach and Paradigm of Investigation.

A shift in the discussion on women followers in Mark is noticed when scholars began to question the paradigm of the discussion. So far the emphasis has been more on the quantitative analysis that makes numerical comparison between men and women stories. There is also the tendency to narrow down the debate to the narratives that explicitly talk about women disciples. While acknowledging the significance of quantitative analysis, it was observed that there is more to it. Susan Graham, for instance, argues that any discussion of women discipleship in Mark has to take into cognizance, what she calls the “other” logic of relationship which the women have with Jesus, “a tactile epistemology,” which is different from the epistemology of action (of speech and hearing) which is the framework of the male disciples’ relationship with Jesus.⁴² She agrees that there is no doubt that male disciples are the main focus of Markan presentation. Women presumably speak but their speech is rarely recorded. Jesus healed four women, only two of them utter a word – the woman with the flow of blood, who spoke to herself (5:33) and the Syrophoenician woman (7:26, 28). Peter’s mother-in-law and Jairus’ daughter say nothing. The widow at the treasury (12:41-44) and the woman who anoints Jesus (14:3-9) perform exemplary and recommendable deeds but are not reported to have said anything. This framework of female’s relationship with Jesus, in Graham’s view, calls for a deconstruction. And her fundamental question is: “What is the relationship of the often invisible and silent women in this story to Jesus?”⁴³ How do we interpret this tactile epistemology that is at the heart of Jesus’ relationship with the women?

⁴² Susan Graham Lochrie, “Silent Voices + A Relational Dependency on the Tactile Epistemological Differences between Male and Female Disciples of Jesus – Women in the Gospel of Mark,” *Semeia* 54, (1991): 147.

⁴³ Ibid, 148.

Graham suggests that the best way to approach the matter is to look, not on what the women say (since that is not their framework of relationship with Jesus), but on what they do. While they do not say much, the things they do are striking. In exploring the deeds of the women, she sees significant link in the vocabulary used to describe the women and that used to describe Jesus. The woman with the flow of blood touches Jesus and was healed. The woman who anoints him does so by touching him. On the other hand, Jesus cures Peter's mother-in-law and Jairus' daughter by touching them. He holds each by the hand and raises her up (1:31; 5:41). A connection is made that just as Jesus raises (*egeirō*) them up so too, he will be raised up (14:28; 16:6). Concerning "service" (*diakoneō*), it is pointed out that the service of Simon's mother-in-law, like that of the women who witnessed Jesus' crucifixion (15:41), is described with the same verb (*diakoneō*) that Jesus uses to describe his own vocation: "For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45).⁴⁴ Whereas the poor widow gave in everything she had, all she had to live on, the woman who anoints Jesus spent a fortune to buy a very expensive ointment to anoint Jesus in preparation for his death. Both exemplified Jesus' act of sacrificial service and self-donation of Jesus. The verbal link with the hemorrhaging woman is even more pronounced.

She has "suffered" (*paschō*) for twelve years, a verb otherwise used only of Jesus in this gospel (8:31; 9:12); no others are said to suffer. She experiences her illness as a scourge (*mastix*, 5:29), the same term used later by Jesus to predict what will happen to him (*mastigoō*, 10:34); and like Jesus, she is said to tell the truth (5:33; cf. 12:14, 32). This vocabulary is only used of Jesus and the woman, effecting an identification of their experiences.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid, 152.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 148-149. As early as 1980, Marla Schierling had already established this verbal link between this woman's suffering and that of Jesus. "Not only is this woman an example of faith and truthful testimony, but also she has suffered as Jesus. Only here and in relation to Jesus is the word "suffering" ever mentioned." (Schierling, "Women as Leaders in the Marcan Communities," 252).

The point that Graham is making is that when we read Mark's text from the center of women's experience, listening to their silent relationship with Jesus and giving it a voice, we would realize that Mark has tactfully represented the women as those who embodied the true discipleship that Jesus calls for. She argues that part of the problem why affirming women discipleship is difficult is that we have been treating them as people on the margins as opposed to bringing them to the center. Joanna Dewey expresses this dilemma more succinctly. "We have created," she says, "a mental picture of the Markan narrative world as one in which only men accompany Jesus. The mention of women in Mark 15 and 16 is too late to modify our imaginative reconstructions."⁴⁶ The task, therefore, is that of recreating of our mental picture of how we read Mark. It is the task of identifying the unique way that the women relate with Jesus and how in that uniqueness they model the discipleship of service that is at the center of following Jesus.

Mary Ann Beavis,⁴⁷ applying form-criticism to the narratives about women, examines Mark's use of a Greco-Roman literary form, the *chreiai* (pronouncement stories) to convey certain lessons about faith and discipleship exemplified by women characters.⁴⁸ She observes that in Mark's narratives almost all the pronouncement stories are about the words and deeds of Jesus. It is therefore interesting that Mark also uses such pronouncements to describe or refer to the words and deeds of some women.⁴⁹ Still more, it is significant because in such usages they do not depict feminine virtues that are usually the case. The bold faith of the hemorrhaging woman is that of a

⁴⁶ Dewey, "The Gospel of Mark," 270.

⁴⁷ Mary Ann Beavis, "Women as Models of Faith in Mark," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 18, no. 1 (January 1988): 3-9.

⁴⁸ *Chreiai* are brief stories about the words and deeds of some people. In such stories the climactic element is a pronouncement which is presented as a particular person's response to something said or observed on a particular occasion in the past. In Greco-Roman world they are mostly used for men. When women are the subjects, *chreiai* generally describe stereotypically feminine virtues, concerns and attitudes.

⁴⁹ Such anecdotes include the woman with the flow of blood – 5:24-34; Syrophenician woman – 7:25-30; widow at the treasury – 12:41-44; and the woman who anoints Jesus- 14:3-9.

man. “Her faith is not only a trusting attitude, but also an action involving risk.”⁵⁰ In the case of the Syrophoenician woman, the pronouncement story focuses on the woman’s clever saying⁵¹ in her determination to convince Jesus to heal her daughter. It is insisted that this woman’s verbal sparring “has nothing to do with her femaleness, or relationship with men, but with the question of the relation between Jews and Gentiles.”⁵² It is a boundary-breaking victory. The widow at the treasury and the woman who anoints Jesus utter no word. However, pronouncements are made about their extraordinary acts to show how distinguished and exemplary they are. The former gives “all her living” in the service of God and the latter performed a prophetic act that is to be remembered “wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world.” In both instances, Jesus makes positive pronouncements that he does not make on an individual. In the case of the woman who anoints Jesus, it is noted that “Jesus’ comment on the woman’s prophetic anointing is his lengthiest and most positive pronouncement on the words or deeds of any person preserved by the evangelist Mark.”⁵³

Beavis’ conclusion is that the evangelist’s use of *chreiai* on women is an indication that there are things / characteristics common to Jesus and women that Mark wants to underscore. It is his artistic way of projecting the women as “models of faith” in his gospel. This is vividly stated in her conclusion: “Mark’s four *chreiai* about women thus provide models of faith for both missionaries and their audiences, Christians and non-Christians. In the words of Saint Theresa,

⁵⁰ Ibid, 6.

⁵¹ “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Mk 7:28.

⁵² Beavis. “Women as Models of Faith in Mark,” 6.

⁵³ Ibid, 7.

these women “know more about what God thinks.”⁵⁴ And if women are models to be imitated, one can easily deduce that they are the true disciples.

Mary Rose D’Angelo’s analysis⁵⁵ examines the role gender plays in the narratives about women. Important for her is the acknowledgement that Mark presents different categories of women to the readers. There is the group that Mark specifically presents as women disciples by using the two key discipleship terms (*akoloutheō* and *diakoneō*) to describe their relationship with Jesus. Three of them are named and they are depicted as providing “continuous witnesses to the death of Jesus, the burial, and the empty tomb (15:40-41, 47; 16:1-8).”⁵⁶ Although this group of women is mentioned lately in the narrative, its presence implies that women are among those who followed Jesus throughout his ministry. Apart from the obvious role of showing that Jesus actually died, that someone knew where he was buried, and that the tomb found empty was the right one, D’Angelo argues that their role is central to the theology of the gospel and suggests women’s active participation in early Christian community.

The second category of women who play narrative roles in the gospel is the six unnamed women. These include, Peter’s mother-in-law (1:29-31), Jairus’ daughter and the hemorrhaging woman (5:21-43), the Syro-Phoenician woman (7:24-30), the widow at the treasury (12:41-44), and the woman who anoints Jesus (14:3-9). The women in this group also perform gender roles but more importantly is what their narratives contribute to Mark’s theological schema. Peter’s mother-in-law is used to introduce Christian vocabulary of “being raised” in order to “serve” (1:31)

⁵⁴ Ibid, 8.

⁵⁵ Mary Rose D’Angelo, “(Re) Presentation of Women in the Gospels: John and Mark,” in *Women & Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard, Kraemer and Mary Rose D’Angelo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 129-149 [137-147].

⁵⁶ Ibid, 137.

and readers and hearers are invited to place themselves within the narrative from the outset.⁵⁷ Touch and transfer of power that are unique features of healing miracles in Mark (see 1:41; 5:41; 6:5; 7:32-33; 8:23-25 where Jesus touched people to cure them, and 3:10; 5:27-28; 6:56 where people touched Jesus and were healed) are illustrated by the double miracle of Jairus' daughter (5:23, 41) and the woman with the flow of blood (5:28). In the case of the widow at the treasury and the woman who anoints Jesus, a contrast is drawn between their exemplary deeds and the failure of the other parties. The widow who gives all she lives on (12:44) is contrasted with the greed of the scribes who devour the properties of widows (12:40). Similarly, the generosity and prophetic ministry of the woman who anoints Jesus is contrasted with the Jewish leaders' (14:1-2) and Judas' (14:9-11) betrayal.⁵⁸ Readers, as it were, are called to imitate the good examples of these two women and to spurn the vices of Judas and the scribes. The last group of women are those Mark portrays negatively. Included here are Herodias and her daughter whom D'Angelo refers to as the "two female villains" because Mark depicts them to be the catalyst for the beheading of John the Baptist (6:17-29). The two are contrasted with the twelve who embraced discipleship with its costs (6:7-13). The woman servant of the high priest who questions Peter (14:66-70) belongs to this group.

Thus from the perspective of gender roles, D'Angelo's conclusion is that it is difficult to argue that Mark addresses the issue of gender in any coherent or comprehensive way. He does not seem to make the status of women any central focus of his concern. And as far as the discipleship of women is concern, it is pointed out that the fact that the twelve are all men and that the women disciples are mentioned only at 15:40-41 undoubtedly reflect the androcentric perspective of the

⁵⁷ Ibid, 140.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 143.

gospel.⁵⁹ But this should not be construed to mean that Jesus is out to create an all-male ministry. The apocalyptic context of Mark with its urgent demand on all does not allow for such interpretation. “[M]en and women appear to have done what the spirit gave them to do as well as to have spoken what the spirit gave them to speak without thinking beforehand (13:11).⁶⁰ Leadership, service, and prophetic roles performed in the faith community appeared to have depended on a call based in spiritual experience rather than on appointment. Similarly, the life in the new community is modeled, not on blood relationship (3:21, 31-32), but on faith (3:33-35).

1.3. Challenging the Concept “*ho mathētai*” (“the disciples”).

One of the difficulties we noted in preceding discussions that militate against making case for women discipleship is the androcentric nature of the language which uses masculine forms for common gender. In the first place, in the Gospel of Mark, the Greek term for “disciple” is only found in its masculine plural form (*ho mathētai*). It does not have feminine plural neither is it used in masculine and feminine singulars.⁶¹ Similarly, the presence of women among the men is obscured by the use of masculine terms such as *autoi* (they), *polloi* (many), *anthropoi* (people), and *oxlos* (crowd).⁶² This makes it difficult to know when the women are present among the disciples and when it is only men that are talked about.

This obscurity is called into question at this stage of the scholarship. The concept “disciples” referring exclusively to males is challenged and scholars are calling for its redefinition to reflect Mark’s complex and composite portrait of those who followed Jesus. Victoria Phillips’

⁵⁹ Ibid, 145.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 145.

⁶¹ Puerto, “Female disciples in Mark?” 146.

⁶² Munro, “Women Disciples in Mark?” 226.

contribution here is significant.⁶³ She begins on the premise that the feminist criticism has made progress by establishing that Mark has an excellent portrayal of women in his gospel. Yet their full characterization as disciples still poses a big challenge. She expresses dissatisfaction with the current characterization for two reasons. Firstly, “most characterization replicate their [women’s] absence from the gospel until their sudden materialization 15:40; that is, they do not discuss the women who followed Jesus until after Jesus has died. So doing perpetuates the deeply embedded perception that “the disciples” refer solely to the male disciples.”⁶⁴ The second is related to the first. It is the tendency to limit the textual evidence for characterizations to the scenes in which the women explicitly appear. And because these texts (the women who witnessed the crucifixion 15:40-41, the entombment of Jesus 15:46-47, and the empty tomb 16:1-8) appear very late in Mark’s narrative, it becomes difficult to understand the motive behind such delay and how they are related to the other narratives about women. It leaves the reader to conjecture the motivation or the reason why the women do what they do. The danger is that such conjecture from narrative action alone leads to the attribution of stereotypical gendered motives, such as women’s love, devotion, and loyalty. The cumulative consequence of this type of characterization, in Phillips’ view, is that it “minimizes, if not obscures, the women’s status as disciples, concomitantly transforming them into minor characters, ... or interpreting their presence as merely literary, demanded by the plot, or necessary for rhetorical effect.”⁶⁵ It gives a false dichotomy between “the

⁶³ Victoria Phillips, “Full Disclosure: Towards a Complete Characterization of the Women Who Followed Jesus in the Gospel according to Mark,” in *Transformative Encounters: Jesus and Women Re-viewed*, ed. Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 13-32.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 14. Here we recall how this has been a puzzle to Munro Winsome (“Women Disciples in Mark?” 230), Susan Miller (*Women in Mark’s Gospel* (London: T and T Clark International, 2004), 153), Tolbert Mary Ann (“Mark,” 273), and Reimund Bieringer and Isabelle Vanden Hove (“Mary Magdalene in the Four Gospels,” *Louvain Studies* 32, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 187).

⁶⁵ Ibid, 15. Joel Williams’ classification of the characters in Mark has three main group of characters – the disciples [male], Jesus’ opponents, and the crowd. Minor characters come from the crowd and all the women characters belong here. (Joel Williams F., *Other Followers of Jesus: Minor Characters as Major Figures in Mark’s*

disciples” and “the women” that excludes the possibility that the latter could be construed as disciples.

Phillips, thus, proposes that a complete characterization of the women who followed Jesus must follow out of the implication that they are disciples. This, however, calls for a reinterpretation and a new understanding of what the term “the disciples” represents. And in general, it demands a reconsideration of Mark’s androcentric language. Her proposal re-echoes the view shared by Fiorenza who maintains (not only for Mark’s gospel but for the entire NT) that exegesis must take seriously the issue of androcentric language as generic language. And this means interpreting androcentric language on the whole as inclusive of women until proven otherwise.⁶⁶ In our Markan context, it would mean that the term “disciples” should be taken to represent male and female disciples unless the analysis of a specific passage indicates that no women are present in the scene under consideration. The passages that directly talk about women do so on the grounds that such women are exceptional and perhaps, their deeds are worthy of emulation. These texts are not to be taken as the only available information about women in the gospel. If we go by this logic, it means that women disciples are not to be limited to what is presented in 15:40-16:8. They are to be looked for in narratives that are not strictly gender specific.⁶⁷ Furthermore, if this understanding is upheld, “the story of the women can be integrated into the preceding narrative, because their story is the story of ‘the disciples.’ Merging the story of the female disciples into the story of ‘the disciples’

Gospel (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1994), 11-12). See also Elizabeth Malbon, *In the Company of Jesus: Characters in Mark’s Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 70-99.

⁶⁶ Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 43-48.

⁶⁷ Examples of gender specific passages she singled out are 3:14-19 – where the names of the Twelve are explicitly male names; 9:2 – Peter James and John as the three disciples who witnessed the transfiguration, etc. passage like 9:14, 7, on the other hand, can be read to include male and female disciples. (Phillips, “Full Disclosure,” 25).

will require re-reading the Gospel, knowing that the women who followed Jesus are present but not represented in the scenes of Jesus with his disciples.”⁶⁸

The challenging of the concept “disciples” is not limited to its gender exclusiveness. Some scholars question its inclusiveness in terms of scope. It is observed that people are confusing “disciples” with “followers” and are putting accent on the former rather than on the latter. Mercedes Puerto⁶⁹ sees this mix-up as an obstacle to the discussion on the women who follow Jesus. She claims that the majority of feminist scholars assume a certain type of discipleship and try to fit each of these female figures into the mold. For her, “the problem is at the starting place, in the acceptance of a determined conception of what discipleship is – something that then affects the rest of the studies.”⁷⁰ She attributes this tendency to patriarchal mentality that has remained a perennial challenge to scholars, both male and female. Discipleship, because it is associated with power and leadership, is normally considered the most appropriate paradigm for discussing women followers in Mark. Yet a critical reading of this gospel, in her analysis, shows that the predominant model in Mark is the “following”, not “discipleship” as such. This finds expression in Jesus’ teaching: “If anyone wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (8:34). Moreover, prior to the teachings, the narratives of Jesus’ family (3:31-35) and Jesus’ encounter with the Syrophoenician woman (7:24-30) show the open ended nature of belonging to the new family of God and that Mark’s emphasis is not on disciples but on followers. With regard to the former, we read that Jesus, looking at those who sat around him, said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and

⁶⁸ Phillips, “Full Disclosure,” 21.

⁶⁹ Puerto, “Female disciples in Mark?” 145-172.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 148.

mother' (cf. 3:34-35). "The phrase 'whoever does God's will,' Puerto notes, "introduces an unending group of followers, given that there are no limits or borders other than this one condition of obedience to God. ... The call is no longer vertical (from Jesus to others), and it is no longer gender exclusive (issued only to men)."⁷¹ With this broadening of the concept, the stress is shifted from the formal-call group to the general invitation to be part of the family of God.

Puerto's conclusion is that the predominant paradigm in Mark's narrative is "the following." It is within this broader concept that we can talk about the disciples, the Twelve, the crowd that flocks around Jesus, the circular group of those around him, (4:10), and the crowd together with the disciples (8:34). Women, it is presumed, are to be found in any of these groups of followers with the exception of the Twelve that is exclusively male. She reiterates that, just as it is the case with the term "apostles," the call to discipleship does not have as much theological significance as scholars accord it. The important concept is "following" and discipleship should enter into this model and should submit to it.⁷² This, in her view, would explain why Mark does not narrate of any specific call of women but tells the reader many stories that portray women as models of the type of followers that Jesus advocates.

Earlier in the scholarship, Elizabeth Malbon⁷³ had singled out this point to be one of the issues that needed to be clarified in discussion of discipleship in general. For her, literary analysis of Mark's gospel shows that Mark's portrayal of the followers of Jesus is both complex and composite. The call and commission narratives give us the information about a group of people

⁷¹ Ibid, 152.

⁷² Ibid, 147.

⁷³ Malbon, "Fallible Followers," 29-48.

Jesus calls to follow him but these are not the only group or individuals who follow him. According to her;

Throughout the narrative, exceptional individuals believe in Jesus (Jairus, 5:22-24a, 35-43), follow Jesus (Bartimaeus, 10:46-52), agree with Jesus (one of the scribes, 12:28-38), recognize Jesus (centurion, 15:39), honor Jesus (Joseph of Arimathea, 15:42-46) – and thus exemplify to the reader, in at least one special action, what following Jesus entails.⁷⁴

These are not called by Jesus but they took their own initiative to come to him, perhaps as a result of hearing Jesus' teaching or seeing the miracles he does or having benefited from an encounter with him. This composite nature of following is very important for Malbon since it is in the successes and the failures of both the disciples and the crowd, both portrayed as fallible followers, that Mark's narrative message comes out clearly. That message, according to her, is that discipleship is open to all but at the same time demanding.

Interestingly, unlike some other scholars who categorize women as part of the crowd, Malbon sees women followers as a group of its own. While agreeing with Marla Schierling and John Schmitt that, contrasted with the male disciples, Mark has portrayed the women as role models for discipleship, she does not hesitate to argue that women are also fallible followers. She cautions against the tendency to present the women as the characters that oppose or parallel the male disciples. "Rather," she argues, "the women characters (along with the crowd and exceptional male characters) supplement and complement the Markan portrayal of the disciples, together forming, as it were, a composite portrait of the fallible followers of Jesus."⁷⁵ This being the case,

⁷⁴ Ibid, 31.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 33.

she centers her discussion on exploring how women characters can shed light on what it means to be followers of Jesus and how they are especially appropriate for such characterization.

Like Puerto Navarro, she argues that “followers” and “followership” are richer and more encompassing concept than “disciples” and “discipleship.” The disciples, understood as the few men called and commissioned by Jesus, are just a subset of the universal set which is the followers. In their followership, an important point is made that women became models not because of their gender as women but because they exemplified followership by their relation to Jesus and by their commendable deeds. Peter’s mother-in-law, after being healed, served Jesus. The hemorrhaging woman manifested bold faith. The same bold faith characterizes the Syrophoenician woman whose clever reply to Jesus’ rhetoric is presented as persuading him to change his stance. Both the poor widow and the woman who anoints Jesus embody the self-denial of authentic discipleship by their respective act of generosity. Both have pronouncement statement, *chreiai*, made on their actions. The women who witnessed the crucifixion have the two discipleship words, “*akolouthein*” and “*diakonein*,” used to describe their relationship with Jesus. They followed and ministered to him when he was in Galilee. They saw where Jesus was buried and eventually went to the tomb to anoint him. Such is the connotative value of the Markan women.

Conclusion

Our review has shown that the scholarship on Markan portrait of women has evolved from simply making quantitative analysis of narratives about women to an interpretations that focus more on the qualitative analysis of such texts. It has evolved from questions of portrayal (positive or negative) to more complex questions of paradigm and concept definition. Some scholars have put emphasis on the specific texts that deal with women who follow Jesus. Some have also try to see signs of women discipleship in every narrative concerning women. Still others dwell on more

technical concerns about language. The implications of androcentric bias and language are pointed out as a major militating factor. Of course, every writing is spacio-temporally conditioned. Mark's story is not an exception. All models of biblical criticism (historical-critical, literary-critical, cultural criticism, and ideological criticism) have also been brought to bear on the topic. Susan Graham quoted Susan Suleiman as saying that "every kind of criticism, no matter how resolutely 'scientific' or 'practical,' implies a philosophical stance...."⁷⁶ This is very true in this review. It is true, too, that the assumptions, presuppositions, and world views represented are mostly Euro-American. What about a voice from the margins of Africa? In postcolonial and postmodern biblical interpretation where emphasis is on diversity and plurality and where "a choral cacophony of voices are encouraged to be heard in the sanctuary of biblical interpretation,"⁷⁷ such a voice from Africa can be enriching to the scholarship on Markan portrait of women.

⁷⁶ Graham, "Silent Voices," 146.

⁷⁷ John Hayes and Carl Holladay use this expression to describe the emergence of the exegesis with a special focus in the second half of the twentieth century. See John Hayes and Carl Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 167.

CHAPTER TWO: IGBO CULTURAL STUDY IN CONTEXT

One of the observations made at the end of our scholarship review in chapter one is that the discussions represent the Euro-American voices on biblical interpretation. It also reflects their social locations and world views. In terms of models of biblical hermeneutics, it is evident that the competing umbrella models of biblical criticisms (historical, literary, and cultural criticisms) have been brought to bear on the topic. Nevertheless, one notices that African voice and perspective is missing. In a postcolonial biblical interpretation with its emphasis on contextualization, diversity, plurality, and speaking in one's own tongue, this becomes a matter of interest. How would an African, and to be specific an Igbo of Nigeria, interpret Mark's representation of women who follow and serve Jesus?

This chapter, therefore, aims at putting Igbo reading and interpretation in context. It briefly looks at the development or evolution of biblical criticism in the twentieth century. Such an overview would show that Igbo reading falls within postcolonial cultural studies or ideological criticism. Next, the chapter proffers Igbo family consciousness, the "*Nwanne*"⁷⁸ philosophy of life, as a hermeneutical tool or lens for an Igbo interpretation. Without presuming that everybody is familiar with the Igbo people of Nigeria, the last part of the chapter gives the reader a general picture of the Igbo people, their worldview, and the position and role of women in such cosmology.

⁷⁸ It is a genderless philosophy of life that reflects the strong family bond that exists between the Igbos as people from the same mother. My *Nwanne* in the Igbo culture is the other whose life and future is tied with mine. Inherent in it is the sense of shared origin, shared purpose, family-hood, togetherness, team work, friendship, and community.

2.1. Development of biblical criticism

Fernando Segovia⁷⁹ rightly observes that biblical criticism has undergone a fundamental and radical shift of such magnitude and consequences in the last quarter of the twentieth century. His plot of this development shows that there are four competing paradigms or umbrella models of interpretation, namely; historical criticism, literary criticism, cultural criticism, and cultural studies.⁸⁰ Each of this paradigm, according to him, has its own distinctive mode of discourse and broad spectrum of interpretation. In historical criticism, the text is approached as a means (i.e, as historical evidence from and for the time of composition) and the meaning of the text resides either in the world represented by it, in the intention of the author, or both. It is regarded as a scientific way of interpreting the bible that is objective, value-neutral, and disinterested. It pays more attention to the religious and theological aspect of the text.

With literary criticism, the focus shifts from the world behind the text or the author who conceived it to the text as text. Biblical text is primarily seen as a medium – as a communication between a sender and a receiver, an author and a reader. Attention is turned to the artistic character of the text with its corresponding emphasis on its formal features; the text is viewed as a literary and rhetorical whole. Cultural criticism marks a further development in biblical criticism. It tries to harmonize the focus of historical criticism and literary criticism. It begins to view the text both

⁷⁹ See Fernando Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 3-52.

⁸⁰ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza in her review of the various theoretical models developed by biblical historical scholarship and their implications for the feminist biblical interpretation also outlines four models: doctrinal, historical-critical, dialogical-hermeneutical, and liberation theology. She interprets the evolution as a shift from “academic” to an “engaged” stance, from impartiality and disinterestedness to allegiance and interestedness. See Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 4-6. See also Katherine Zappone, “A Feminist Hermeneutics for Scripture: The Standpoint of the Interpreter,” in *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association* no. 8, ed. Mayes A.D.H (Dublin: Irish Biblical Association Publications, 1984), 25-38; John Hayes and Carl Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner’s Handbook* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 16-21.

as means and medium with focus on its broader social and cultural dimensions. In this sense, the economic, social and cultural dimensions of the biblical text become more a matter of interest than the religious interest of historical criticism. As regards text as medium of communication, cultural criticism focuses more on text as an ideological whole than on its literary and rhetorical unity that is the focus of literary criticism.

In this development of biblical criticism, Segovia notes that there is a gradual turn toward the reader on the part of both literary criticism (talks of implied reader) and cultural criticism. Nevertheless, such reader is faceless, cannot be identified. Yet that is a fundamental issue that underlie every biblical interpretation. The person that is reading and interpreting the text is not an abstract being out there but a real person (a real reader and a real interpreter) historically positioned. Every model of interpretation, according to Segovia,

must come to terms with the fact that lying behind the identification and interpretation of the sociocultural codes present in the text, the constructions of the world behind the text, and the interpretive models employed in such reconstructions is always the real reader – the flesh-and-blood reader, historically and culturally conditioned, with a field of vision fundamentally informed and circumscribed by such a social location.⁸¹

With cultural studies this dimension comes to the fore and the text is viewed as the construct of real flesh-and-blood reader. Here “meaning is taken to reside not in the author of the text or the world behind the text (as postulated by both historical criticism and cultural criticism) or in the text as such (as postulated by literary criticism of the text-dominant variety) but in the encounter or interchange between text and reader.”⁸² It is further specified that the reader in question is not the intermediate and formalistic reader-construct of the literary criticism of the reader-dominant sort, but a real flesh-and-blood reader who does not claim objectivity and impartiality. He/she

⁸¹ Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 29.

⁸² Ibid. 42.

comes to the text with his/her assumptions and presuppositions. “Meaning emerges, therefore, as the result of an encounter between a socially and historically conditioned text and a socially and historically conditioned reader.”⁸³

In the context of our study, the flesh-and-blood reader is identified as an Igbo person, male or female. He or she is socially and historically conditioned in the sense that one is interpreting the text from Igbo social locale and perspective and in a postcolonial era where plurality, diversity, contextualization, and cacophony of voices have been brought to bear on biblical interpretation. As a cultural study, meaning is to emerge from the interchange between the Markan text and real Igbo readers of the twenty-first century.

2.2. Igbo family/community consciousness, the “*Nwanne*” Philosophy of Life

Before delving into detailed discussion of Igbo world view that would be of great importance in our understanding of the Igbo biblical interpretation, suffice it to stress from the outset that the Igbo family/community consciousness - *Nwanne* philosophy of life - is central to comprehending most of the things one can say about the Igbos,⁸⁴ their perspective of biblical interpretation inclusive. The Igbos, like the rest of the African continent, are community oriented and in the family people live as *umunne* (children of the same mother). A further insight into the Igbo understanding of the family and what it means to be *umunne* is deemed necessary at this

⁸³ Ibid. 42

⁸⁴ See for example Nneka Okafor and Felix Munrove who advocates that *Nwanne* paradigm is the ultimate paradigm for the liberation of Igbo women from the patriarchal subjugation they experience today. [Nneka Ifeoma Okafor and Felix Munyaradzi Murove, “The *Nwanne* Paradigm as Liberative Panacea to the Patriarchal Nigerian Igbo Society,” in *Gendering African Social Spaces: Women, Power, and Cultural Expressions*, ed. Toyin Falola and Wanjala Nasong’o S (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2016), 37-55]. See also Ikenna Okafor who postulates *Nwanne* philosophy of life as a model for a theology of fraternal solidarity, an Igbo perspective to liberation theology. [Ikenna Ugochukwu Okafor, “Onuru Ube Nwanne Agbala Oso, a Theology of Fraternal Solidarity: An Igbo Perspective to Liberation Theology,” *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology* 24, no. 1 (2012): 5-39].

point. Cletus Obasi & Rebecca Nnamani have a good synthesis of what the Igbos perceive a family to be:

Igbo tradition respects the individual person without discrimination. ‘A person is thought of first of all as a member of a particular family, kindred, clan or tribe. Today in Igbo village, one rarely asked: ‘who are you?’ but rather, ‘whose son (daughter) are you?’ and what lineage or clan do you belong to?’ Each individual Igbo man or woman belongs to a family and this is learnt from infancy. It is the family that makes the individual in a community. The individual, the family and community are bonded bio-sociologically and spiritually. It is so organized that each Igbo individual is respected in his/her family and his/her maternal home. The feeling of belonging to a family is the spurring spirit to contribute to the well-being of the family you belong, from the smallest to the biggest. It is the quest of everyone: *Umuada, Ndinyom, umuokpara, nwoke, and nwanyi*.⁸⁵

It is striking to note that the first thing mentioned in the description of an Igbo family is that it is a place where everyone is respected without discrimination. There is no question of who someone is because one is given one’s identity by the family and from the family to the community. The family is a home where everyone feels the sense of belonging and in turn contributes one’s giftedness to the well-being of the family according to what one is capable of offering. This has nothing to do with people’s age or size or gender. The bio-sociological and spiritual bond that bind the people in the community transcend all these classifications. In the family, inclusiveness and complementarity are the watchwords. The man knows he needs his wife to fully belong to the community just as the woman knows that she needs her husband to fully identify herself in the society. The same is said with regard to the relationship between parents and their children.

Teresa Okure,⁸⁶ a famous Nigerian feminist biblical scholar, is consistent in emphasizing this aspect of inclusiveness, solidarity and complementarity as African’s distinctive way of living

⁸⁵ Cletus O. Obasi & Rebecca G. Nnamani, “The Role of Umuada Igbo in Conflict Management and Development in Nigeria,” *Open Journal of Political Science* 5, (2015): 257.

⁸⁶ Teresa Okure roots her project of feminist theological scholarship on the African understanding of family living as a life of inclusiveness and solidarity: where the family members – men and women, old and young, parents and children – struggle alongside each other to realize the family ideal. In a family, one person’s concern is the

and doing things. In the family men struggle alongside the women to establish their family and the same applies to every sphere of life. Okure buttresses this point when she emphasizes that, “in traditional African context, fully human undertakings are done conjointly by men and women.”⁸⁷ Subsequently, in the context of feminist biblical scholarship, she proposes that “doing theology from women perspective” will achieve the best result when done in an inclusive way. Such inclusiveness at the level of gender entails the “efforts of women and men to interpret the scripture as they relate to women, in a common search for new inclusive meaning.”⁸⁸ The basic rationale underlying this understanding is that in Africa, real life issues affect everybody in the community, men and women alike. This reality is normally expressed in an Igbo proverb: “*Imi na anya bu nwanne. Oji buru n’ihe meturu imi meturu anya; ihe meturu anya metukwaru imi.*” (The nose and the eyes are brothers and sisters. Whatever affects one, ultimately affects the other).

In Igbo traditional family the members live as *nwanne*. What does it mean to be *nwanne* to the other, one may ask?⁸⁹ *Nwanne* is made up of two words: *nwa* (child) and *nne* (mother). This translates to “the child of my mother.” *Nwanne* evokes the strong bond that exists between the children of the same mother. “It reflects the reality of descent from a common origin and hence the need to be strongly identified as being part of the being of the other whom I call *Nwanne*.”⁹⁰

concern of everybody and solutions are sought conjointly. Her main critique of Feminist (Europe and America), Womanist (African American), and Majerista (Hispanic) hermeneutics is their exclusion of the men in their pursuit of women affairs. See Teresa Okure, “Feminist Interpretation in Africa,” in *Searching the Scriptures Volume One: A Feminist Introduction*. ed. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza with the assistance of Shelly Matthews (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 76-85; _____ “Invitation to African Women’s Hermeneutical Concerns,” in *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa*. ed. Mary Getui, Tinyiko Maluleke, and Justin Ukpog (Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers, 2001), 42-67.

⁸⁷ Okure, “Feminist Interpretation in Africa,” 78.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 77.

⁸⁹ For detailed discussion on *Nwanne* concept see Joseph Therese Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought* (London: Routledge, 2000), 76-92; Okafor and Murove, “The *Nwanne* Paradigm as Liberative Panacea to the Patriarchal Nigerian Igbo Society,” 37-55 [45-49]; Okafor, “Onuru Ube *Nwanne* Agbala Oso,” 12-16.

⁹⁰ Okafor and Murove, “The *Nwanne* Paradigm as Liberative Panacea to the Patriarchal Nigerian Igbo Society,” 45.

The sense of shared purpose, family-hood, togetherness, team work, friendship, and community is also inherent in the concept of *nwanne*.⁹¹ Worthy of noting in conceptualizing *nwanne* in Igbo family life is its inclusiveness as far as gender is concerned. When one is called *nwanne*, it is not reflected whether it is male or female. You only know the sex of the person when he or she appears or when the suffix “*nwoke*” (“*nwanne m nwoke*,” for male) or “*nwanyi*” (“*nwanne m nwanyi*,” for female) is added to *nwanne*. People hardly add such suffix because it sounds artificial to the mouth. Secondly, and more importantly, in Igbo family life the sex of the family member is least considered. “For the *Ndigbo*, that gendered-based brother or sister is not the issue and one does not consider the gender aspect first when we refer to the person as *Nwanne*.”⁹² My *nwanne* remains my *nwanne* irrespective of whether he is a male or she is a female. In essence, the maleness or the femaleness of the *nwanne* does not add or remove anything to his or her identity as my *nwanne*. As we shall see later, the inclusiveness and complementarity that is embedded in the *nwanne* philosophy of life is an important element in understanding the various roles people play in the family. Suffice it to mention that the *nwanne* philosophy of life might be difficult to articulate in cultures where there is dichotomy or struggle between the sexes. Basically, it is all about people’s world view. This leads us to the next part of this chapter which is an insight to Igbo cosmology where every aspect of Igbo life finds meaning and expression.

⁹¹ Okafor, “Onuru Ube Nwanne Agbala Oso,” 13.

⁹² Okafor and Murove, “The *Nwanne* Paradigm as Liberative Panacea to the Patriarchal Nigerian Igbo Society,” 47.

2.3. The Igbo People of Nigeria

2.3.1. Who are the Igbos?

The Igbo-speaking people constitute one of the three major tribes in Nigeria.⁹³ Geographically it is located in the South-Eastern part of the country between latitude 5 and 7 degrees north and longitude 6 to 8 east and occupies an area of about 15,800 square miles.⁹⁴ In terms of origin, the Igbo elders maintain that the Igbo are indigenous to their present habitation in the country and had no history of having migrated from another place. Elizabeth Isichei, one of the Igbo historians and ethnographers, quotes one of the Igbo elders of having made this assertion: “We did not come from anywhere and anyone who tells you we came from anywhere is a liar. Write it down.”⁹⁵ Linguistically, the Igbo have one unified language, although dialects abound. According to Chinwe Nwoye, citing earlier sources, Igbo language belongs to the Sudanic linguistic group of the Kwa division of the Niger-Congo family.⁹⁶

Despite the fact that politically the Igbo do not have a centralized government as a people,⁹⁷ they have certain characteristics that distinguish them as a unique people. “These characteristics include geographical contiguity, a single language comprising related dialects, a significant measure of cultural homogeneity, including an egalitarian social structure, a distinct marriage system, comparable family life and traditional forms of religion.”⁹⁸ Currently, the Igbo occupy

⁹³ The other two major tribes are the Hausa (found mostly in the northern part of the country) and the Yoruba (who occupy the west of the country). However, Nigeria as a country has about 260 tribes in all.

⁹⁴ Victor Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 1.

⁹⁵ Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People* (London: Macmillan Press, 1976), 3. See also, Chinwe Nwoye, “Igbo Cultural and Religious Worldview: An Insider’s Perspective,” *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (September 2011): 305.

⁹⁶ Nwoye, “Igbo Cultural and Religious Worldview,” 305. See also, Uchendu, *Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, 3.

⁹⁷ “*Igbo enwe eze*” (Igbo do not have king) is a popular saying that expresses this phenomenon.

⁹⁸ Joseph Therese Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought* (London: Routledge, 2000), 2-3.

five of the thirty-six states making up the present Nigeria. The official census figures of 1991 has it that the Igbo people number about 10.7 million. They, more than the other tribes in Nigeria, embraced Christianity and are predominantly Christians today though traditional religion is still strong in some places.

2.3.2. Socio-political life of the Igbo

Socio-politically, the concept “*Igbo enwe eze*” (Igbo do not have king) implies that the Igbo have no centralized form of administration. Communities are organized along lineage which is made up of agnate group called *Umunna* (literally, children from the same father), which refers to the patrilineal or matrilineal members of the village-group who cannot inter-marry.⁹⁹ The *Umunna* is organized at three levels, namely; the family (the primary level and the most important level), the village, and the town. The family is organized around the husband who is seen as the head of the family and in his absence the eldest son takes the responsibility. At the village level it is the most senior man, the *Okpala*, who is the leader. The leadership of the town is in the hands of the age grade groups.

Being a patriarchal community, the political organization of the Igbo seems to be the affairs of men. This is the case in principle. However, in operation the women groups are very powerful and influential. The group of *Umuada* (daughters of the lineage),¹⁰⁰ for example, is a big force to reckon with. Joseph Therese Agbasiere describes their significance in the following way:

⁹⁹ For detailed discussion on this see Uchendu, *Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, 39-48; Nwoye, “Igbo Cultural and Religious Worldview,” 305-306.

¹⁰⁰ Every woman by virtue of being born in her patrimonial place belongs to this organic group. It has nothing to do with status or creed. “Members of *umuada* may be married, unmarried, divorced or widowed, but must be born of the same kindred.” (Eugene Chigbu Uchendu, “Repositioning culture for development: Women and Development in a Nigeria Rural Community,” *Community, Work & Family* 18, no. 3 (2015): 340). This is where the women have the greatest voice in the community and every men’s organization submits to their decision.

The powers of the *umuada* are as extensive as they are ambivalent. They include the right of arbitration within their natal lineage, settling of quarrels concerning political, economic and ritual matters which are beyond their male relative's power to settle. ... More important, the *umuada* have the power to ostracize any proven incorrigible (male) lineage relative.¹⁰¹

From this description it is evident that their influence and power go beyond politics to touch every aspect of Igbo life. Worthy of noting here, too, is the fact that even men's institutions submit to their authority. As a matter of fact, nobody, man or woman, would want to make any case with the *umuada*. In the traditional setting, any issue they fail to settle (if there could be such a case) will not be settled by any other organ. In the words of Agbasiere, in her criticism of the foreign historians' underestimation of the authority of this group, maintains that, "The *umuada* of any unit of the patrilineage functions as the final arbiters in all conflict situation within the respective lineage. Their verdict is final, even though the implementation of their decision may be entrusted to the male relatives."¹⁰² Using modern terminology, Eugene Uchendu equates the power they wield to that of a pressure group.¹⁰³ But I think their influence and the authority they wield is more than that of a pressure group. It is more encompassing and touches every sphere of Igbo life – religious, cultural, political, and social.

There are also other women groups that are actively involved in the social, political, economic, religious, and cultural life of the Igbo people.¹⁰⁴ *Ndi Iyom* or *Otu Umunwanyị* (Association of women of all categories), like the *Umuada*, is worth mentioning because of their role and influence. In terms of membership it is open to everybody who is a woman irrespective

¹⁰¹ Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought*, 40.

¹⁰² Ibid, 42

¹⁰³ Eugene Chigbu Uchendu, "Repositioning culture for development: Women and Development in a Nigeria Rural Community," *Community, Work & Family* 18, no. 3 (2015): 340.

¹⁰⁴ Eugene Uchendu lists four of such groups: *Ndi Iyom* (all women, whether married, unmarried, divorced or widowed and irrespective of their lineage), *Ndi Ikom* (unmarried women), *Ndi Nne* (group of women who are mothers), and *Ndi Nne kele Oshie* (elderly women). See Uchendu, "Repositioning culture for development," 340.

of one's lineage or social status. As such it has wider membership and effect. While *Umuada* is limited to the lineage daughters and *Ndi Inyemedi* limited to the women married to a particular clan, *Ndi Iyom* can extend to village, town or even a whole locality. In effect, this is the real pressure group. This is the type of group that was involved in the famous Women's War (*Ogu Umunwanyi*) of 1929¹⁰⁵ that bit the imagination of British colonial rule. No history of Igbo's encounter with the British Government is complete without the account of this incident.

In essence, what is very evident in the socio-political life of the Igbo people is that the Igbo women are more visible and powerful in the community when they are in groups than when they act as individuals. This influence and authority that the Igbo women enjoy in patriarchal Igbo society should be kept in mind as it will be relevant later to our comparative analysis with the Markan women.

2.3.3. Igbo Worldview

Just as it is with every other people, the Igbo cosmological outlook undergirds their perspective of life. This is therefore very pertinent in the discussion of the Igbo understanding of the human person and the role everyone plays in the harmonious organization of life and the community they inhabit.

¹⁰⁵ It was an unprecedented incidence that took place in November of 1929 when a group of women in Calabar and Owerri Provinces, in their thousands, demonstrated against the oppressive British colonial rule that introduced taxation of women and the other restrictions of the freedom and autonomy they enjoy as women in Igbo society. It ended tragically as police and troops, acting under the British District Officers' command, fired on the women killing more than fifty women and injuring so many others. However, the women succeeded in pressurizing the colonial administration to remove tax on them. For detailed description of the incidence, see A. E. Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria 1891-1929* (New York: Humanities Press, 1972), 207-248; Judith Van Allen, "Aba Riots or the Igbo Women's War? – Ideology, Stratification and the Invisibility of Women," *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 6, no. 1 (January 1975): 11-39.

The first statement to be made about the Igbo world view is that it is deeply religious. That is to say that the people have a religious conception of the universe. Elizabeth Isichei, underscoring this point, even goes to the extent of saying that, “The Igbo were nothing if not profoundly religious, and all accounts of their life reflect the fact.”¹⁰⁶ In this religious conception, there exists two complementary worlds: the physical and the spiritual that are three-dimensional and are in continuous interaction. There are *Elu* (sky – the abode of the gods), *Ala* (earth – human habitation) and *Ime ala* (under the earth – the abode of the spirits and ancestors). What this means is that the gods, the living, and the dead are occupying the same universe and are continually complementing each other. This relationship among the three key players in the Igbo cosmos is not only complementary but also is understood in terms of equality. This phenomenon is well articulated by Chinwe Nwoye:

In Igbo religious worldview, the human world is three-dimensional – the sky; the earth, intricately woven with water; and the spirit/ancestral world. Each of the three dimensions operates as a viable reality or a place of habitation; with all three interconnected or contiguous and continuous in a non-hierarchical manner.¹⁰⁷

Another aspect of the Igbo cosmology that is of interest to our discussion is its gendered nature and the balance and complementarity that exist between the feminine and masculine principles. This reality is well demonstrated in the gender of the Igbo deities that control the abodes of existence. Whereas the Sky and the Ancestral deities are male (*Chukwu* – Supreme God and Ancestors), the deities of the Earth and Water are female (Earth goddess and Water spirits). These deities, though gendered and perform different roles, complement one another for the single purpose of enhancing the human life and the promotion of human person’s total well-being.

¹⁰⁶ Isichei, *History of the Igbo People*, 24.

¹⁰⁷ Nwoye, “Igbo Cultural and Religious Worldview: An Insider’s Perspective,” 307.

Among these four deities the *Chukwu* and the *Ani* (Earth Goddess) are regarded as the father and the mother of the universe respectively. *Chukwu* is the sky-father above and *Ani* is the Earth mother below.¹⁰⁸ The Igbo world is believed to be at its best when there is a balance between these two masculine and feminine principles operational in the cosmos. The importance of this balance and complementarity cannot be over emphasized. Any imbalance results in an unpleasant situation that would immediately call for the appeasing of whichever realm that is grieved. This principle also applies when it comes to the relationship between men and women in family and societal life.

2.3.4. Igbo Patriarchy

Like most traditional societies (and Markan community) the Igbo world is a patriarchal world. However, it is not androcentric as could be expected in a patriarchal set-up. On the contrary, it is a feminine-oriented patriarchy. Hence, it is a patriarchy that is paradoxical. At the level of the deities, the male deities appear to occupy a predominant place. For instance, the sky god, *Chukwu*, has the father figure and is male. Similarly, the ancestors who occupy the earth-beneath are male and there seems to be no women ancestors. However, notwithstanding this apparent male predominance, “the traditional religion (*Omenala/odinala*) is based on the worship/reverence of “*Ala*”, the earth goddess” and great importance is given “to the tie which keeps all together in the form of Mother Earth – the mother of all.”¹⁰⁹ In fact, one would even get the impression that greater prominence is given to the mother earth, a female deity. According to Nneka Okafor, “In giving prominence to the god-mother, the Igbo wish to say that women are important in its society as they are the gate between the ancestors gone and our world; it is this mother who is fruitful that

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 309.

¹⁰⁹ Nneka Ifeoma Okafor and Felix Munyaradzi Murove, “The *Nwanne* Paradigm as Liberative Panacea to the Patriarchal Nigerian Igbo Society,” 46.

complements the actions of the male deities in Igbo society.”¹¹⁰ But what is at stake is the balance that is to be maintained in the roles played by the female and male deities in the dynamics of the Igbo cosmology. At the core of Igbo religion, Nwoye stresses, “is the polarity between *Chukwu* and the *Ana* (or *Ani*) – a polarity in which both poles are, necessarily, crucial.”¹¹¹ The maintaining of the balance of the polarities between the deities and their mutual complementarity is what guarantees the well-being of the cosmos as well as that of human beings.

At the level of human existence, Igbo patriarchy is expressed in the fact that it holds the male child at esteem as he is the one who perpetuates the clan name by inheriting the father’s patrimony. This means that kinship is primarily traced in the male line and the individual belongs to a group of relatives, the agnate (*Umunna*).¹¹² In the family the husband is projected as the head of the family and represents it in the family rituals that are offered to the deities. At the clan, village, and town leadership it is the most elderly man that is in charge. That is the patriarchy in principle. Nevertheless, in reality the understanding of a strong bond of kingship and relationship is based on the female – the mother. The symbol of *Nne* (mother) is the ultimate and the bond of *Umunne* (children of the same mother) is stronger than that of the *Umunna* (children from the same father). In addition to its strength, the “*umunne* kinship bond is a permanent one, unaffected by the marital status of the mother and unchanged when she dies.”¹¹³ As a matter of fact, one’s *Ikwunne* (mother’s lineage) is the safest haven for that person. That is where one is most welcomed and recognized.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 46

¹¹¹ Nwoye, “Igbo Cultural and Religious Worldview,” 309.

¹¹² Ibid, 312.

¹¹³ Uchendu, *Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, 66.

In terms of family responsibility and leadership, the man's "headship" is more of a title and his powerfulness in most cases is blown out of proportion. In actual operation most women are the key players in their families through the strong influence they wield on their husbands.

Phanuel Akubueze expresses this paradox in the following way:

"The man's power is basically a rehearsed external show which is not sustained by internal reality." An Igbo husband is given to dramatic and theatrical display of power, especially when there is a third party. Most of the time the woman play along with this ego-boosting antics. Women go along with the acting because tradition demands that they prop up the men as the family heads, even when the women are the main breadwinners. For the Igbo woman, it is not a matter of pride to boast that she plays the role of husband instead of a wife; she does not want to be identified as a wife who husbands her husband.¹¹⁴

Eugene Uchendu's findings in Uturu¹¹⁵ town supports this paradox of men's power. The women he interviewed acknowledged that their husbands are the head of the family since that is the traditional belief. This notwithstanding, some of the women expressed that the women are the ones ruling in their homes through the way they influence the decisions of their husbands and sons. By so doing the voice of the women is heard through the mouths of their husbands. "For me," one of them airs, "ruling at home is more important to ruling outside the home. The important thing is that we, the women should never underestimate the influence we have in our families and at home."¹¹⁶ Uchendu sees a kind of "invisible matriarchy" at work despite the patriarchy and patrilineage that one sees on the surface. This concurs with the view of Joseph Agbasiere who argues that the "external features of patrilineality and 'patriarchy' are but social mechanisms for

¹¹⁴ Egejuru Phanuel Akubueze, "The Paradox of Womanbeing and the Female Principle in Igbo Cosmology," in *Nwanyibu: Womanbeing & African Literature*, ed. Phanuel Egejuru A. and Katrak Ketu H (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1997), 16.

¹¹⁵ Eugene Uchendu's research aims at getting the views of women as regards the roles they play in their homes and in the society at large. His finding shows that there is a kind of "invisible matriarchy" that is operational despite the fact that what is seen on the surface is patriarchy and men's predominance. See Uchendu, "Repositioning culture for development, 334-350

¹¹⁶ Uchendu, "Repositioning culture for development," 344.

maintaining an equilibrium between the interplay of this intrinsic factor of female-orientedness and the religious notion of the worth of the human person, male or female, in the dynamics of relationship.¹¹⁷ By putting patriarchy in parenthesis, I suppose, Agbasiere wants to make the point that it is a patriarchy in disguise – the one that is feminine in orientation.

2.3.5. Roles played by individuals in Igbo society

Because of the family and community rootedness of the Igbo person¹¹⁸ the roles individuals play in the families and communities are first and foremost viewed from the point of view of how such roles contributes to the common life. It is not viewed basically from who is performing them. What is more important is how they complement one another and how they help to maintain the balance that is so essential in Igbo cosmology. Men, women, and children in the family carry out different roles that are complementary in intent and are geared towards the well-being of the family. There is also mutual respect of various roles and nobody is expected to take his or her role for granted. Nneka Okafor sums it up this way:

In Igbo cultural society, as regards to the position of men and women, the roles are well-defined and each role complements the other as the men assuming their role need women to assume their role in order to make progress. It is society that sees the goodness of the woman and knows that she is equally in all ramifications to the man. The woman knows her place and never seeks to take the place of the man; the man knows his place and would not disrespect his wife by trying to assume her role. Each sex does acknowledge that

¹¹⁷ Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought*, 7-8.

¹¹⁸ The Igbo people, like many other African societies, have a very strong sense of the family and community. "It is in rootedness in an ongoing human community that the individual comes to see himself as man," says Ifeanyi Menkiti. This echoes John Mbiti's famous philosophical thought that, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." The *Nwanne* concept advocates by Nneka Okafor as the liberative panacea to the patriarchal Igbo society is based on traditional Igbo communitarian understanding of the human person. See, Ifeanyi Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," in *African Philosophy: An Introduction*. Third Edition, ed. Richard A. Wright (New York: University Press of America, 1984), 171-181; John Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Second Edition Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1989; Nneka Ifeoma Okafor and Felix Munyaradzi Murove, "The *Nwanne* Paradigm as Liberative Panacea to the Patriarchal Nigerian Igbo Society," 37-55.

accommodating one another is a fundamental that should always be present and cannot be removed.¹¹⁹

Another important point about the different roles the individuals play is that every role is very important and there are no superior or inferior roles. Every role is very essential and as such indispensable for the healthy, smooth, and progressive running of the family affairs. With this understanding there is no competition between the genders. Rather, men and women work hard to be productive. Underscoring the importance of the value that is attached to every role, and reacting to the claim by some people that Igbo women carry out inferior roles compared to the ones done by men, Phanuel Akubueze expresses his doubts, “that an objective Igbo man would say that his wife plays a minor role in his family. In Africa as a whole, roles are not categorized as major and minor or as superior and inferior. There is a clear division of labor but all roles are complementary and interdependent.”¹²⁰ Like many scholars he argues that such unhealthy categorization and designation of women’s role as inferior came with colonization.

2.3.6. Status of Women in Igbo Society

Despite being a patriarchal society the balance and the complementarity of the masculine and feminine principles in Igbo worldview shows that both men and women occupy significant place in the family and society and thus are people of equal status. The different roles played by men and women are not to be misunderstood to mean that women occupy second class position. As it has come out clearly in our prior discussions, traditional Igbo society attached no importance to gender issues because the focus is on the family and the community. Men and women perform their traditional roles for building up their family. “Each role, regardless of who performed it was

¹¹⁹ Okafor and Murove, “The Nwanne Paradigm as Liberative Panacea to the Patriarchal Nigerian Igbo Society,” 38-39.

¹²⁰ Akubueze, “The Paradox of Womanbeing and the Female Principle in Igbo Cosmology,” 17.

considered equally important because it contributed to the fundamental goal of community survival.”¹²¹ In other words, both men and women occupy significant position and both work to complement each other. The principle of complementarity, inclusiveness, equality, and community inherent in Igbo worldview does not admit subjugation and enslavement. Moreover, the institutions of women – *Umuada* and *Otu Umunwanyi* – are there to ensure that women’s status, relevance, and authority are not, in anyway, undermined.

There is a misconception that African women’s role is that of house wives and thus are limited to the domestic enclosure. Actually household responsibility is one of the roles women can play. And from Igbo perspective, with the emphasis on the family, it is a very primary and important responsibility for any woman who considers herself a serious person. However, it is not only covert roles that women play. They have many overt responsibilities that make impact in the life of the community. Uchendu lists three of them, namely, productive, community management and social change tasks.¹²² Every woman works hard in the family lands with the other family members to produce food for the family’s sustenance and to get money to take care of her social responsibilities. Some women do small-scale business and they go to village markets to sell commodities. As groups, they engage in community developmental projects just as men do in their various groups. As already seen, the strength of women is more conspicuous when they act in groups. Uchendu’s research gives us a picture of what women’s groups can do both for community development and for bringing about social change.¹²³ With reference to the former, they renovated

¹²¹ Afisi Oseni Taiwo, “Power and Womanhood in Africa: An Introductory Evaluation.” *Journal of Pan African Studies* 3, no. 6 (March 2010): 230.

¹²² Uchendu, “Repositioning culture for development,” 341.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 242-243.

the village school's home economics laboratory and equipped it. For the latter, they succeeded where the men failed. The report of their group leader says it all:

When our men could not manage the security situation in Uturu, we stepped on stage to protest against armed robbery and killings. Ask around, we took to the street some time on the 7 May 2002 and carried out the biggest protest in the history of Uturu ... We are able to use our own powers as women to secure sanity to the community. We have even cautioned erring ezes and chiefs here.¹²⁴

It is therefore vivid that Igbo women can be everything but not invisible or without status in Igbo society. They are not domesticated house wives but holistic entities with both covert and overt significance and influence. One can even say that they have the power which the men do not have notwithstanding that men are designated the head of the family. In Igbo society, therefore, women occupy an unimaginable position and could not be said to have no voice or power. On the contrary, they are very visible, very powerful and very influential. The issue, therefore, is not whether they have power, but “whether specific groups of women are aware that they have power, and the meaning and extent of that power vis-à-vis that of men in the context of gender relations.”¹²⁵ Of course, this does not deny the fact that there might be individual women in specific situations that are victims of subjugation by men. What has been proffered is what is obtained generally based on Igbo cosmological principles and what concrete experiences have shown.

Conclusion

Biblical criticism has witnessed tremendous development in the last quarter of the last century. We have seen a shift from historical-critical method with its objectivity, disinterestedness, and impartiality to postcolonial cultural studies or ideological criticism that approaches the text

¹²⁴ Ibid, 243. These women, it could be said, did at the town level what the women involved in Women War of 1929 did at the national level. Both were able to effect a positive social change for the community.

¹²⁵ Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought*, 2.

from a subjective stance and presuppositions. The freedom to interact with the text in a creative manner by a flesh and blood reader who is historically conditioned identifies Igbo interpretation as a study in culture. In terms of perspective, its approach to Mark's portrait of women is from the stand point of Igbo family consciousness that is expressed in *Nwanne* philosophy of life. This approach we have seen has inclusiveness, complementarity, and solidarity as its distinctive characteristic.

Our overview of the Igbo worldview reveals that it is a world that is established on the principle of balance and complementarity between the feminine and masculine principles. It is a patriarchal world that is feminine-oriented. This "balance of patrifocality and matrifocality"¹²⁶ forms the root of the understanding of the equality that is to govern the relationship of men and women. In this understanding, the different traditional roles played by women and men are seen, not in terms of superiority or inferiority or in terms of stereotype, but in complementary terms. The family and the community, not people's gender, are the driving forces. The husband, the wife, and the children work hard to build a formidable family and whatever an individual member of the family does is supposed to be geared towards this common agenda.

Women as it has been demonstrated have high status in the family and the society at large. Their power and influence are not limited to the domestic domain. They have both covert and overt responsibilities. Ironically, their institutions, like *Umuada* and *Otu Umunwanyi*, command more authority and influence than those of men. They dare where men cannot venture. In effect, the Igbo women are very visible in every sphere of the community life. There is an Igbo saying that "*Adighi etinye nwanyi Igbo n'akpa*" (an Igbo woman cannot be pocketed). In terms of her relevance to the

¹²⁶ Okafor and Murove, "The Nwanne Paradigm as Liberative Panacea to the Patriarchal Nigerian Igbo Society," 46.

Igbo cosmos, Joseph Agbasiere best describes an Igbo woman as a “gift pragmatized.” She explains this to mean that an Igbo woman is “a ‘gift’ to the society, an ethical being who confers some status on the man, one who is an upholder of morality.”¹²⁷

Lastly, it is clear that Igbo women are at their best when they are in groups. Such groups confer on them a kind of sacred status and they become untouchable. Whatever action they take at this level is considered serious and is taken as such no matter who is involved. Whenever women come out in group to protest for anything the men, in most cases, would submit. That is why the shooting of the women involved in the Women’s War of 1929 was considered by the Igbos as the worst abomination that could happen to Igbo women on Igbo soil.

¹²⁷ Agbasiere. *Women in Igbo Life and Thought*, 7-8.

CHAPTER THREE: HEALING OF SIMON'S MOTHER-IN-LAW (MK 1:29-31)

Mark's positive portrait of women, it could be said, is shown right from the beginning of his story of Jesus. He considers it important (for the editorial reasons best known to him) to include a story of Jesus' healing of a woman (1:29-31) as a part of the series of healings and exorcisms performed by Jesus on his first day of ministry in Capernaum. From the point of view of women's encounter with Jesus, Donahue and Harrington regard it as the first of four Markan narratives that deal with "acts of power" in favor of women (the rest are 5:21-24, 35-43 and 5:25-34).¹²⁸ The question therefore arises as to the significance of this story to Mark's portrait of women in particular and to his story of Jesus in general. From a point of view of postcolonial cultural studies with its emphasis on contextualization, real flesh and blood readers, and plurality, how might Africans, especially the Igbos of Nigeria, read and interpret the service of Peter's mother-in-law?

This chapter, therefore, takes up the story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (1:29-31). The chapter has three parts. The first is an exegesis of the pericope where we shall seek an informed understanding of the text in its historical and literary context.¹²⁹ Having established this informed understanding, part two looks at how scholars have interpreted the story using different models or paradigms of biblical interpretations – historical, literary, and cultural criticisms. It will be clear from this discussion that the interpretations are influenced by the social locations of the interpreters, their hermeneutical tools, and the presuppositions and the assumptions they brought to bear on the text. It also reveals that they represent predominantly European and North American

¹²⁸ John Donahue and Daniel Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*. Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005), 85.

¹²⁹ "The goal of exegesis is to develop a coherent, informed interpretation of biblical texts that is based on the best knowledge available to the interpreter." See John Hayes and Carl Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 21-28.

perspectives or voices on biblical hermeneutics. The postcolonial and postmodern emphasis on contextual reading and interpretation of the bible challenges me as an African reader to search for or explore how an African perspective, a voice from the margins, could also reflect or be heard on this story. Employing cultural studies as a paradigm of interpretation and Igbo family consciousness, the “*Nwanne*”¹³⁰ philosophy of life, as a hermeneutical tool, part three of the chapter attempts an African, specifically Igbo, contextualization of the “waiting on them” of Peter’s mother-in-law.

3.1. EXEGESIS OF MK 1:29-31

3.1.1. Translation

²⁹ As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰ Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹ He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. (NRSV)

3.1.2. Narrative Context and Literary Form

The story of the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law belongs to the literary unit that marks Jesus’ first day in Capernaum, a “paradigmatic day” that inaugurates his ministry (1:21-34).¹³¹ After the narrative of the calling of the first four disciples (1:16-20) Mark narrates how Jesus

¹³⁰ *Nwanne* philosophy of life is already explain in chapter two. It is a genderless ideology that reflects the strong family bond that exists between the Igbos as people from the same mother. My *Nwanne* in the Igbo culture is the other whose life and future is tied with mine. Inherent in it is the sense of shared origin, shared purpose, family-hood, togetherness, team work, friendship, and community. See Nneka Ifeoma Okafor and Felix Munyaradzi Murove, “The *Nwanne* Paradigm as Liberative Panacea to the Patriarchal Nigerian Igbo Society,” in *Gendering African Social Spaces: Women, Power, and Cultural Expressions*, ed. Toyin Falola and Wanjala Nasong’o S (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2016), 37-55 [45].

¹³¹ See Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 82-83; Monika Fander, “Gospel of Mark: Women as True Disciples of Jesus,” in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, ed. Schottroff Luise and Wacker Marie-Theres (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 628. Martin George calls it “a day in the life of Jesus.” [Martin George, *The Gospel According to Mark: Meaning and Message* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2005), 21].

journeyed with them to Capernaum. On this Sabbath day Jesus begins by demonstrating his power as a teacher through confrontation with an unclean spirit in the synagogue (1:21-28). From there he proceeds to the house of Peter and Andrew where he cures the former's mother-in-law (1:29-31). He ends the day with the cure and exorcism of many sick people brought to him that evening at Peter's home (1:32-34). The literary unity of the section is shown in the fact that the narrative of exorcism in the synagogue (1:21-28) and that of the healing in the house (1:29-31) complement each other and give concrete expression to the subsequent summary statement about Jesus' ministry of exorcism and healing (1:32-34).¹³²

Structurally, it follows the pattern of normal miracle story which is characterized by three elements: the statement of the problem, the healing action of the miracle worker, and the demonstration of the proof of the healing.¹³³ These basic elements are capable of expansion of details depending on the length and complexity of the story. Hence Robert Stein identifies the component parts of the story as follows: the arrival of the healer (1:29), the diagnosis of the problem (1:30a), a request for healing (1:30b), the description of the healing (1:31a-b), and the proof of the healing (1:31c-d).¹³⁴ Peter's mother-in-law is sick with fever and the people there with her tell Jesus about it. In response Jesus takes her by the hand and raises her up and she becomes well. The woman shows that she is healed by serving meal to the people around. Though this story follow the normal pattern of miracle stories, it lacks some details, perhaps as a result of its short

¹³² Barnes Tatum, "Did Jesus Heal Simon's Mother-in-law of a Fever?" *Dialogue* 27, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 151.

¹³³ Paul J. Achtemeier, "The ministry of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 35, no. 2 (April 1981): 157-169 [164-165].

¹³⁴ Robert Stein, *Mark. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 92. See also Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 85; Mark Strauss, *Mark. Exegetical commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014), 98; Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 199.

length. It has no mention of the duration of the sickness, no word uttered by Jesus, and no stress on the faith of the one who is healed.¹³⁵ As already pointed out, in place of such response Mark tells the reader that the healed woman immediately began to wait on the people present.¹³⁶ In this sense her action becomes the proof of her healing.

3.1.3. Synoptic Parallels

Matthew (8:14-17) and Luke (4:38-41) both preserve the account of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. However, in their use of Mark they omitted some details and added few things that he does not have. Both omitted the information that Andrew, James, and John were in Jesus' company as witnesses of the miracle. Stein suggests that Matthew and Luke omitted their names because they played no part in the story. Mark may have added their names because of their association with Peter in 1:16-20.¹³⁷ The two also omit the details about "took her by the hand and lifted her up" (1:39). Matthew simply tells us that Jesus "touched her hand and the fever disappeared" (Mt 8:15a). In the Lukan parallel (4:39) there is no personal touch but the healing is described by Jesus "rebuking" (... *epitimēsen*) the fever.¹³⁸ Matthew does not mention that Jesus was told about the sickness of the woman (Luke has "and they made an appeal to him on her behalf). Rather it was Jesus himself who noticed that the woman is lying sick with a fever and took the initiative to cure her. Whereas Mark and Luke report that Simon's mother-in-law after being cured from the fever "got up and started waiting on them" ("*diēkonei autois*" 1:31; Lk 4:39),

¹³⁵ A good example of a healing story where there are such details is that of the woman with the flow of blood (5:25-34). Here the reader is told that the woman has been sick for twelve years, the effort she made to reach Jesus, the words of Jesus acknowledging her faith and declaring her healed.

¹³⁶ C. S. Mann, *Mark. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1986), 241. See also Mark Strauss, *Mark*, 98.

¹³⁷ Stein, *Mark*, 93. Joel Marcus has the same explanation: "it is more likely that the reference to James and John was added by Mark in order to link our passage with 1:16-20." See Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, 198

¹³⁸ Luke's description raises the question whether he associates the woman's fever with demon possession. Stein argues against such an interpretation. (See Stein, *Mark*, 94, footnote 3).

Matthew limited the service to Jesus alone – “she got up and began to wait on him” (“*diēkonei autō*” Mt 8:15). The three evangelists locate the venue of the healing at Peter’s house; but Mark adds the detail “and Andrew”.

3.1.4. Interpretation

The two main characters in this story are Jesus and Simon’s mother-in-law. Jesus, as a miracle worker with the power of God, heals a woman who is sick with fever. Jesus on entering the house of Peter and Andrew is informed of the sick condition of Peter’s mother-in-law. He approached her, took her by the hand and raised her up. The healing is effected through a personal contact – he touched her. Jesus’ healing method here contrasts with that of the exorcism of the demoniac in the synagogue (1:21-28). Whereas in the latter Jesus casts out a demon by a command, in the former he heals the woman by physical touch. This is a common pattern of healing in Mark’s gospel (1:41; 5:41; 6:5; 7:32-33; 8:23-25). At times others touch Jesus and are healed (3:10; 5:27-28; 6:56). These gestures strengthen the image of Jesus as a Spirit-empowered one whose presence brings wholeness and also shows his compassion and empathy for the sufferer.¹³⁹ Jesus’ healing, like his teaching (1:22), is a healing with a difference.

Not only does Jesus touch the woman he also helps her to get up: he raised her up. The verb “raise” (*egeirō*), is another characteristic of the Markan healing accounts (2:9, 11; 3:3; 5:41; 9:27; 10:49). This word has a range of meaning including the connotation of setting a person upright or restoring someone to health. Mark will use the same Greek word for the raising of the dead, including Jesus’ being raised from the dead (14:28; 16:6) and the resurrection of the dead in the next life (12:26). Paul (1 Cor 15:4; Gal 1:1; Rom 4:24) and Luke (Acts 3:15; 4:10) also used

¹³⁹ Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 89; Strauss, *Mark*, 100.

ēgeiren to talk about the raising of Jesus from the dead. Stressing the link between its use here and the raising of Jesus, George Martin points out that Jesus’ “raising her up prefigured far greater raisings.”¹⁴⁰

Simon’s mother-in-law, though not identified by her proper name but by his relationship with Peter, is the only person identified in the narrative (apart from the four disciples whose presence is noted). The “they” who inform Jesus of her illness are not known. Also Mark does not tell the reader the reason why the woman stays at Peter’s home. That Peter has mother-in-law implies that he is married, a fact that is referred to in 1 Cor 9:5. However, there is neither mentioning of the presence of Peter’s wife in the story¹⁴¹ nor is anything said about his children. Apart from being the recipient of the healing miracle, the woman’s characterization finds expression in her action after being healed: “she began to wait on them.” The traditional interpretation of her action is that it is a confirmation of her healing.¹⁴² “Waiting on” translates the Greek *diēkonei* which literally could be rendered “she served them” or “ministered to them”. The use of *diakoneō* here calls to mind its earlier use in 1:13 where the angels “minister” to Jesus in the wilderness. Looking forward, it foreshadows its use by Jesus when he speaks of the ideal of leadership as the humble service of others (9:35; 10:42-44) and his own mission in 10:45: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve (*diakonesai*).”¹⁴³ In 15:41 *diakoneō* would be one of the discipleship verbs that is used to describe the women followers who witnessed the

¹⁴⁰ Martin, *Gospel According to Mark*, 25. For details of the link *ēgeiren*, used here, has with its other uses See Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, 199.

¹⁴¹ This absence of Peter’s wife in the narrative and the “waiting” of Peter’s mother-in-law after her cure (instead of Peter’s wife) has made exegetics to speculate that Peter is a widower at this moment. Gundry, for example, would wonder why the mother-in-law, presumably a visitor in the house, is the one doing the serving when it is the prerogative of Peter’s wife to do it even at the very beginning. (Robert Gundry, *Mark: A commentary on His Apology for the Cross* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993], 89. See also Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 81; Stein, *Mark*, 94.

¹⁴² We shall see later the other renderings that it has, especially its connection with discipleship.

¹⁴³ Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 82.

crucifixion. The “they” that are the objects of her service is not clear. Does it refer to Jesus and the four disciples mentioned in the narrative or does it extend to all who may have been around? In a family setup it is presumed that there might be people who are with her, looking after her.

3.1.5. Main theme of the pericope

Although Christology, expressed in Jesus’ authority (*exousia*) of teaching, exorcism, and healing, is the central theme of his paradigmatic day of ministry in Capernaum (1:21-34), the theme of discipleship is very prominent in Mk 1:29-31. The first indication of this is the presence of the four disciples Jesus called in 1:16-20. They are mentioned explicitly as witnesses to the healing. Secondly, the theme is expressed in Mark’s use of *diakoneō*, a discipleship term, to describe the service of Peter’s mother-in-law in response to her healing. The woman served others instead of herself. This is the type of service that Jesus models and invites his followers to do the same. Donahue and Harrington articulate this point in these words;

Peter’s mother-in-law embodies and foreshadows the ideal of discipleship as service of others which Jesus will address to all the disciples in response to a question from two of those present in this narrative (James and John): The greatest among them should be their servant (*diakonos* [10:43] – the nominal form of *diakonein* [1:31]), an ideal Jesus himself incarnates (10:45). The action of Peter’s mother-in-law also foreshadows the presence of the women at the cross in 15:41 who had followed him and ministered to him (*ēkolouthoun kai diēkonoun*) in Galilee.¹⁴⁴

This deeper level of understanding Peter’s mother-in-law’s “waiting on them” (*diakonein*), is very relevant to our study and will be explored further in this chapter.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 85.

3.2. SCHOLARLY DISCUSSIONS

Having sought an interpretation and understanding of our pericope, we now proceed to look at how it has been discussed in biblical scholarship. How has it attracted the attention of scholars? How have different scholars from different social locations and using different models of interpretation and different methodologies interpreted this story?

3.2.1. A Less Considered Text

The first thing to be noted in the scholarship of Mk 1:29-31 is that it is not among the stories about women in Mark's gospel that are frequently discussed in scholarship. Deborah Krause describes it as "a little considered tradition in the gospel of Mark."¹⁴⁵ David Malick has a similar description: She is "an especially minor character in Mark who is not named, not given significant space in the narrative, and rarely discussed in scholarship."¹⁴⁶ Even in feminist scholarship, Amy-Jill Levine observes that it is "the frequently overlooked account."¹⁴⁷ One sees these observations confirmed in Swartely's classification of the narrative roles women play in Mark's gospel. Peter's mother-in-law is classified as one of the seven women who play secondary

¹⁴⁵ Deborah Krause, "Simon Peter's Mother-in-law – Disciple or Domestic Servant? Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics and the Interpretation of Mark 1:29-31," in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (Sheffield: Academic Press, 2001), 38.

¹⁴⁶ David Malick, "Simon's Mother-in-law as a Minor Character in the Gospel of Mark: A Narrative Analysis," *Priscilla Papers* 31, no. 2 (2017): 4.

¹⁴⁷ Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff, ed. *A Feminist Companion to Mark* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 2001), 14. She observes that unlike other stories about women where many scholarships abound, the story of Peter's mother-in-law has only one article (by Deborah Krause) in the Volume. Hisako Kinukawa only attended to it as an excursus in her book.

narrative role.¹⁴⁸ These contrast with the other four women she considers as playing “very prominent and positive narrative roles.”¹⁴⁹

Among the reasons given for its unimportance is the shortness of the account, its domestic nature, its dominant androcentric outlook, the fact that the woman is not identified by her proper name (but by her marriage relationship with Peter), and her silence. Are these valid reasons for declaring the narrative unimportant? Does it not give the impression that the narrative is considered as if it is an isolated story that is not part of the narrative unit of Mark’s gospel? From the point of view of Mark’s narrative rhetoric, to be sure, Mk 1:29-31 cannot be considered insignificant. I concur with Malick who argues that, “When her narrative [Simon’s mother-in-law] is read within the narrative structure and logic of Mark’s Gospel (the story discourse), it makes significant contribution to the message of Mark, and more broadly, to Mark’s biblical theology of discipleship.”¹⁵⁰ This is to say that paying a closer attention to the broader section of the narrative where the tradition of the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law is incorporated is important in discovering its significance. In what follows, therefore, we shall look at some of the arguments for making a case for the importance of this short story.

The first thing to be pointed out is that Mk 1:29-31 is not an isolated narrative but is one of a whole series of healings and exorcisms that Mark narrates in 1:21-2:12. We know that in biblical interpretation one of the ways of grasping the meaning of a text is to find out what the author is doing with it in relation to the other texts. This could be done through comparative or

¹⁴⁸ The other six are mother of Jesus (6:3), Herodias (6:17-22, 28), Jairus’ daughter (5:35-43), Herodias daughter (6:22-28), Syro-phenician woman’s daughter (7:24-30), and a maid (14:66). See Willard Swartley M., “The Role of Women in Mark’s Gospel: A Narrative Analysis,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 27, no. 1 (1997): 16-22.

¹⁴⁹ The four narratives include, woman with hemorrhage (5:24-34), Syro-phenician woman (7:24-30), widow at the treasury (12:41-44), and woman who anoints Jesus (14:3-9). Swartley, “The Role of Women in Mark’s Gospel,” 18.

¹⁵⁰ Malick, “Simon’s Mother-in-law as a Minor Character in the Gospel of Mark, 4.

contrasting juxtaposition of characters.¹⁵¹ Peter-Ben Smit,¹⁵² for example, has tried to highlight or bring out the importance of the story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law through this means. He analyzes 1:29-31 in relation to the other narratives (1:21-28; 1:32-34; 1:35-39; 1:40-45; and 2:1-12) in the section, comparing and contrasting the characters (especially the people Jesus cured). In terms of the identity of the people healed, he observes that they are all unnamed. They are identified in terms of their health condition ("a man with unclean spirit", "all those who were ill and those who were possessed", "a leper", and "a paralyzed man") or in the case of Simon's mother-in-law, with her marriage relationship to Peter. Compared to these other characters, Peter's mother-in-law could be said to have a name, though not a personal name.¹⁵³ This is a typical way of identifying significant women in Palestine during the time of Jesus. Moreover, anonymity is generally Mark's way of representing the women in his gospel. With the exception of Mary, the mother of Jesus, Herodias, and the three named women mentioned in 15:40-41, every other woman in the gospel is anonymous.

Smit also considers the response of the people who are cured in the various narratives in the section. In the first exorcism the delivered man does not say or do anything in response to his healing. It is only the response of astonishment of the people around that is given. In the case of the many healings and exorcisms that took place at the door of Peter's house no response is shown

¹⁵¹ For a discussion on the various ways the narrator could make characters known to the audience, see David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 99-104; Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *In the Company of Jesus: Characters in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 9-12; Malick, "Simon's Mother-in-law as a Minor Character in the Gospel of Mark, 4.

¹⁵² Peter-Ben Smit, "Simon Peter's Mother in Law Revisited. Or Why One should be more careful with Mother-in-law," *Lectio Dificilior, European Electronic Journal of Feminist Exegesis*, 1 (2003): 1-12. See also Malick, "Simon's Mother-in-law as a Minor Character in the Gospel of Mark, 5.

¹⁵³ Within the context of the Palestine of Jesus' time Tatum Barnes considers her identification as Peter's mother-in-law to be a personal name. This being the case, he argues that this story "is one of the few gospel miracle stories in which the recipient of a healing is identified by a personal name." See Tatum Barnes, "Did Jesus Heal Simon's Mother-in-law of a Fever?" 156.

either. It seems that it is only the demons that spoke. The leper responds by going around proclaiming what Jesus has done for him. This reaction is considered negative because it is a disobedience to Jesus' command to him. Jesus had commanded him not to tell anyone. On the contrary he went about spreading the news and this makes it difficult for Jesus to move around freely. The only reaction from the cured paralyzed man is that he picks up his mat to go home. He does not say or do anything for Jesus. Again the response of the crowd is that of astonishment and praising God. Thus in the whole section it is only Peter's mother-in-law who responds positively to Jesus' healing by serving him and all who are around. Smit is not alone in this observation. Malick makes the same assertion when he notes that "every miracle in this broader section of the narrative (1:21-2:12) includes a response, and the action of Simon's mother-in-law is the only positive response in the entire section."¹⁵⁴

The close analysis of the larger narrative context of the Healing of Peter's mother-in-law also shows that she is not the only person who is silent. Mark presents all the recipients of Jesus' healing to be silent. The healed leper spoke but not to Jesus. Though he went about sharing the good news of his healing, it is in disobedience to Jesus' command. The only voices heard are those of Jesus and the demons and those of the crowd praising God in astonishment. Most of those who are cured are not given a voice.

With regard to the theme of discipleship echoed by the service of Peter's mother-in-law, Smit observes that the entire section (1:21-2:12) is framed by the calling of the disciples: the calling of the first four disciples (Peter, Andrew, James, and John) in 1:16-20 and the calling of Levi in 2:13-17. As it were, the whole section has discipleship as one of its dominant themes and it is in

¹⁵⁴ Malick, "Simon's Mother-in-law as a Minor Character in the Gospel of Mark, 5.

this woman's action that the theme is expressed. To heighten the theme of discipleship in the story, Mark tells the reader that some disciples were present as witnesses. Thus our pericope echoes this theme of discipleship that is one of the main themes that Mark wants to develop in the whole section.

Smit's concluding observation, in my view, makes a strong statement about the uniqueness of this story and the need for its consideration as an important and significant narrative in the scholarship of Mark's gospel. His statement is that when we look at its larger (theological and narrative) context;

Mark 1:29-31 does constitute somewhat of an exception, because this story is the only one in which the healing of the ill person is followed by a concrete and positive response towards Jesus. This is a very special feature of healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law. All other healed people either do not respond at all, or not in the way Jesus would like them to. The reaction of Simon Peter's mother-in-law (her service) might, therefore, be more than just a matter-of-fact statement about a woman resuming her normal duties. A sequence framed by the calling of various disciples may have something to say about discipleship as well.¹⁵⁵

The sentiment of Abraham Kuruvilla is not different. For him this act of generosity and humility makes Peter's mother-in-law to stand out in the crowd. His analysis is that;

In all these accounts of Jesus' increasing popularity, only this woman, Simon's mother-in-law, is said to minister to ("serve", 1:31) Jesus – an act of self-giving. ... Nobody in that idolizing crowd is mentioned as giving to Jesus, not even the disciples. Everyone is out to get, except this anonymous woman. Amidst all who are seeking only to get from Jesus, here is one who was willing to give, because she herself had been given.¹⁵⁶

In this sense, her service, a self-giving act, looks forward to the self-giving donation of the poor widow (12:41-44) and the lavish generosity of the woman who anoints Jesus (14:3-9). These three women would be remembered by any attentive Markan reader when Jesus starts emphasizing

¹⁵⁵ Peter-Ben Smit, "Simon Peter's Mother in Law Revisited," 6.

¹⁵⁶ Abraham Kuruvilla, *Mark: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene, Oregon: 2012), 38-39.

service of others as the true spirit of discipleship. Peter's mother-in-law demonstrates that such way of life is possible. The disciples are to imitate her good example.

The significance of Mk 1:29-31 can also be demonstrated based on the connections, intra-textually and intertextually, it has with the other biblical passages since in exegesis the question of the link (verbal, thematic, etc) a passage has with the other narratives is always an important one. As it is evident from our exegesis, the story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law has a lot of verbal and thematic connections with the narratives precedent to it and the one coming after it. We saw how Jesus cured her through physical contact with her: he "touched her." Later in the narratives the reader will note that Jesus touched the leper (1:41), Jairus' daughter (5:41), the few he healed in his home town (6:5), the deaf and dumb man (7:32-33), and the blind man (8:23-25) in order to cure them. The reader will also learn that some other people were cured by touching Jesus (all those who were afflicted – 3:10; the woman with the flow of blood - 5:28; all those who touched him or his garment – 6:56). The verb "raise" used in this healing story will also be used in many other healings in Mark's narratives (2:9, 11; 3:3; 5:41; 9:27; 10:49). The same verb, too, is used to talk about Jesus' resurrection (14:28; 16:6) and the resurrection of the dead in the next life (12:26). Intertextually, it echoes Paul's teaching in 1 Cor 15:4, Gal 1:1, and Rom 4:24. It is echoed as well in Acts 3:15; 4:10. We have seen, too, that "service" which is the woman's response to her healing is an important discipleship word for Mark. Her service looks back to the service of the angels in the wilderness and foreshadows the use of the verb in Jesus' teachings on discipleship (9:35; 10:42-44), his own model of service (10:45), and the service of the women followers mentioned in 15:40-41. Thus intra-textually and intertextually, the narrative of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law is rich. It resonates with many other narratives. In my view, such a text cannot be considered insignificant.

The significance of this story could also be seen from the fact that it is preserved by the other synoptic gospel writers (Mt 8:14, Lk 4:38-39). Such multiple attestations suggest the historicity and the authenticity of the story. The reference to the wife of Peter in 1 Cor 9:5 favors the idea of the historical existence of his mother-in-law.

Tatum Barnes,¹⁵⁷ in addition to these other considerations, looks at the significance of this story from the perspective of the transmission history of Mark's gospel. He observes that the reconstruction of the transmission history of Mark shows that there is nothing to suggest that the brief account of Mk 1:29-31 "would not have been integral to the text of Mark at stage 1."¹⁵⁸ This is to say that it is not a later addition but is part and parcel of the gospel account at every stage of its transmission. It exists both in the earlier "secret Mark"¹⁵⁹ and in the canonical Mark - the version of Mark in the NT. This again favors the historicity of the story.

There is no doubt that this story is relatively short. It is told in only three verses. This makes it lack some details that other longer healing stories might have. Nevertheless, it has the three elements of a healing story: problem, solution, and proof of the healing. As one can observe from Paul Achtemeier's discussion, it seems that inasmuch as details are important since they tell us more than just a miracle, what makes a miracle story to be such is that the three essential elements are contained.¹⁶⁰ Moreover, what is more important is what a story communicates, not necessarily its length.

¹⁵⁷ Tatum Barnes, "Did Jesus Heal Simon's Mother-in-law of a Fever?" 148-158.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. 151.

¹⁵⁹ "Secret Mark" is a version of the gospel of Mark used in Alexandria in the second century. The claim is that this version of Mark contained certain passages intended only for the learned and not for the common church folk. It was discovered by Morton Smith in 1958 while working in the manuscript collection of the Mar Saba monastery near Jerusalem. (Barnes, "Did Jesus Heal Simon's Mother-in-law of a Fever?" 150).

¹⁶⁰ Achtemeier, "The ministry of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels," 165. He sees "details" as materials that are "extraneous to just telling of a miracle." They are added to make other points.

Following from what has been argued thus far, I believe that the story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, as brief as it may appear, is a significant narrative that has much to contribute to the study of Mark's portrait of women and, in general, to Mark's theology of discipleship. I think the main obstacle is what Monika Fander rightly points out about this story: it is "an event that at first glance does not appear all that significant."¹⁶¹ As such one needs to go beyond that first glance. That is to say that we must go beyond the historical fact that the story relates to ask about Mark's plot for incorporating it in his gospel. It is no doubt that when read critically, looking at the larger context of its theological and narrative intent, one cannot but appreciate its richness and significance.

3.2.2. Rendering of "*diēkonei autois*"

Moving from our attempt to establish the relevance of our pericope, we now proceed to look at scholars' interpretations of the service of Peter's mother-in-law. It goes without saying that the history of the hermeneutics of the narrative of Peter's mother-in-law, more than in any other thing, centers on the interpretation of the reaction of this woman after she was cured: "and she began to wait on them" (1:31c).

Following the characteristic structure of most healing accounts, earlier exegetes simply interpret the action as a proof that the woman is completely healed.¹⁶² A woman who was

¹⁶¹ Monika Fander, "Gospel of Mark: Women as True Disciples of Jesus," in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, ed. Schottroff Luise and Wacker Marie-Theres (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 628.

¹⁶² The earliest of such interpretation is found in the exegesis of Ezra Gould. "*diēkonei autois*. She served or waited on them. This is added to show the reality and completeness of her recovery." [Ezra Palmer Gould, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Mark* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1896), 26]. "The serving at the evening meal is mentioned as a sign of the cure." [Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1963), 180]. See also Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (trans. John Marsh; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), 212; R.T France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary of the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 108 ["The completeness of the cure is emphasized by the clause *kai diēkonei autois*: no period of convalescence was needed"].

previously lying on bed because of the fever is now up on her feet and is active. Having been freed from the fever she has resumed her normal duties. Robert Stein strongly favors this interpretation and tries to exclude any other rendering. He insists that the phrase, “And she began to serve them [food]” (*diēkonei autois* - an inceptive imperfect) provides proof of the healing in the story rather than an example of discipleship.¹⁶³ Looking at the woman’s service from the context of the domestic role women could perform in Hellenistic homes, Kathleen Corley limits Simon’s mother-in-law’s gesture to the physical or menial task of serving food. Like Stein, she concludes that it “merely verifies her healing.”¹⁶⁴ Based on this contextual reading, she further discards as incorrect the assertion of some feminist scholars that the woman’s service depicts female diaconate. She also disagrees that the scene suggests house-church.¹⁶⁵

The majority of recent exegetes,¹⁶⁶ while upholding the historical context of this story and its domestic undertone, give it a larger contextual rendering that takes into consideration Mark’s theological and narrative plot. George Martin best expresses it in these words:

The incident ends with what seems to be a homey note: and she waited on them. Now that she was no longer laid up, she could do what women did when guests arrived: get out the good dishes and prepare some food. But there is a deeper meaning as well: the Greek word for waited on can also be translated “served,” and it is the word Jesus will use when he tells his followers that he has come not to be served but to serve (10:45), and that they likewise must become servants (10:43). Simon Peter’s mother-in-law is the first person in Mark’s Gospel to fulfill this teaching of Jesus. The fact that she puts herself at the service of them means that she does it for Jesus and his followers – for the whole Church, so to speak. She is not simply someone whom Jesus healed but a model of service for all.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ Stein, *Mark*, 94. Gundry bases his own argument on the big gap that separates “service” mentioned in this pericope and the next time it will be used in 9:35 and 10:43-45. See Gundry, *Mark*, 91.

¹⁶⁴ Kathleen E. Corley, *Private Women Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 88.

¹⁶⁵ See Monika Fander who suggests that, “the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law, along with 1:32-34 served as a legend about the founding of the church in Capernaum.” (Fander, “Gospel of Mark,” 629).

¹⁶⁶ See Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 82. They agree that the woman’s action confirms the healing but go further to stress the verbal link it has with 1:13 and 10:45; See also Straus, *Mark*, 100.

¹⁶⁷ George Martin, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 26.

This deeper interpretation is also expressed by Joanna Dewey. “To demonstrate that the healing has occurred, Mark relates that she rose ‘and served them.’ *Diakonia* (service) often refers waiting on table. It is an important word, here describing women’s or (slave) activities but later describing Mark’s ideal of discipleship – which in retrospect may apply here as well.”¹⁶⁸ The point here is that the interpretation of the “waiting on them” as a proof of the healing and its domestic context does not exclude a deeper interpretation that explores the link *diakoneō* has with its other uses in Mark’s gospel. The angels “serve” Jesus in the wilderness (1:13), and Jesus teaches that a disciple’s greatest role is to be a “servant” (9:35; 10:43; *diakonos*), since even the Son of Man himself came not to be served but to “serve” (*diakoneō*; 10:45).¹⁶⁹ This is to say that although *diakoneō* commonly refers to waiting on tables, its meaning goes beyond that. It can mean any kind of service.¹⁷⁰

3.2.3. Feminist critical-scholarship

Most feminist scholars,¹⁷¹ exploring a larger contextual reading and applying feminist hermeneutic of suspicion,¹⁷² read in the “service” of Peter’s mother-in-law the discipleship of

¹⁶⁸ Joanna Dewey, “The Gospel of mark,” in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary. Vol. 2*, ed. Fiorenza Elizabeth Schussler (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 476.

¹⁶⁹ Straus, *Mark*, 100.

¹⁷⁰ Hermann Beyer has a detailed discussion on the multivalent meaning of *diakoneō* and its other related words (*diakonia* [service] and *diakonos* [servant, deacon]). Here the “serving” of Simon’s mother-in-law has the narrower meaning of “waiting at table” just as it is the case in Lk 10:40; 17:8; Jn 12:2. See Hermann Beyer, “*diakoneō, diakonia, diakonos*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. Abridged in one volume*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 152-155.

¹⁷¹ Exceptions are Winsome Munro and Deborah Krause. They insist that the domestic context of Peter’s mother-in-law cannot allow for an interpretation of her “service” in terms of discipleship role. See Munro, “Women Disciples in Mark?” 225-241 (233); Deborah Krause, “Simon Peter’s Mother-in-law,” 37-53.

¹⁷² A feminist hermeneutic that “takes as its starting point the assumption that biblical texts and their interpretations are androcentric and serve patriarchal functions.” It aims at liberating texts from such one-sided outlook. Elizabeth Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 15-22 (15); See also Deborah Krause, “Simon Peter’s Mother-in-law,” 35-42.

women. Monika Fander, for example, sees in her “waiting on them” the *diakonia* which is a facet of discipleship for both men and women in Mark.¹⁷³ The woman enters into service to Jesus and those present through what she does every day. This description, in Fander’s interpretation, shows what Mark understands discipleship to be. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza makes a strong link between the service of this mother-in-law and that of the women under the cross (15:40-41). All, she argues, “are characterized as those disciples who have understood and practiced true Christian leadership.”¹⁷⁴ Similar connections have been made by other scholars with other passages. Marla Selvidge reads the woman’s service in terms of 10:45 and argues that the woman “is carrying out the same mandate that Jesus requires of all followers,”¹⁷⁵ notwithstanding the domestic context within which it is performed.

Mary Ann Tolbert considers the significance of her service from the perspective of its link with the angels’ service to Jesus when he was in the wilderness (1:13). She identifies the two services to be the same, though carried out in different contexts. “What the angels were able to do for Jesus in the wilderness, the woman whose fever has fled now does for him in her home.”¹⁷⁶ Her allusion is that Peter’s mother-in-law meets the qualification for discipleship. This comparison raises the question as to whether the angels are disciples of Jesus since they, too, “serve” him. The context of 1:13, especially when the allusion is made to Ps 91:9-13, does not suggest discipleship in the ministration of the angels. As in the Psalm, the primary role of the angels is to give supporting guard and strength to Jesus as he battles with satan during his temptation. Tolbert noted

¹⁷³ Monika Fander, “Gospel of Mark,” 268-269.

¹⁷⁴ Fiorenza, “*In Memory of Her*,” 321.

¹⁷⁵ Marla Selvidge, “And Those Who Followed Feared (Mark 10:32),” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (1993): 398.

¹⁷⁶ Mary Ann Tolbert, “Mark,” in *The Women Bible Commentary*, ed. Newsom Carol and Sharon Ringe (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 263-274 [267].

that to avoid such confusion some English translations have “to minister” in the case of the angels and “to serve” for the service of Simon’s mother-in-law. Moreover, narratively, the ministration of the angels comes before Mark introduces the theme of discipleship through the calling of the first group of disciples (1:16-20). The presence of these disciples at the scene of the healing heightens the theme of discipleship in the narrative.

A more critical lens is employed by Joanne Dewey in her interpretation.¹⁷⁷ Her approach is from feminist dual hermeneutics. This is a hermeneutical tool that views the Bible as a male-dominated text and as such requires dual interpretation. A negative interpretation first discloses the text’s complicity with patriarchal ideology. This is then reconstructed with a positive reading in order to recuperate the utopian moment.¹⁷⁸ Dewey first notices patriarchal ideology in Simon’s mother-in-law’s service to Jesus and those with him. What she is doing, in that context, is menial, domestic work that is reserved for women and slaves. However, a positive reconstruction can translate her “waiting at table” into the ideal of discipleship by looking forward to the meaning Mark gives to it in the succeeding passages. “Mark uses ‘to serve’ to describe her activity, the same term he will later use for true discipleship.”¹⁷⁹ In retrospect, her *diakonia* could be interpreted in terms of discipleship.

It is striking to note that some feminist scholars (prominent among them are Winsome Munro, Debora Krause, and Kathleen Corley) do not follow the trend of the feminist rendering which advocates for a deeper meaning of the mother-in-law’s service. Munro, for example, gives a detailed analysis of the various contexts where *diakoneō* is used in Mark (1:13; 1:31; 10:45; and

¹⁷⁷ Joanna Dewey, “The Gospel of Mark,” in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*. Vol. 2. ed. Elizabeth Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 476-477.

¹⁷⁸ See Krause, “Simon Peter’s Mother-in-law,” 41.

¹⁷⁹ Dewey, “The Gospel of Mark,” 477.

15:41) and the different meanings it has in those contexts. Interestingly, the service of Simon's mother-in-law is the context where Munro argues that the term most likely bears the sense of table service (serving food). As she puts it, "[i]n the setting of the home it can be expected that she had recovered sufficiently to play the part of a hostess."¹⁸⁰ The understanding is that her healing happened at the time of supper and it naturally follows that when she became healed of the fever she prepared and served them supper.

Krause¹⁸¹ is more revolutionary in her contextual reading of the text. Coming from the background of feminist hermeneutics of suspicion and the experience she had with the women in her bible study class, she observes a bitter irony in the description of the service of Simon's mother-in-law: a text that both reveals Jesus' reaching out to heal the sick woman and women's domestic servitude. She sums up this experience as follows:

When I teach the Gospel of Mark in seminary classes and lead Bible studies ... I often find that in reading the tradition about Jesus' healing Simon Peter's mother-in-law many women snort under their breath at the details in Mk 1.31 about her 'serving them'. With the most minor amount of encouragement (such as the quip 'Healed her just in time for supper!') many women laugh and nod with recognition. ... They can appreciate the complexity of a tradition that at once bears life-giving good news about healing for a woman, and bears the unexamined oppression of feminine domestic servitude.¹⁸²

Krause finds in such experience an embodiment of a complex feminist hermeneutic of politically charged suspicion about the tradition and the deep personal piety within it. Resolution of this tension, in her view, calls for "careful navigation between the shoals of positivistic idealism on the

¹⁸⁰ Munro, "Women Disciples in Mark?" 233.

¹⁸¹ Krause has an exciting scholarship on the healing of Peter's mother-in-law in Mark, the most detailed I have come across. See Deborah Krause, "Simon Peter's Mother-in-law – Disciple or Domestic Servant? Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics and the Interpretation of Mark 1:29-31," in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (Sheffield: Academic Press, 2001), 37-53.

¹⁸² Krause, "Simon Peter's Mother-in-law," 38-39.

one hand, and nihilistic dismissal on the other.”¹⁸³ She acknowledges that this is a big task in biblical interpretation.

In navigating the tension between the domestic servitude and the liberating power that the story of the healing of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law, she argues that the context and the object of her service “to men”¹⁸⁴ shows that she is simply carrying out her domestic duty, a duty of serving a meal (supper). Krause repeatedly argues that the efforts of her fellow feminist scholars to read discipleship meaning into the woman’s service is, understandably, an effort to make sure “that not one sister be left behind.”¹⁸⁵ For her, such “reading of Mk 1.29-31 represents a positivistic exaggeration of women’s discipleship in the Gospel tradition at the expense of critically examining the context and object of Simon’s mother-in-law’s service.”¹⁸⁶ The point here is that the feminist project of deconstructing and reconstructing the biblical text to expose its androcentric bias and to recover its liberating power for women should not be understood to mean that every woman in Mark is portrayed positively. She further sees in such attitude the danger of reifying the patriarchal value for traditional gender roles of feminine domestic servitude. Here she makes a particular reference to PHEME PERKINS’ sociological reading of the text.¹⁸⁷ The latter interprets the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law as a restoration of the position of honor. The fever had made her incapable of welcoming the guests as should be the case. However, after Jesus touched her and she became well she was able to do that by serving them food. PHEME sees her service a privileged role which she performed as the senior woman of the house, the role which nobody would do in her presence.

¹⁸³ Ibid. 38.

¹⁸⁴ On several instances, Krause translates “she served them” to mean “she served men.”

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. 50.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. 42.

¹⁸⁷ PHEME PERKINS, “Mark” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible, VIII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 546.

Krause lastly argues that the liberation drive of her fellow feminists to redeem Simon's mother-in-law as a disciple of Jesus by all means "has come at the cost of discounting her context and idealizing her service."¹⁸⁸ Like Munro, Krause insists that the domestic context and the object of the woman's service do not admit for any interpretation that goes beyond table service. "Healed her just in time for supper!"¹⁸⁹ This is Krause's jest for expressing the domestic context and object of the service and her (Krause's) reservations to interpret it as discipleship.

There is no doubt that Krause's contribution to the debate is remarkable. She courageously took a "peculiar position of reading against the grain of feminist biblical critical discourse that has sought to establish the Gospel of Mark as a witness to the equal discipleship of women and men in the early Christianity."¹⁹⁰ Her call for the recognition of the tension between the need to emancipate women and the "non persons" from patriarchal oppression, on the one hand, and the need to appreciate and challenge the contexts, on the other, is legitimate. In reading the text, careful attention is to be paid on "the particularities, ambiguities, and tensions of individual traditions and the individuals described within the traditions."¹⁹¹ Nevertheless, it seems to me that in her effort to stress the context and the object of Simon's mother-in-law's service, Krause does not explore its literary connection with the rest of the gospel. Her refutation of the other scholars' effort to link the service in 1:31 with the Markan use of the term in other context gives the impression that she is discussing the story in isolation. The story of the healing of Simon's mother-in-law is a narrative within the larger narrative, the Gospel. And Mark, as a Gospel, is not just a story but a story told

¹⁸⁸ Krause, "Simon Peter's Mother-in-law," 50.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.39.

¹⁹⁰ Krause herself uses these words to describe the peculiarity of her position. See Krause, "Simon Peter's Mother-in-law," 51.

¹⁹¹ Krause, "Simon Peter's Mother-in-law," 51.

with a (theological) purpose. It is a discourse, that is, “the story-as-discoursed.”¹⁹² It is not just a matter of “what” happened but also “how” Mark has tried to put what happened together to form a narrative unit. Similarly, our consideration of Simon’s mother-in-law as a character in that story, should also take into account her characterization in terms of the narrative role she plays in the discourse. As Malbon would always emphasize, “Narrative analysis of characters is intertwined with narrative analysis of plot.”¹⁹³ Mark has his narrative rhetoric and for him to include the story of Simon’s mother-in-law suggests that the story fits into the plot. In this connection, Selvidge wonders if Mark would “preserve a story about Jesus healing a woman just for the purpose of fixing him a dinner or demonstrating a village hospitality.”¹⁹⁴ From the point of view of a narrative plot, one would expect to see how this story contributes to the themes Mark wants to develop in that section of the gospel and, by extension, the whole gospel. In this sense, texts are read in relation to the other texts, intra-textually and inter-textually. Simon’s mother-in-law’s hospitality, no doubt, has some connection with the use of the term, “service” in other contexts. And if *diakoneō* in Mark is central to the mission of Jesus and those he invites to be his followers, one, by implication, is compelled to look for the link between the service of this women and discipleship.

3.3. AN IGBO CULTURAL STUDY

It is evident from the above scholarship review that in terms of social location, methodology, and context, the conversation represents European and North American voice on biblical interpretation. In terms of the paradigm of interpretation we find the three competing

¹⁹² Malbon, *In the Company of Jesus: Characters in Mark’s Gospel*, 6.

¹⁹³ Ibid. 9. For more discussion on the relationship of “story” and “discourse,” “characters” and “characterization”, see Malick, “Simon’s Mother-in-law as a Minor Character in the Gospel of Mark, 4.

¹⁹⁴ Selvedge, “And those who followed feared (Mark 10:32),” 398.

umbrella models at play (historical criticism, literary criticism, and ideological criticism). Historical criticism, focusing on the text as a means, and the world behind the text, and the intention of the original author, interprets the service of Peter's mother-in-law as the proof that healing has taken place. With its focus on the artistic character of the text and its corresponding emphasis on its literary and rhetorical unity, literary criticism links her service to the other uses of the term in the gospel. Ideological criticism finds expression in the feminist reconstruction of the text from women's perspective and experience, using the feminist hermeneutic of suspicion. As mentioned already, all these are European and American models and voices.

In a postcolonial cultural studies with its emphasis on diversity, plurality, and listening to the voices from the margins, perspectival reading is called for and is encouraged. How will an African and specifically an Igbo of Nigeria read and interpret the response of Peter's mother-in-law after her healing? What will the expression, "she began to wait on them" evoke in the life of the Igbos?

Before proceeding with African reading, it is important to place such an interpretation in context. Firstly, in terms of paradigm or model of interpretation it is a postcolonial cultural studies or ideological criticism. Segovia has a good description of this model.

Cultural studies within biblical criticism seeks to integrate, in different ways, the historical, formalist, and sociocultural questions and concerns of the other paradigms on a different key, a hermeneutical key, with the situated and interested reader and interpreter always at its core. ... [It is] a mode of discourse best characterized as ideological, given its central focus on contextualization and perspective, social location and agenda. ... Such a mode of discourse is by no means monolingual but rather quite varied, profoundly polyglot, given the complex nature of social locations and agendas.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁵ Fernando Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 41.

Thus as a cultural study Igbo hermeneutic seeks to contextualize the story of Simon's mother-in-law within its sociocultural world view, a world view that is quite different from the Western and North American perspective (not ruling out the possibility that there might be common experiences).

Secondly, it should be recalled from Chapter Two that the Igbo world is a world that is deeply religious and is centered on family and community consciousness. The family which is regarded as a home where every member belongs and is identified, not people's gender, is the driving force for all socialization. Life is lived on the principle of balance and complementarity between the feminine and masculine principles. This "balance of patrilocality and matrilocality"¹⁹⁶ forms the basis of the understanding of the equality that is to govern the relationship of men and women. As such, the different traditional roles women, men, and children play in the family are seen, not in terms of superiority or inferiority or in terms of stereotype, but in complementary terms for the building up of the family. An Igbo cultural reading will take this family life dynamics into consideration in the interpretation of Mk 1:29-31. Its hermeneutic is therefore that of family consciousness, a communal way of life. This hermeneutic attempts to retrieve the family values that seem not underscored in the European and North American hermeneutics. Again, I have to emphasize that this move is not to discredit these other interpretations. As a cultural study it seeks to interact with them in a creative way¹⁹⁷ and in the process contribute Igbo (African) voice, a voice from the margins, to the biblical criticism.

¹⁹⁶ Okafor and Murove, "The *Nwanne* Paradigm as Liberative Panacea to the Patriarchal Nigerian Igbo Society," 46.

¹⁹⁷ Segovia stresses very much this need for creative interaction among the impulses of the competing models of biblical interpretation. In postcolonial cultural studies the interpreter must put into consideration the historical impulse of traditional criticism – its sense of the distance of the text; the formalist impulse of literary criticism – its regard for the principles of narrative; and the hermeneutical impulse of cultural criticism – its regard for the context of both text and reader.

3.3.1. Issue of Simon Peter's mother-in-law's presence at Peter's home

Igbo hermeneutic of family consciousness before getting into the woman's service will first be interest to know or ask questions about the presence of the mother-in-law in Peter's home. What is it that brought her to Peter's home? From Igbo social life point of view, there could be three reasons, under normal circumstances, namely; she has just paid her son-in-law a normal visit which is done occasionally; the wife of Peter has given birth and she has come to look after her – what is traditionally called “*omugwo*,”¹⁹⁸ the third reason could be that she is sick and has come to be looked after by her daughter and the son-in-law. Our narrative suggest that the latter is the reason for her being at Peter's home. But whatever may have been the case, the point remains that she is a visitor in that house and as such it is not her responsibility to host Jesus and those with him. The female head of the house is her daughter, Peter's wife. That is her home and it is her prerogative to welcome the guests. Traditionally, her inability to do it while present would constitute a big public embarrassment to Peter – that his mother-in-law, rather than the wife, is managing his home. An Igbo reader would wonder is he is marrying the daughter and the mother at the same time.

Since the presence Peter's wife was not recognized in this narrative and especially when another woman performed her role,¹⁹⁹ it would suggest that Peter is a widower. But since 1 Cor 9:5 talks about Peter's wife travelling with him later in his missionary journey the issue of her absence in this story will remain a puzzle to the Igbo hermeneutic of family consciousness. The

¹⁹⁸ It is interesting to know that this practice still goes on till date. Even when the daughter is living in the city far away from the village, arrangements are made for the mother to travel to the city to do “*omugwo*” for the daughter. As a matter of fact, it is what every mother-in-law looks forward to doing in her life time. It carries prestige. On the part of the woman who delivered a new baby, it is a thing of great joy to be taken care of by the mother after giving birth. If one's mother is dead the aunt takes up this task.

¹⁹⁹ I find it interesting to read that Gundry is also concerned about Peter's mother-in-law's hosting the guests in the presence of Peter's wife. For such to happen suggests “that Simon is widowed (otherwise, why does Simon's wife not serve the men from the start?), though if so he will marry again (1 Cor 9:5).” Gundry, *Mark*, 89.

only way to resolve it is to assume that she was not at home at that time. If she were to be at home, Mark's intention for leaving her out of the story would be seriously questioned. How could he leave the most important woman of the house out of the story that is supposed to bring her to the fore! That is her home and she is supposed to be more conspicuous than any other person. To this effect, something is missing in Mark's story. Taken negatively, it is a public assault on Peter. If it were to be in Igbo society, it would affect his vocation as a disciple of Jesus. In the case of Peter's wife, she would be considered an irresponsible woman.

3.3.2. Peter's Mother-in-law's "waiting on them"

When we come to the key part of the story, Peter's mother-in-law's "waiting on them", what will immediately resonate in the mind of an average Igbo is an essential element of Igbo family and communal life, called "Igbo hospitality" and what it represents in the sociocultural life of the Igbo people. Victor Uchendu, emphasizes the centrality of this hospitality in these words:

The Igbo are nothing if not hospitable. To them hospitality is a major social obligation. Inability to meet it is a humiliating experience for the Igbo. The general complaint of farmers after the planting season concerns the scarcity of yams with which to feed their guests. ... But the unwillingness to meet the demands of hospitality is another matter: it leads to loss of prestige. The inhospitable person is called many names (none complimentary) – *onye ani*, *onye akpi*, *onye aka chichi* – 'the tight-fisted one.' In Igbo estimation he is an unsocialized "person with a dry heart."²⁰⁰

As can be deduced from this description, hospitality for the Igbo is a way of life. It has nothing to do with being rich or poor, being a man or a woman, being a child or an elder. It is a gesture

²⁰⁰ Victor Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 71. Anybody who reads Igbo literatures, especially the writings of Chinua Achebe would be come across the various forms in which the Igbo hospitality is expressed. See for example, Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, New York: Fawcett Publications, 1959; _____ *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*, London: Allen Lane, Penguin Books, 2012.

that is expected of everyone. In the way it is expressed, it is very simple and spontaneous. No one is to be reminded to do it. It just follows naturally.

I guess a further insight into Igbo hospitality will help us understand why Peter's mother-in-law's "waiting on them" after her healing could easily be interpreted as an expression of hospitality by Igbos. The first thing to be noted is that it can be expressed in various ways: "exchanging gifts and farm products, sharing meals, providing lodging and food for guests, and formally presenting kola nuts."²⁰¹ The occasion or ceremony at hand or the people involved is what determines the way it is offered. Nevertheless, such hospitality is always an expression of warmth and friendship. When done as a reciprocal action for another hospitality extended to one, it would be an appreciative gesture. Hospitality could be either direct reciprocity or indirect reciprocity. The former is best described in this Igbo saying, "*Aka nri kwoo aka ekpe, aka ekpe akwoo aka nri.*" The translation is that when the right hand washes the left hand, the left hand does the same to the right hand. In practice what this means is that hospitality is what everyone extends to the other and expects to receive from others as well. There is no particular group whose obligation is only to give hospitality just as there is no group whom it is its right to be on the receiving end. Everyone gives and everyone expects to be given. This type of hospitality exists mainly among neighbors living together. The latter is the type of hospitality that is shown to guests, visitors, and strangers. For instance, a family that hosts a guest is not expecting another hospitality from her or him in return. It is done as a symbolic gesture. The understanding is that everyone travels and could be hosted by any other person. The guest who receives free lodging and food is

²⁰¹ Uchendu, *Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, 71.

expected to return the same hospitality to any other traveler.²⁰² In this sense it is another way of passing across the message of oneness and interdependence in Igbo communal life.

Another important thing to be noted about Igbo hospitality is that it is different from almsgiving or charity toward the other. “For the Igbo”, Uchendu makes it clear, “hospitality is not a form of charity, not a matter of doles from the rich to the poor. It is an expression of good neighborliness, the Igbo way of sociability. Hospitality symbolizes that a guest is welcome.”²⁰³ The point here is that the significance of Igbo hospitality lies on what it represents or symbolizes rather than the act itself. It is not hierarchical in the sense of the quantity of what is given or received. It is qualitative in essence. A cup of water offered to somebody as hospitality has the same significance or effect as when a chicken is given. Similarly, hospitality is not what the better-off does for the disadvantage or a tribute the latter pays to the former. It has nothing to do with inferiority or superiority, strength or weakness. It is a horizontal gesture of warmth and friendship. More importantly, hospitality for the Igbos is not a mere courtesy; it is an expression of true communion.²⁰⁴

3.3.3. Welcome or Kola nut hospitality

As it has been indicated above, Igbo hospitality could be expressed in various ways, like sharing meals, exchanging gifts and farm products, exchanging pleasantries, presenting food and lodging to guests. However, the most common and most important form of Igbo hospitality is the

²⁰² Ibid. 71-72.

²⁰³ Ibid, 72. On a negative note, evil people can abuse this hospitality by using it as an opportunity to do harm to other people.

²⁰⁴ It is to be pointed out, sadly though, that people can abuse this gesture of communion. Wicked people can use such “hospitality” to do harm to others.

presentation of kola nut.²⁰⁵ It is a hospitality shown to formally welcome a guest or guests. When a guest arrives at people's home he or she is presented with a kola nut to show that he or she is welcome. Without this gesture the visitor does not need to be told that the atmosphere is not friendly or welcoming unless the person is not an Igbo. Uchendu underscores the significance of kola nut hospitality in these words;

The sharing of food, and liquor is not as important to the Igbo as the sharing of kola nuts which play important social and ritual roles in Igbo culture. ... The kola nut is the greatest symbol of Igbo hospitality. It always comes first. "It is the king". To be presented with kola nut is to be made welcome; and one is most welcome when the nut turns out "white," whether this is by accident or by design. Presenting a guest with a kola nut is an important ceremony.²⁰⁶

Kola nut hospitality is not limited to gestures of welcoming guests at home. A kola nut is presented and broken at every gathering, whether it is a meeting or a celebration, resolution of conflicts or worship. It is a way of welcoming the people in such occasions. It is also a way of showing that all is well and that the ceremony is formally opened. It is so significant and important that, "[n]o ceremony or ritual could begin without breaking and sharing kola nut, which is the first thing offered to a visitor. It was in fact the medium of worship and invocation of blessing or saying of incantations, *igo oji*."²⁰⁷

To keep up with the social demands of kola nut hospitality every family always has kola nuts available at home. Since the nut is produced by a local tree it is not difficult to find it. As a matter of fact it would be strange to find a family that does not have kola nut trees. Today the

²⁰⁵ Kola nut is a seed produced by one of the native trees. Its botanical name is *Cola nitida*. It is deemed to be sacred and as such has "a very distinct and distinguished role to play in Igbo life and culture." See Achebe, *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*, 10. For detailed description of the morphology of Kola nut see Ifi Amadiume, "Of Kola Nuts, Taboo, Leadership, Women's Rights, and Freedom: New Challenge from Chinua Achebe's *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*," *Journal of West African History* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2015), 119-145 [125].

²⁰⁶ Ibid. 74.

²⁰⁷ Amadiume, "Of Kola Nuts, Taboo, Leadership, Women's Rights, and Freedom," 127.

situation is different. The seed is not easy to come by, yet this hospitality has remained. In place of the real kola nut any food item or drink could be presented as a kola nut to welcome guests. What is important is that the gesture of welcome hospitality is extended to the visitor and, in case of formal ceremonies, that the ritual of kola nut is performed.

3.3.4. “Kola nut” hospitality of Peter’s mother-in-law

With the foregrounded discussion on Igbo hospitality and what it signifies and symbolizes in the sociocultural life of the Igbos, we proceed to look at how the waiting of Peter’s mother-in-law could be read and interpreted in such a context. The first thing to be noted is that there is a movement from outside to inside, i.e, from public domain to the private life in the family. Jesus and the four disciples having done with the ministry of preaching and healing in the synagogue came to the house of Peter and Andrew. Mark does not specify the purpose of the visit – whether they are retiring from the day’s activities or for some other reason. But what is clear in the story to an Igbo reader is that Peter’s household is to receive and host august visitors – Jesus and those in his company. Peter and Andrew, being the owners of the home, would have been the ones to receive the visitors. But they are among the visitors, coming from outside in the company of Jesus. It is therefore the task of those at home to attend to this important social demand. Unfortunately, the guests are not “offered kola nut” (the first thing that is supposed to be done) because a family member is sick. That the woman is lying in bed, in Igbo way of rating ailment condition, connotes that she is very sick. As a result, the protocol of welcoming visitors was not followed but that does not mean that it will not be done eventually. Peter and Andrew must have been feeling very uncomfortable, if not embarrassed, for such an awkward scenario (the inability of the family to welcome Jesus in a traditional way). Luckily Jesus takes charge of the situation by healing the sick woman who in response began to wait on them.

There is no doubt that, sociologically, the Igbos would interpret her service as an extension of Igbo traditional welcome hospitality that is accorded to visitors. Using the proper language of such gesture of hospitality, Simon's mother-in-law *choolu ndi obia oji* (the woman presented kola nut to the visitors). It could be that she first offered them the kola nut seed itself and proceeded to prepare a full meal for them. The duration of the visit is what determines how elaborate the welcome hospitality would be. What is more important is that the guests are "offered kola nut." It is a simple gesture but one that communicates so much about Igbo family life values which are expressed through hospitality.

From the point of view of the narrative unity of Mark's gospel, Igbo hermeneutic would link the service of Peter's mother-in-law more with Jesus' teaching in 9:35-41 than with any other passage. The theme of service, expressed in welcome hospitality shown to others, ties them together. Jesus here teaches that;

'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.' John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.' But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward' (9:35-41).

We remember that this passage belongs to the section where Jesus, on his way to Jerusalem, is teaching the disciples and all the people following him the true meaning of discipleship. Those who would choose to follow him must be ready to serve, must be ready to be hospitable to their neighbors. And Jesus sets himself as the one who models such attitude of mind: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45).

When an Igbo reader comes across this teaching of Jesus in his or her reading of Mark, there is no doubt that the welcome hospitality (the kola nut she offered to the guests), of Peter's mother-in-law will immediately come to the person's mind. The reader will remember that she welcomed Jesus and those in his company, she served them food, and she gave them a cup of water. As it stands, she embodies what Jesus is trying to inculcate in the disciples. In a way, one can imagine that Jesus is telling them, in addition to imitating him, to imitate the good example that Peter's mother-in-law demonstrated on the day they visited Peter. The reader would also connect this woman's model with the other women Mark talks about in the gospel, especially the hemorrhaging woman, the Syrophoenician woman, the poor widow who gave all she lives on, and the woman who anoints Jesus. Mark represents these women positively and as models to imitate. With all these in mind, it would not be difficult for an Igbo reader to agree with Mark that there are women disciples when Mark narrates about their presence during Jesus' crucifixion (15:40-41).

Conclusion

The story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, the first woman episode in Mark's gospel, as well the scholars' hermeneutics of it shows the tension or ambiguity that is found in Mark's portrait of women. On the one hand, it could be seen as a positive portrait. Mark shows his concern for the women by including their story among the healings that Jesus does on the first day of his ministry. On Jesus' part it is an indication that he has positive and welcoming attitude toward women.²⁰⁸ Jesus exorcised a man possessed by demon in 1:21-28 and this is immediately followed

²⁰⁸ As Witherington observes, "If we may accept Mark's ... placing of this pericope as an indication that we are dealing with an incident near the beginning of Jesus' ministry, then we see that even from the first Jesus showed His concern for women and His willingness to violate the common view of the Sabbath and the standing rules about uncleanness of a sick person in order to help them." Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study*

by the healing of a woman, showing a kind of equal attention to both men and women. Mark in telling this story employs a vocabulary, “service,” that is central to his theology of discipleship, thereby giving his audience the impression that this woman is the first human subject to practice true discipleship. Just as Jesus serves and would call his disciples to imitate him, so also this woman serves them. Women are, therefore, perceived as part and parcel of the ministry of Jesus from the onset.

On the other, the domestic context and the object of the woman’s service raises a question as to whether it is a positive portrait or a glorification of patriarchal enslavement of women. Narratively, compared with the story of exorcism that precedes it (1:21-28), the story of the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law is short as if it is just a mere report, a by-the-way account. The woman is anonymous, only identified as Peter’s mother-in-law. In contrast, it is the names of the four male disciples who have no role to play in the story that are mentioned. In the entire story nobody utters a word, not even Jesus. The proof of the healing shown by the meal the healed woman serves Jesus and his disciples could be interpreted as women subjugation. How can a patient who has just recovered from her sickness be the one to run around to serve food? Could it not have been the other way round – that a patient is given something to eat?

In the midst of this tension, an African interpretation of the story, using the model of cultural studies and the hermeneutic of family consciousness, demonstrates how social location and the assumptions or perspective of real flesh and blood readers can influence the meaning of texts. The story speaks more of welcome hospitality than any other thing. The woman’s “waiting on them” is perceived as a normal gesture of hospitality that is extended to guests in a family setup.

of Jesus’ Attitude to Women and their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Life (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 67-68.

*Igbonizing*²⁰⁹ her service, one can say that *na-ochoolu ndi obia oji* (she offered the visitors kola nut). Anybody, male or female, young or old, can be the subject or object of such gesture of communion. By this very action Peter's mother-in-law would be considered a responsible woman in the family and in the community. The family of Peter would also be considered a respected family, a family where Igbo hospitality, an essential fabric of Igbo sociocultural life, is lived.

²⁰⁹ To give it Igbo flavor or to put it in Igbo language.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE WOMEN WHO FOLLOWED AND SERVED JESUS (Mk 15:40-41)

Jesus' crucifixion (15:33-41) is marked by four key events that have theological significance for Mark: the darkness that covered the whole land (33), Jesus' cry of abandonment from Ps 22:1 (15:34), the rending of the temple curtain (15:38), and the profession of the Centurion that Jesus is "truly the son of God" (15:39). Mark concludes all this with the information that there are women who are eye witnesses to all that take place, even though they are watching from a distance (15:40-41). The evangelist goes further to mention the names of three of them and adds that these three and the rest in their group have been following and serving Jesus right from the time he is doing his ministry in Galilee.

This passage has narrative significance as it also raises questions of scholarship. To start with, this is the first time Mark is bringing to the notice of the readers that there is such group of women followers. It is also the first time such women followers are mentioned by name. More significant is Mark's use of discipleship terms, "*akoloutheō*" ("follow") and "*diakoneō*" ("serve"), to describe these women's relationship with Jesus. Does this imply that they are women disciples? How do we interpret their "following" and "serving" Jesus? Narratively, a concern is raised as to why Mark would delay up to the end of the gospel to relay such important information about women discipleship, especially considering the fact that this is a major theme in his gospel. From the point of view of Mark's portrait of women, how are these women connected or linked to the other women Mark presents earlier and later in the gospel? Contextualizing this passage in an African social location, how will it be interpreted and understood? What memories does it evoke and what concerns does it raise?

These are the issues that this chapter tackles. It follows the same pattern of chapter three. It develops in three parts. The first part is the exegesis of the pericope where we shall seek an informed understanding of the text in its historical and literary context.²¹⁰ Part two looks at how scholars have discussed some of these historical, literary, and ideological questions raised above. The last part of chapter is a cultural study of the text from an African perspective. The Igbo family consciousness, the “*Nwanne*” philosophy of life, is used as a hermeneutical tool. The *Nwanne* philosophy of life is a genderless concept that reflects the strong family bond that exists between the Igbo as people from the same family. My *Nwanne* in the Igbo culture is the other whose life and future is tied with mine. Inherent in it is the sense of shared origin, shared purpose, family-hood, togetherness, team work, friendship, and community.²¹¹

4.1. EXEGESIS OF MK 15:40-41

4.1.1. Translation

⁴⁰There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. ⁴¹These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem (NRSV).

4.1.2. Literary, Structural, and Thematic Analysis

The literary context of our text is the last hours of Jesus’ passion and death and burial (15:33-47). In the midst of the cosmic and earthly portents that mark this moment, Mark reports Jesus’ last words and cry (15:34, 37), the reaction of the bystanders (15:35-36), and the climactic

²¹⁰ The goal of exegesis is to develop a coherent, informed interpretation of biblical texts that is based on the best knowledge available to the interpreter. See Hayes and Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner’s Handbook*, 21-28.

²¹¹ See chapter two for detailed discussion on *Nwanne* ideology. See also Okafor and Murove, “The *Nwanne* Paradigm as Liberative Panacea to the Patriarchal Nigerian Igbo Society,” 45.

confession of the Centurion that “Truly this is the son of God” (15:38-39). He then gives the information about the presence of women followers who witnessed Jesus’ death from a distance (15:40-41).²¹² Our pericope links the death of Jesus to the two events that follow it: his burial and the experience of the empty tomb. Two of the named women, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jose, witnessed where Joseph of Arimathea buried the body of Jesus (15:47) and subsequently, the three women went to the tomb after the Sabbath to anoint the body, where they found the tomb open and the announcement that Jesus has risen (16:1-8).

The structure of 15:40-41 can be sketched as follows;

15:40 – introduction of the first group of women (there were also women)

- their posture (they were watching from a distance),
- names of three of them (Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James the younger and Joses, and Salome)

15:41 – the relationship of these women with Jesus (they were “following” and “serving” Jesus when he was in Galilee)

- introduction of the second group of women (there were also many other women)
- their relationship with Jesus (they had come up with him to Jerusalem).

Thematically, our passage is about discipleship – faithful discipleship of women that contrasts the failure of the male disciples. Witherington outlines the ways in which this theme is reflected in the passage:

The discipleship status of the named women is indicated by Mark in three ways: they are said (1) to be witnesses of the most crucial events in Jesus’ life (θεωροῦσαι); (2) to have served Jesus (διηκόνουν – note this is said only of women in Mk 15:40-1a); to have followed Him (ἠκολούθουν). ... We conclude that Mark intends us to understand that the

²¹² Marcus summarized it as follows: “The Markan account of Jesus’ last hours alternates between descriptions of cosmic and earthly wonders (15:33, 38), the death-cry and decease of Jesus (15:34, 37), and the reactions of bystanders to his death and dying (15:35-36, 39-41).” Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 1061.

named women are disciples of long standing, even while Jesus was in Galilee. Thus, they are prepared to be reliable witnesses to the events beginning with the crucifixion.²¹³

Thus the presence of the two Mary, Salome, and the women in their group at the scene of the crucifixion and Mark's description of them as followers of Jesus who used to minister to him when he was in Galilee, demonstrate that Jesus' effort to form disciples was not a wasted endeavor. Despite the fact that the male disciples abandoned him, he still has followers "by his side" (the distance of the women from the cross does not mean absence) who even witnessed his burial and eventually received the information about the resurrection. Mark uses them to make summary statement about discipleship. True disciples are those who follow and serve and are faithful to Jesus to the end. These women embody this reality.

4.1.3. Gospel parallels

It is interesting to note that the four canonical gospels (Mt 27:55-56, Lk 23:49, and Jn 19:25) attest to the presence of some women at the scene of the crucifixion. Matthew has followed Mark in placing his account in the context of Jesus' death, following immediately after centurion's confession. However, the name of the third woman he mentions (the mother of the sons of Zebedee) does not tally with Salome recorded by Mark. Could it be taken that the two names are referring to the same person? It is not clear. Luke gives a general description of the women without mentioning any names: "But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things." These women could be likened to the "many other women," the second group of women mentioned in Mk 15:41b. This general description could be explained on the basis that Luke had earlier in Lk 8:1-3 talked about the women who are in the company of Jesus with the Twelve. Three of them are mentioned by name

²¹³ Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, 122.

– Mary Magdalene, Joanna the wife of Chuza, and Susanna. Luke’s mentioning of Joanna and Susanna, who are not found in any of the canonical gospels, suggests that he may have access to independent tradition.²¹⁴ In terms of the ministry of the women followers, Luke specifies that it is material support which they provide for Jesus and his disciples from their own resources.²¹⁵ Luke gives an additional information that these women “had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities” (Lk 8:2). John’s account stands out from those of the synoptic gospels in that he identifies one of the women as mother of Jesus and places Mary Magdalene last on his list of the named women. He also gives the indication that some male disciples are present at the scene of crucifixion by mentioning the presence of the beloved disciple (Jn 19:26-27).

4.1.4. Interpretation

The first thing that calls for interpretation is the posture of the women whom Mark presents as the witnesses to the events of Jesus’ death. These women are “looking on from a distance” (*apo macrothen*). This spatial position contrasts that of the centurion. Whereas the latter is close to Jesus (“opposite him” 15:39) the former are portrayed as watching from afar as spectators (v. 40).²¹⁶ Explanations for this abound. According to Joel Marcus, their description as looking on from afar “introduces a note of editorial reserve, since it portrays them as unwilling to come to Jesus’ aid in his hour of distress, perhaps out of fear of being associated with a condemned criminal.”²¹⁷ As a Markan addition, it prepares the way for the end of the gospel, where the women will flee from the tomb out of fear and terror (16:8). That the women are watching from a distance further echoes

²¹⁴ Winsome Munro, “Women Disciples in Mark?” 233.

²¹⁵ This information has influenced some scholars’ interpretation of the “*diēkonoun auto*” of Mk 15:41 to mean providing food and other material support to Jesus.

²¹⁶ See Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 449.

²¹⁷ Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 1069.

Ps 38:10-11 where the acquaintances of the “Righteous Sufferer” stood far away from him.²¹⁸ It also evokes in the mind of the reader 14:54 where Peter is portrayed as following Jesus “at a distance.”

This apparent distancing notwithstanding, the women’s subsequent actions – observing Jesus’ burial (15:42-47) and later going to the tomb to anoint his body (16:1-8) – suggest their commitment to following Jesus. Contrasted with the male disciples who abandoned Jesus and fled when he was arrested, the presence of these women at the cross portrays them as the ideal and faithful disciples who understood Jesus and what it means to follow him. “To be present at all,” Malbon would say, “is a mark of followership, but remaining “at a distance” is a mark of fallibility.”²¹⁹ To eliminate the negative connotation of viewing the women as watching from a distance, Marla Selvidge suggests another translation. Instead of “women watching from a distance” one can translate, “women from a distance watching.”²²⁰ In this translation the stress is no longer on the spatial and psychological distance but their geographical origin – the women come all the way from Galilee.

Another exegetical issue in the passage is the identity of the three named women: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses, and Salome. This is the first time Mark mentions the presence of such group of women in the ministry of Jesus, unlike Luke who introduced them earlier during Jesus’ ministry in Galilee as those who supported Jesus and the disciples out of their means (Lk 8:1-3). Apart from mentioning their names Mark does not give more information about them, perhaps because they are people well known in his community.

²¹⁸ Robert Stein argues against such an allusion to Ps 38:10-11. Robert Stein, *Mark*, 719-720.

²¹⁹ Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, “Fallible Followers” 43.

²²⁰ Marla Selvidge, “And those who followed Feared (Mark 10:32),” 399.

Today their identity is a matter of scholarly debate.²²¹ Part of the challenge is that the names “Mary” and “Salome” are names widely attested by women in Palestine in the Second Temple period. All that is known about Mary Magdalene is that she came from a town called Magdala, a fishing village on the western shore of Galilee. It is only from Lk 8:2 that we have an additional information that seven demons had been cast out of her.²²²

The identity of “Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses”²²³ poses more challenge. Whereas some exegetes²²⁴ identify her with “Mary”, Jesus’ mother, the majority suggest that she is “Mary” the mother of James the son of Alphaeus mentioned in 3:18.²²⁵ Gundry, for example, in arguing for the “mother of Jesus” makes his case on the basis of the names of two of Jesus’ brothers listed in the same order in Mk 6:3. He further argues that Mark does not simply address her as the “mother of Jesus” here “probably because the centurion has just identified Jesus as God’s Son and Mark does not want Mary’s being the mother of Jesus to lessen the emphasis in this passage on his divine sonship.”²²⁶ Those who suggest that she refers to Mary the mother of James the son of Alphaeus argue that there is no other evidence to show that the brother of Jesus is known as “James, the younger.” Rather it seems that this designation is meant to differentiate this James from the more popular James, the brother of the Lord and the son of Zebedee.²²⁷

²²¹ Marcus’ description is that we “Know virtually nothing about these women.” (Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 1059). “But all the names in v. 41 are common ones, so that we can have no certainty of the identity of the two companions of Mary of Magdala, even though clearly Mark expected his readers to know them.” (France, *Mark*, 664-665).

²²² Some exegetes question the historicity of this Lukan account. Marcus, for examples, sees such tradition to be “probably more indebted to the Lucan view of Jesus as a compassionate healer than to historical memory.” (Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 1059). See also Straus, *Mark*, 707.

²²³ Interestingly, in 15:47 she is called Mary the [mother] of Joses whereas she is called Mary the [mother] of James in 16:1. It is suggested that this is probably as a result of Mark’s abbreviated style and desire for variation. See Straus, *Mark*, 707.

²²⁴ See Gundry, *Mark*, 976-979; Kuruvilla, *Mark: A Theological Commentary for Preachers*, 354;

²²⁵ See France, *Mark*, 664; Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 1060; Stein, *Mark*, 720; Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 449; Straus, *Mark*, 707.

²²⁶ Gundry, *Mark*, 977.

²²⁷ See Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 1060.

The identity of Salome also poses a challenge. Like the name “Mary,” it is a very common name in Palestine during the time of Jesus. However, on account of Matthew 27:56 where the name of the third named woman differs from what Mark has, there have been suggestions that Salome might be the mother of the sons of Zebedee.²²⁸ Matthew may have made this specification to eliminate the confusion of later generations not being sure of the “Salome” in question.

Mark’s way of identifying the women witnesses and their relationship with Jesus is another point for interpretation. The first thing to be noted is that there are two groups of women that Mark talks about in 15:40-41. The first (smaller group) is the group of women who “used to follow (*ēkolouthoun*) and serve (*diēkonoun*) Jesus when he was in Galilee.” This is the group where Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses, and Salome belong. There is the second group of “many other women” (a larger group) who “had come up with” (*sunanabāsai*) Jesus to Jerusalem. Victoria Phillips points out that Mark distinguishes the two groups by his use of language of contrast (“many other women”) and indefinite association (“came up with him”) to describe the latter as opposed to the language of relationship (“followed and served him”) used to describe the former.²²⁹ There is commitment on the part of the three women and the rest in their group.

How do we interpret Mark’s use of discipleship terms to describe these women’s association with Jesus? Are they to be regarded as disciples? The verb *akoloutheō* (“to follow”) prior to its use here, has been used by Mark in other contexts. It is used in the call narratives where Jesus formally called some people and they followed him (cf. 1:18 – call of Simon and Andrew;

²²⁸ Darrell Bock, *Mark* (Cambridge: University Press, 2015), 374.

²²⁹ Victoria Phillips, “Full Disclosure,” 18-19. She uses this Markan distinction of the two groups to argue strongly for the discipleship status of the three women and the others in their group. See also Bieringer and Vanden Hove, “Mary Magdalene in the Four Gospels,” 188-189.

2:14, – call of Levi). In other passages it is used literally, such as in passages where the crowd follows Jesus (cf. 2:15, 3:7, 5:24, 10:32, and 11:9). There are also other instances where a deeper theological meaning could be discerned in the way Mark uses it (8:34, 9:38, 10:21, 10:28).²³⁰ Linking Mark's use of *akoloutheō* in 15:40-41 and its use in these other passages, it becomes evident that he designates discipleship status to these women.²³¹ The imperfect tense of the verb makes the argument more compelling. Unlike the “many others” who followed Jesus on his way to Jerusalem (they could be seen as pilgrims or curious crowd), the three women belong to the company of Jesus, having been with him all the time he was doing his ministry in Galilee. As committed members of Jesus' inner group²³² they have followed him to Jerusalem as a way of showing their commitment to him.

Mark's use of *diakoneō*, “to serve”, to further describe these women's relationship with Jesus evokes its other uses in Mark's gospel. It was first used in the narrative of Jesus' experience in the desert in which the angels “were ministering to him” (1:13). Simon's mother-in-law becomes the first human subject to minister to Jesus after being healed from fever (1:31). Later in the narrative, as Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, he teaches those following him that discipleship is all about “service” just as, himself, “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:45). The exact meaning of *diakoneō* in our passage is

²³⁰ Bieringer and Vanden Hove, “Mary Magdalene in the Four Gospels,” 189-190.

²³¹ See Donahue and Harrington: “The use of the verb *akolouthein* (“follow”) suggests that they can be called “disciples” of Jesus, since *akolouthein* is the usual Markan (and NT) word for discipleship (see Mark 1:18; 2:14, 15; 5:24; 6:1; 8:34; 9:38; 10:21, 28, 32, 52).” [Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 449]; “Moreover, these women had not only provided material help, but also ἠκολούθουν αὐτῷ; this is the language of discipleship, and suggests that they, like the twelve, were regular members of the group.” [France, *Mark*, 663].

²³² Munro observes that the presentation of the women in 15:40-41 is a typical Markan way of presenting Jesus, the disciples, and the crowd. In this context the “many other women” represent the crowd, the women in the group of Mary Magdalene represent the inner disciples, whereas the three named women correspond to Peter, James, and John. (Munro, “Women Disciples in Mark?” 230-231).

strongly debated. Whereas many scholars²³³ give it the basic meaning of providing food and other material and financial support as it is the case with Luke's description in Lk 8:1-3, others²³⁴, especially the feminist scholars, go for a deeper theological meaning.

4.2. SCHOLARLY DISCUSSIONS

Unlike the story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law that is less considered in scholarship, the account of the women who witnessed the crucifixion and death of Jesus is a widely discussed passage. Discussions on the text mostly focus on its significance, Mark's delay in mentioning the existence of such group of women followers, and their discipleship status. What follows are scholars' conversations on each of these issues.

4.2.1. Significance of Mk 15:40-41

The narrative link 15:40-41 creates in Jesus' mission, passion and death, burial and resurrection cannot be over emphasized.²³⁵ Since these women are identified as habitual followers of Jesus (they used to follow and minister to Jesus when he was in Galilee), their witnessing of the crucifixion, burial and the empty tomb connects the Jesus they associated with during his teaching and healing ministry with the one whom they saw died, buried, and the one they found his tomb empty, with announcement from the young man that he has risen. In Munro's articulation;

[T]hey provide the indispensable connecting link between the one who is risen, and the historical Jesus who healed, taught, and was crucified, died, and was buried. It is they who established that the one who will be seen (ὄψεσθε) in Galilee (16:7), the Son of Man who

²³³ Strauss for example argues that "Ministering/serving" (διακονέω) probably means meeting needs such as food and clothing and assisting with those who came to Jesus for teaching and healing." (Strauss, *Mark*, 706). See also Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 449; George Martin, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 442.443;

²³⁴ Munro has a detailed analysis of the different meanings *diakoneō* has in the passages where it is used in Mark (1:13; 1:31; 10:45). In 15:40-41 she argues persuasively that it has a deeper theological meaning. *diēkonoun* is to be interpreted "as parallel to *ηκολουθοῦν*, which, in turn, is to be interpreted in terms of discipleship." (Munro, "Women Disciples in Mark?" 234). See also Fiorenza, "In Memory of Her," 320-321; Malbon, "Fallible Followers," 43.

²³⁵ R. T. France calls it a "bridging passages." See France, *Mark*, 661.

will be seen (ὄψονται) coming in clouds with great power and glory (13:26) is the same one whom they followed and served in Galilee, whom they saw (θεωροῦσαι) dying on the cross (15:40), and whom they saw (ἐθεώρουν) laid in the tomb.²³⁶

With particular emphasis on the narrative unity of the last events of Jesus' life (15:33-16:8), France notes that;

Their presence at Golgotha, at the scene of burial, and again at the discovery of the empty tomb binds the final scenes of the gospel tightly together, and assures the reader that these women, the only human witnesses of the fact of Jesus' resurrection in Mark's gospel, have been closely involved in the whole sequence of events, so that any possibility of a mistake, for instance, over the location of the tomb is ruled out. They saw him die, they saw him buried, and they saw that same tomb empty.²³⁷

In this sense a connection is made with the question of the historicity of the three events that mark the end of Mark's gospel: Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. Arguing for historicity, Strauss points out that since women were not viewed in Judaism as reliable witnesses and could not testify in court, the early church would never have invented stories in which women were the main eyewitnesses.²³⁸ Such embarrassing and doubtful accounts favor their authenticity and is to be seen as a strong evidence for their historicity too. Connecting it to the absence of the called and commissioned male disciples, Perkins argues that the "witness of others to what happened is critical to understanding the authenticity of the traditions about Jesus' death, since his male disciples had fled."²³⁹ The presence of this group of women who has been in Jesus' company, thus, serves that purpose.

²³⁶ Munro, "Women Disciples in Mark?" 236.

²³⁷ France, *Mark*, 661. Mary Ann Tolbert shares the same view. "The epilogue is structured by the triple appearance of three (or two) named women at crucial points of witness: at the crucifixion (15:40), at the burial (15:47), and the empty tomb on the morning of the first day of the week (16:1-2)." [Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Seed: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 290]. See also Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 1069.

²³⁸ Strauss, *Mark*, 711. See also Gundry, *Mark*, 978.

²³⁹ Perkins, "Mark," 724.

The significance of 15:40-41 is also argued from the point of view that it marks a remarkable shift in the gospel's emphasis.²⁴⁰ Up to this moment in the Marcan narrative, the impression created is that the close followers of Jesus are all men.²⁴¹ There is neither prior mention of any group of women following Jesus as one would read in Lk 8:1-3 nor is there any call narrative for any woman. All the women mentioned as having encountered Jesus are those who are beneficiaries of his healing in one way or another or those whom Jesus praises for good deeds or for showing exemplary faith. With this notice in 15:40-41, that there is a group of women who used to follow and minister to Jesus, the inclusive nature of discipleship in Mark's gospel becomes exposed. For Fander, this is a good correction to the earlier androcentric impression.²⁴²

Another significant shift marked by 15:40-41 is that of a private, domestic domain to the public life. "[T]he scene represents a break with the more usual pattern in the Marcan representation of women. Here for the first time they are acknowledged as present in considerable number, not in the privacy of the home, but in the public arena in association with Jesus and his total mission."²⁴³ It is in this narrative, too, that women are mentioned by their personal names. Up to this point, with the exception of Mary the mother of Jesus (see 6:3-4), and Herodias (6:14-28), no woman in Mark is ever identified by her personal name. Mark has always identified the women in terms of their relationship to men (wives, mother-in-law, daughters), children (mother

²⁴⁰ See France, *Mark*, 661. Tolbert sees these women's presence at the cross as "the glow of dawn after a dark night." She contrast them with the crowd mocking Jesus and the male disciples who are completely absent. (Tolbert, *Sowing the Seed*, 291).

²⁴¹ Munro argues that prior to 15:40-41 the impression one would have is that "Mark presents Jesus who goes about his mission in the company of twelve men, with women either absent or at best peripheral to the entire enterprise." Munro, "Women Disciples in Mark?" 225. For Fander, "That women belong to the circle of disciples was up to this point not explicitly mentioned." Fander, 639.

²⁴² Fander, 639. This shift from exclusivism to inclusivism is also pointed out by Fiorenza: "That Mark's androcentric language functions as inclusive language becomes now apparent in the information that women disciples have followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, accompanied him on the way to the cross, and witnessed his death" (Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 320).

²⁴³ Munro, "Women Disciples in Mark?" 234.

of), their condition (e.g. hemorrhaging woman, poor widow), or the place from which they come (e.g. Syro-phoenician woman).

Elizabeth Malbon observes another important shift marked by the presence of women witnesses at the last events of Jesus' life. It is a shift from presentation of women as "individual women" to a presentation showing them appearing in groups. In her analysis;

Individual women characters have previously exhibited in particular actions the active faith and self-denying service of followership, but at 15:40-41 we learn that many women (πολλαί, 15:41), and especially three named women (Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome, 15:40), have continuously followed (ἠκολούθουν, 15:41) Jesus and ministered to (διηκόνουν, 15:41) him."²⁴⁴

Viewed from the importance of discipleship as a major theme in Mark's gospel, our pericope demonstrates that discipleship is not a complete failure during Jesus' final moments. Not everybody deserted Jesus, and there are "faithful remnants."²⁴⁵ While the male disciples are completely absent, the women are present, and so some of Jesus' followers followed him to the very end. "While Mark emphatically stated that at his arrest all of Jesus' disciples deserted him, the women at the crucifixion remind us that devotion to Jesus is still alive."²⁴⁶ This is to say that the scandal of the abandonment (14:50) and the absence of the male disciples at the crucial moment of Jesus' life is counteracted by the presence and witness of the women followers. The latter's presence, supposedly, is part of what Raymond Brown meant when he observes that Mark 15:33-41 shows that it is not true that "God ... has not intervened in the struggle and left Jesus

²⁴⁴ Malbon, "Fallible Followers," *Semeia*, 41. PHEME PERKINS shares the same view. "It is the only time that women followers of Jesus appear publicly in Mark's Gospel. (Perkins, "Mark," 724). FANDER's sentiment is not different: "Something else stands out: in contrast to the twelve, women have up to this point appeared only as individuals; in 15:40-41 women are for the first time spoken of as a group." (Fander, "Mark," 639).

²⁴⁵ Strauss, *Mark*, 713.

²⁴⁶ Ibid. 713.

unsupported.”²⁴⁷ Just as the Father does not leave Jesus alone to suffer, similarly Mark wants to show that the absence of the male disciples does not mean that Jesus lacks human supporters. Mary Ann Tolbert makes this point more succinct when she notes that:

While the authorial audience may infer that God has responded to Jesus’ distress (15:37-38), it would be hopeful to hear that some of Jesus’ human associates had fared better than the disastrous twelve, and such seems to be the case when the narrator notes that women who had followed Jesus and ministered to him in Galilee are watching the crucifixion (15:40-41). They have not betrayed, denied, and fled, as did the male disciples, but have remained with Jesus through tribulation and persecution.²⁴⁸

There is no doubt, in my opinion, that the site of these women at the scene of the crucifixion would have constituted a big encouragement to Jesus. Jesus could see that he had not been completely abandoned. The Father is with him. Some of his followers are also with him.

Victoria Phillips and Carla Ricci²⁴⁹ point out another important element in 15:40-41, its capacity for disclosure. The passage draws the reader’s attention to the presence of women followers that, up to this point, has been concealed or not made explicit. Such awareness can help to recover the place of women in the life and ministry of Jesus which otherwise has been going on unnoticed prior to the disclosure. Ricci observes that with 15:40-41 “women have recovered a place and a significant role in Jesus’ existence and had a close link with him, given that in the final and dramatic phase of his life they occupied the place the gospel authors themselves finally tell us of.”²⁵⁰ Phillips makes the same point when she says; “Having learned on a ‘first’ reading that

²⁴⁷ According to Brown the other events that show that God has not abandoned Jesus is God’s intervention by rending the sanctuary veil and bringing a pagan to acknowledge publicly Jesus’ divine sonship. Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah. From Gethsemane to the Grave: A commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels*, Vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1049.

²⁴⁸ Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Seed*, 291.

²⁴⁹ See Victoria Phillips, “Full Disclosure: Towards,” 13-32; Carla Ricci, *Mary Magdalene and Many Others: Women Who Followed Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1994.

²⁵⁰ Ricci, *Mary Magdalene and Many Others*, 28. She expresses Mark’s androcentric bias when she adds that the “absence of the women from the texts comes to an end at the point where the absence of the disciples from the events begins; where men are present, this acts as an obstacle to women being taken into account.”

women number among Jesus' disciples, one could decide to re-read the Gospel in light of that knowledge."²⁵¹ This is to say that 15:40-41, with its capacity for disclosure, can serve as a paradigmatic text or lens for reading Mark's gospel, a reading that would reveal what has been concealed about women's active involvement in the life and ministry of Jesus. Both scholars attribute the concealment to the androcentric nature of Greek, which Mark could not avoid in his composition of the gospel account.

4.2.2. Late Mentioning of the Women Followers

In the entirety of Mark's Gospel, a reader rarely encounters any account of women followers of Jesus. All the calls and commissioning of disciples are about men. The impression that dominates the entire gospel prior to 15:40-41 is that Jesus calls only the males to follow him, live the life he leads, and participate in his ministry. The only women we read about are individual women whom Jesus heals of their diseases and those whom he praises for their exceptional acts of faith and self-sacrifice. Thus it comes as some surprise to learn at the end of the gospel that there is a group of women who has been following and ministering to Jesus since he was in Galilee until his arrival in Jerusalem. Mark's use of discipleship terms, "*akoloutheō*" and "*diakoneō*", to describe their relationship with Jesus strongly suggests to readers that these women are disciples. But if they are disciples, why would Mark delay to talk about their presence and activities? Susan Miller puts the question and concern outrightly in these words; "Why has Mark not mentioned the presence of these women before the crucifixion? Does Mark intend to highlight or downplay the role of women? What is the relationship between this group of women and the Twelve?"²⁵² Thus,

²⁵¹ Phillips, "Full Disclosure," 16.

²⁵² Susan Miller E., *Women in Mark's Gospel* (London: T and T Clark International, 2004), 153. Miller adds that, "It is puzzling that Mark has not mentioned the women earlier" (159). Other scholars have expressed this delay by Mark in accounting for the presence of women disciples in different ways: Donahue and Harrington see the information in 15:40-41 as "a surprising notice" and the women as those "who mysteriously appear as witnesses to

from the point of view of Mark's narrative rhetoric, is this delay in favor of women disciples or is it a polemic against them?

Carla Ricci expresses the enigma as it is and why it begs a question. She says;

We are at the epilogue of Jesus' earthly existence. The women have been present, close to him, since the first phase of his public activity, which took place in Galilee, and only now, at the end, when their accounts are virtually finished, do Mark and Matthew say, now they cannot avoid saying so, that the women are there, and indeed that now they are the only ones there. But they had been there first, from the beginning.²⁵³

For Ricci two things are at stake here. It is either the case that Mark knows about the women disciples but conceals their presence or there is no such a group, but Mark invents them for redactional purposes, to make up for the absence of the male disciples. In her opinion the women followers exist but Mark silenced and made them invisible. "The answer we have to give," she suggests, "is that of silence concerning women and their doing, preventing news of them from appearing in the text except in exceptional circumstances."²⁵⁴ Ricci goes on to say that the exceptional circumstance that forced Mark to report the presence of the women at the cross is the absence of the male disciples. Mark has already reported in 14:50 that at the arrest of Jesus, "[a]ll of them deserted him and fled." Yet there is the need for eyewitnesses of the event of the crucifixion in order to substantiate the accounts of the subsequent events: the burial and resurrection. This is why the women were brought to the scene. "The redactors, being unable to cite the witness of the male disciples because they had fled, are then forced to refer to the women who stayed."²⁵⁵ Her conclusion is that narratively, what Mark's delay suggests "is a great silence"

Jesus' death, burial, and empty tomb." (Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 450-452; Bieringer and Vanden Hove describe it as a "surprising after-thought," on Mark's part. (Bieringer and Vanden Hove, "Mary Magdalene in the Four Gospels," 187); For Tolbert, "it is strange that such constant and faithful followers of Jesus should be omitted from the earlier episodes." (Mary Ann Tolbert, "Mark," in *The Women Bible Commentary*, 273.

²⁵³ Ricci, *Mary Magdalene and Many Others*, 26.

²⁵⁴ Ibid. 27.

²⁵⁵ Ibid. 26.

and a concealment of women's discipleship. He broke this silence because the male disciples who would have served as witnesses are nowhere to be found. "Perhaps if the evangelist had been able to refer to the presence of the apostles at the foot of Jesus' cross he would have omitted to mention that the women were there and we should never have known of their presence."²⁵⁶

Winsome Munro gets into a detailed discussion on Mark's late mentioning of the women followers of Jesus. Like Ricci, she argues for the existence of a group of women followers who belong to the inner circle of Jesus' company. In addition to raising concerns over Mark's silence about the discipleship of women, Munro explores what might be the evangelist's reasons for such an attitude. She expresses the apparent tension or enigma as follows:

If, however, Mark regarded some of these women at the cross as among the inner group of disciples, why have they been virtually invisible for the entire length of the Gospel until this point? It has already become evident that Mark is aware of a female presence in Jesus's ministry but obscures it. Such suppression is not difficult to understand.²⁵⁷

Among the explanations Munro proffers include; 1) that Jesus' close association with women would have caused an embarrassment as it was the case in early Christianity. According to her, both the canonical and non-canonical gospels give hint of offense and scandal connected with Jesus' relations with women;²⁵⁸ 2) that Mark has put the women forward to take the place of the discredited and absent Twelve. Since eye witnesses from Jesus' close companions are needed for the validity of the passion and paschal event, and the male disciples who are to play that role are

²⁵⁶ Ibid. 26. This view concurs with Miller who argues that the presence of women in Mark is concealed by the narrator's "focus on the Twelve." (Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel*, 159).

²⁵⁷ Munro, "Women Disciples in Mark," 234.

²⁵⁸ Reference could be made to Lk 7:36-39 where the Pharisee who invited Jesus for a meal was feeling uncomfortable that a sinful woman was touching Jesus – a prophet. A similar thing happens in Jn 4:27. This time it is Jesus' male disciples who are surprised that he is talking with a woman. Munro also points out that in the Book of the resurrection of Christ by Bartholomew the Apostle, Salome is mentioned as tempting Jesus. In Gospel of Thomas 61 she addresses Jesus as a sexual partner. Jesus' preference and expression of love for Mary Magdalene cause offense to the other disciples in Gospel of Phillip (63:30-64:5), and gospel of Mary 17-18). See Munro, "Women Disciples in Mark," 235 footnote 19.

absent, the women are brought in to fill-in the gap; 3) that it accords with Mark's theological stance to acknowledge Jesus' female following after his death than before it. In this explanation it is understood that the rending of the Temple veil represents the setting aside of the Law and the opening of the way for all to enter the holy of holies without any restriction.

Munro poses challenges to each of these explanations. With regard to the issue of embarrassment, she argues that bringing in women at this point of the narrative as witnesses creates its own problem since women's witness in such a situation is normally doubted. A woman's witness is not taken seriously.²⁵⁹ In fact, it has its own embarrassment. As regards the second point – that women are projected as better disciples, Munro argues that the distance that Mark puts between the women and Jesus on the cross makes it difficult to hold such view. They are “watching from a distance,” meaning that there is no communication between them and Jesus as one would find in John's account (Jn 19:25-26). Moreover, if Mark is projecting the women as part of his polemic against the male disciples, why would he silence the same favored women in 16:8? Hence, Munro's conclusion is that Mark does not invent these women for redactional purposes. Rather “the tradition of the resurrection to which he had access did in fact concern women who were reputed to have been associated with Jesus in his life time.”²⁶⁰ In other words, women followers in Mark are historical figures and not the author's invention.²⁶¹

Elizabeth Malbon, while agreeing with Ricci and Munro that Mark delayed in mentioning the women followers in his story, interprets the delay differently. As we have already discussed,

²⁵⁹ This point concurs with Gundry's, who notes that “in both Jewish and Gentile courts the testimony of women is ordinarily suspect.” See Gundry, *Mark*, 978. See also France, *Mark*, 665.

²⁶⁰ Munro, “Women Disciples in Mark,” 236.

²⁶¹ This is contrary to Bultmann who was of the view that in both 15:40-41 and the resurrection scene these women are Mark's editorial invention. “They are necessary because the disciples who had fled could not be made to appear.” Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 274.

Ricci and Munro's interpretation of the delay is that Mark purposely suppressed women's discipleship. He only brought them up when he could no longer conceal their presence because of the absence of the male disciples at the scene of the crucifixion. For Malbon the delay suggests a different reading: it "is a repeating analepsis, an 'analepsis on paralipsis,' that is, a retrospective section that fills in an earlier missing element (or paralipsis)."²⁶² In simple language this means that an event that took place earlier in a story is told later. Mostly the purpose of such style is to clarify things rather than obscuring them. Malbon sees Mark's delay in bringing the women disciples to the fore to parallel his delay to report the recognition of Jesus as "Son of God" by any human character. It is at the moment of Jesus' death that his true sonship could be understood. That is the moment when the centurion recognized it and consequently confessed him to be "truly the Son of God" (15:39). Malbon argues that this could be the same literary irony that is at play in 15:40-41. The Markan narrator delays explicit mention of the women disciples until the moment of Jesus' death when the true meaning of discipleship can be understood.

Malbon further explains Mark's delay to mention the women followers from the perspective of the "reversal of outsiders and insiders" which she argues is basic to the good news of Jesus that Mark narrates.²⁶³ Earlier in the narrative (3:31-35), the author has shown that what makes one a true member of Jesus' new family is not relationship by blood but rather that one (be it woman or a man, a Jew or a Gentile) accepts Jesus invitation to follow him and live the type of life he lives. This is the reversal of expectations that is expressed in Jesus' teaching that "many that are first will be last, and the last first" (10:31). The centurion, an outsider, one of "the last," is the first human person to recognize Jesus as the Son of God and this happens after Jesus' death.

²⁶² Malbon, "Fallible Followers," 41.

²⁶³ Ibid. 42.

One would not, therefore, be surprised to learn that the women, another group on the margins, are the ones who display true discipleship at the crucial moment of Jesus' life and ministry. "Mark's gospel [is] permeated – narratively – by the reversal of expectations – historically conditioned expectations."²⁶⁴ The evangelist's delay in disclosing the presence of the women followers of Jesus could be interpreted as one of such Markan rhetoric of reversal of expectations. John Schmitt echoes the same view when he opines that Mark leaves these women for the late moment because he deliberately plans "to save them for the culminating irony."²⁶⁵ Mark saves the discipleship of women for the time its meaning would be best understood - at the death and resurrection of Jesus - since the experience of these two climatic events are central to followership.²⁶⁶

4.2.3. Discipleship Status of these Women

The tension between Mark's lack of disclosure of the presence of women followers in his narrative prior to 15:40-41, on the one hand, and his use of discipleship terms, *akoloutheō* ("follow") and *diakoneō* ("serve"), to describe their relationship with Jesus in 15:40-41, on the other hand, raises the question whether these women are disciples or not. As Raymond Brown puts it; "Would the indication in 15:41, then, that the three named women 'used to follow him and serve him' in Galilee mean that in Mark's estimation they could be called 'disciples,' even though their presence with Jesus has never before been mentioned?"²⁶⁷ If these women are disciples, why would Mark account only for the call narratives of men and leaves out that of women? Again, why are there no traces of their active involvement in the narratives prior to 15:40-41? Are Mary

²⁶⁴ Ibid. 42-43.

²⁶⁵ Schmitt, "Women in Mark's Gospel," 232.

²⁶⁶ Malbon, "Fallible Followers," 42.

²⁶⁷ Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 1156.

Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses, Salome, and the other women in their group, disciples?

Many scholars²⁶⁸ have no doubt that the three women and the rest in their group are understood as disciples by the author of Mark. The argument for their discipleship is centered not only on the use of the two discipleship words (“follow” and “serve”) to describe their association with Jesus but also on the imperfect tense of these verbs that makes it a habitual exercise as opposed to a one-time event. Donahue and Harrington underscore this point when they affirm that;

The use of the verb *akolouthein* (“follow”) suggests that they can be called “disciples” of Jesus, since *akolouthein* is the usual Markan (and NT) word for discipleship (see Mark 1:18; 2:14, 15; 5:24; 6:1; 8:34; 9:38; 10:21, 28, 32, 52). ... The imperfect tense of the two verbs indicates the women’s continuing performance of their tasks while the group was in Galilee and probably during the journey up to Jerusalem.²⁶⁹

The significance of the imperfect tense and the phrase “when he was in Galilee” cannot be over emphasized in arguing for the discipleship of these women. The verb “follow” connotes commitment on the part of the women in the group of Mary Magdalene and distinguishes them from the “other women” who may have just joined Jesus from Jerusalem and could be described as curious observers. Munro buttresses this point when she argues that;

What confirms the women in 15:40 as belonging to the inner circle is that they followed Jesus habitually, as indicated by the imperfect ἠκολούθουν, and also by the phrase “when he was in Galilee.” Thus, 15:40-41 does not refer to a newly-constituted following in the absence of the men who have fled (14:50), but is retroactive in its significance. It reaches

²⁶⁸ Among them are R.T France (France, *Mark*, 663); Luise Schottroff (Schottroff, *Let the Oppressed Go Free*, 176-178); Winsome Munro (Munro, “Women Disciples in Mark? 230-232); Reimund Bieringer and Isabella Vanden Hove, (Reimund and Isabella, “Mary Magdalene in the Four Gospels,” 190); Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza (Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 320-321); John Donahue and Daniel Harrington (Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel of Mark*, 449-452); Victoria Phillips (Phillips, “Full Disclosure,” 17-21).

²⁶⁹ Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 449-450. Reimund and Isabelle echo the same point. “The fact that ἀκολουθεῖω is used in the imperfect tense leads to the conclusion that the acts of ‘following’ has not yet ended, but is still going on.” (Bieringer and Vanden Hove, “Mary Magdalene in the Four Gospels,” 190); see also Puerto Navarro: “If ἀκολουθεῖω and διακονεῖω form a binominal of actions that define the trajectory of discipleship from the beginning in Galilee through its end at the cross, we can confirm that women are the trues disciples” (Puerto Navarro, “Female Disciples in Mark,” 158).

back, not only to the beginning of the journey to Jerusalem (as for the larger outer group), but to the genesis of Jesus' mission and its central locale.²⁷⁰

This is to say that the women in Mary Magdalene's group are not strangers to the life and ministry of Jesus. They have been part and parcel of it from its beginning as it is the case with the male disciples. They witness the healing miracles that Jesus performs, they follow his teaching, and they must have also learned a lot through these experiences. Thus, their witnessing of the three last events in Jesus' life could be seen as their commitment to put into practice their understanding of discipleship. Again, one is confronted with the ambiguity of Mark's silence about their active presence.

Another important point that favors the discipleship of the women of 15:40-41 is noted by Munro. She observes that the material of the pericope, whatever its source might be, is presented in typically Markan style. According to her, Mark has a style of presenting Jesus in a crowd of people (10:1, 46; 11:8). Within this crowd the group of disciples which form the inner group of followers could be distinguished.²⁷¹ Again the inner group of disciples has another concentric group of three, Peter, James, and John (e.g., 9:2, where Jesus is with the three during his transfiguration, and 14:33, where at Gethsemane he takes only the three to go and pray). Thus, those in the company of Jesus "can be represented in terms of three concentric circles: a nucleus of three within an inner circle distinguished from the outer circle or crowd."²⁷² With reference to 15:40-41, Munro argues that the "many other" women correspond with the outer group – crowd;

²⁷⁰ Munro, "Women Disciples in Mark?" 231.

²⁷¹ For examples see 1:35-37, where the crowds who seek Jesus are distinct from "Simon and those who are with him; 2:15, where Jesus and his disciples are distinguished from the "many" who followed him; 3:7-9, where the disciples aid Jesus' escape from the "great crowd;" 4:10-12, where "those about him and the Twelve" are contrasted with "those without;" 10:1-2, where Jesus draws the attention of "his disciples" to "the crowd that has been with them the whole day and has nothing to eat." The same pattern is also seen in 5:24b, 31; 6:1-2, 30-34, 45, 54-55; 8:10, 34; 9:14. See Munro, "Women Disciples in Mark?" 230.

²⁷² Munro, "Women Disciples in Mark?" 231.

the smaller group of those “who when he was in Galilee followed and ministered to him” corresponds with the inner circle of disciples or the Twelve; and Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother James the younger and Joses correspond with the nucleus represented by Peter, James and John. She reiterates that this “pattern, rather than that they ‘follow him,’ taken in isolation, identifies them as disciples.”²⁷³ Her reason is two-fold: firstly, the verb *akolouthēō* is used of the crowd as well as disciples (3:7; 5:24; 6:1); secondly, the conditions for following are issued to the crowd and disciples alike (8:34-36). The significance of this pattern is that it stresses the aspect of commitment on the part of Mary Magdalene and the women in her group. They are not just following like the rest of the crowd. Their following could be seen as a demonstration of their faith, conviction, and commitment to Jesus whom they have lived with and journeyed alongside his ministry.

As overwhelming as the support for the discipleship of the women of 15:40-41 might be, it is interesting to note that not all scholars subscribe to this view. Raymond Brown, for example, hesitates to conclude that Mark depicts these women as disciples.²⁷⁴ His reluctance can be deciphered from the two basic questions he poses and his answers to them. “Would Mark consider these women disciples, were he asked? (I suspect so.) Did Mark think of them when in describing the ministry he wrote the word ‘disciples’? (Perhaps not.)”²⁷⁵ Brown agrees quite well that the use of the two discipleship verbs to describe the relationship of Mary Magdalene and her fellow followers suggests that they can be considered disciples. Nevertheless, the posture, *apo macrothen*, (“watching from a distance”) which Mark accords to them seems to communicate something different. Their immediate contrast is the centurion who is represented as standing close to Jesus

²⁷³ Ibid. 231.

²⁷⁴ Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 1156-1160.

²⁷⁵ Ibid. 1156.

(“he stood opposite him”) and confessed him to be “truly the Son of God” (15:39). The women on their part, not only watch from a distance, but they neither say nor do anything. They are silent and passive, giving no evaluation of Jesus as the centurion does. This posture, coupled with the fact that Mark has no prior mention of any call of any woman disciple, and heightened by the way Mark negatively portrays them in 16:5-8, makes Brown to be reluctant to perceive the named women and those in their group as disciples.

4.3. Igbo Cultural Study

Our preceding discussion has shown that the note about the women followers in 15:40-41, those who witness Jesus’ death from a distance, marks a significant shift in conceptualizing Jesus’ companions. The use of the discipleship verbs to describe the women’s relationship with Jesus becomes a matter of interest since there is no prior mention of any woman in connection with discipleship. Jesus calls men and they follow him (1:16-20; 2:14), live with him (3:14), witness his healing miracles (1:29-31), and are taught by him (8:27-10:542). The question of the lateness of the information about the presence of such group of women is raised. The status of these women in contrast with the other group of women who are also present is analyzed and the opinion tilts on the side that the former could be called women disciples. Mark’s typical style of presenting Jesus in the midst of categories of followers (crowd, disciples, and Peter, James, and John) used here suggests that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses, and Salome could be equated to Peter, James and John. Narratively, we see that 15:40-41 constitutes an important link between the historical Jesus who healed, taught, and was crucified, died, and was buried, and the Risen Lord whose tomb the women find empty. Mary Magdalene and the women in her group are eye witnesses to all of these.

The above interpretations are the fruit of the three competing umbrella models of biblical interpretation: historical, literary, and ideological criticisms. They represent more the European and North American method of interpretation and as such reflect their social location and cultural view. In what follows we offer an African contextualization of the passage to show how it can speak to a flesh and blood Igbo readers today. In doing this we keep in mind²⁷⁶ that our paradigm or model of interpretation is postcolonial cultural studies or ideological criticism and that, in terms of methodology, Igbo family/community consciousness, the *Nwanne* concept is the interpretive tool. We want to show that from the perspective of *Nwanne* philosophy of life the presence of the women at the scene of the crucifixion can be interpreted as an expression of solidarity which the Igbo would show to a member of the community in Jesus' situation. The identity of the two groups of women mentioned by Markan narrator would not be difficult to decipher for they correspond to the two outstanding women institutions discernable in Igbo socio-political life: the group of "*Umuada*" (daughters of the lineage) and the group of "*Inyomdi*" (wives of the lineage).²⁷⁷ Like the Western and North American hermeneutics, Igbo interpretation is also concerned about the delay in relaying the presence of the women in the story of Jesus. The sense of family-hood or communality among the members of the community and the complementarity of gendered living at the heart of *nwanne* philosophy of life demands that the *Umuada* and the *Inyomdi* are supposed to be conspicuous at every stage of the story (from the beginning to the end) if this is actually the story of Jesus who is a member of the community – their *nwanne*.

²⁷⁶ In chapter two we had set Igbo interpretation in context by looking at Segovia's plot of the development of biblical criticism in the last quarter of the twentieth century. We saw how there is a gradual shift from the text-oriented reading by a disinterested reader to the one that engages the text from a subjective stance, bringing to the text his or her presuppositions; a shift from an implied reader to a flesh and blood reader. See Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 34-52.

²⁷⁷ The full meaning, significance, and roles of the "*Umuada*" and the "*Inyomdi*" will be explored in 4.3.2 that follows. For now we know that they are the daughters of the lineage and wives of the lineage respectively.

4.3.1. Women's Solidarity

“Ometu imi ometu anya” and *“Gidigidi bu ugwu eze.”* These two Igbo proverbs are among the many proverbs that the Igbos use to express the deep or basic sense of solidarity that is intrinsic in their socio-cultural life as a people.²⁷⁸ The first proverb translates that “whatever affects the nose ultimately affects the eyes.” The translation *“Gidigidi bu ugwu eze”* is that “overwhelming support is the prestige of the king.” Solidarity is shown to a member of the family or community, be it in moments of good fortune or in times of difficulties. John Mbiti articulates this experience as follows; “When [one] suffers, [one] does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when [one] rejoices, [one] rejoices not alone but with the kinsmen, his neighbours and his relatives whether dead or living.”²⁷⁹ Igbo solidarity is the way the Igbo people express, in practical terms, their common origin, the fact that they are *nwanne* (brothers and sisters).

When Mark notifies his audience that “there were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome,” no Igbo reader would be surprised to learn that. Neither is he or she taken aback to hear that these women used to follow Jesus and provided for him when he was in Galilee. Likewise, that there were many other women who had come up with Jesus to Jerusalem would not be a wonderment. In fact, it would have been an anomaly if no woman was there to show solidarity to a member of the community in such difficult moment. Jesus is their *nwanne* (brother) and the Igbo family consciousness requires that Jesus’ woes become the woe of the entire community since “[w]hatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the

²⁷⁸ See Ikenna Okafor who uses another proverb, “Onuru Ube Nwanne Agbala Oso” (one who hears the cry of a brother/sister should ignore it) to articulate Igbo theology of solidarity. He finds in it the synthesis of the basic tenets of Catholic Social Teaching and the theologies of Liberation and Inculturation. [Okafor, “Onuru Ube Nwanne Agbala Oso,” 5-39].

²⁷⁹ Mbiti, *African Religion & Philosophy*, 106.

whole group happens to the individual.”²⁸⁰ My *nwanne* is “the other whose life and future is tied with mine, and there is no way I can progress without taking him or her into consideration as an equal complementary partner.”²⁸¹ Thus the women are there at the scene of the crucifixion, not only as eye witnesses to the drama taking place, but as active, involved persons who are participating in the ordeal of their *nwanne*. They are there to show him that they are solidly behind him in this time of tribulation. They are expressing their sense of family-hood, togetherness, friendship, and community which is what it means to be *nwanne* to the other.²⁸²

In the context of Jesus’ crucifixion it is understood that a member of the community is suffering injustice and his affliction automatically becomes the affliction of the entire community. He cannot be left alone to suffer especially when he is somebody who has good name²⁸³ in the community and more still that he is a prophetic figure. The presence of the women at the scene is very symbolic because of what they represent in Igbo world view.²⁸⁴ At the level of the physical world their presence symbolizes community’s (human) support for Jesus since the women, especially the *Umuada*, always stand with the just one and for justice. Their presence, at the spiritual or metaphysical realm, symbolizes the support of *Ani* (the Earth Goddess) which is the

²⁸⁰ Mbiti, *African Religion & Philosophy*, 106.

²⁸¹ Okafor and Murove, “The *Nwanne* Paradigm as Liberative Panacea to the Patriarchal Nigerian Igbo Society,” 45.

²⁸² Ikenna Okafor perceives the *nwanne* relationship as an “ontological fraternal bond.” Viewed from the individualistic and capitalist mindset of contemporary men and women it might be difficult to understand how it works. (See Okafor, “Onuru Ube Nwanne Agbala Oso,” 10).

²⁸³ “*Ezi afa ka ego*” (moral probity or good name) is a famous saying in Igbo that expresses the community’s preference of good name (moral probity) to any other worldly enticement, including money.

²⁸⁴ Phanuel Egejuru has a good articulation of the rich symbolism of female principle and the signifying role of women in Igbo world. Both earth and water which are seen as principles of life are represented as female. The Igbos talk of “mother earth,” “earth goddess,” etc. Similarly, several important concepts such as justice, molarity, freedom, and stability are identified with woman. Woman is also regarded as the conscience of the community since both the spirits and soul of the community are female. Because she symbolizes many powerful and important elements and concepts, womanhood is revered and worshiped. That is why it is a contradiction in terms to talk of women subjugation is pre-colonial Igbo community. Even today it still remains a big paradox. See Phanuel Egejuru, “The Paradox of Womanbeing and the Female Principle in Igbo Cosmology,” 11-19.

principle of life and fertility. This is to say that Mark's mention of the presence of Mary Magdalene and the women in her group at the time of Jesus' crucifixion is not just a factual information about people watching what is going on. It is a disclosure that both the physical and the spiritual world (humanity and the gods, the living and the dead) are behind Jesus. He is a person of integrity in the community and *elu* (sky) and *ani* (earth)²⁸⁵ are vouchsafing for him through the women's presence.

4.3.2. Identity of Mary Magdalene and the other women in her group

We saw in the sections on exegesis and scholarly discussions that 15:40-41 presents two categories of women. There is the inner group of Mary Magdalene who used to follow and minister to Jesus when he was in Galilee. There is also the larger group of "many other women" who came up with Jesus to Jerusalem. The first group, because of the use of the terms "follow" and "serve" which are the key Markan discipleship terms as well as the imperfect tense of these verbs, is considered to belong to the inner circle of Jesus' company. These women can be construed as disciples. An Igbo community-consciousness reading would recognize in the two categories of women the two main women institutions that play important roles in Igbo socio-cultural life, namely, the group of "*Umuada*" (lineage daughters) and the group of "*Nyomdi*" (lineage wives). An Igbo reader would easily identify the group of Mary Magdalene, the inner circle, with the *Umuada*, whereas the "many other women" would be identified as the *Nyomdi*. There is no way the women would not be conspicuous in the crucifixion scene (15:33-41) that Mark describes, if it

²⁸⁵ To establish justice and fairness in matters of human relationship "*Elu*" (the Sky God) and "*Ani*" (Earth Goddess) are normally called upon to testify. Such testimony is given through the presence and witness of certain revered people in the community. *Umuada* is one such group that serves this purpose. Agbasiere describes Igbo women as "*Ala'* delegates" in human affairs. For her, "Womanhood serves to embody core cultural values and, in playing out their roles, women disseminate important notions of identity and cultural awareness. Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought*, 163.

were to be in a typical Igbo setting. To drive this point home I make reference to a similar scene Agbasiere describes. The context is a funeral rite of an Igbo Christian woman (a wife of a chief). After recognizing the huge number of clerics and religious women,²⁸⁶ Agbasiere adds that;

From among the rest of the congregation one could easily recognize the group of women known as the ‘Christian Mothers’ of the parish in their specially designed attire of white and blue *wrappa*, white lace blouse and headtie. The deceased husband’s ‘lineage sisters’ (*umuada*) also had their own uniform, as had the representatives of the various clubs to which the deceased had been affiliated, either directly in person or indirectly through her daughter-in-law.²⁸⁷

We note the similarity between what is described here and what Mark narrates in 15:40-41. Two groups of women are distinguished. The larger group is depicted as the “Christian Mothers”. This group would correspond to Mark’s “many other” women. The group of *Umuada* is a smaller inner group closer to the man mourning his wife. Their closeness is shown in the description “the deceased husbands’ lineage sisters.” This is the group that is responsible for performing traditional funeral rites that involve the lineage women. In terms of sitting arrangement, it is this group that sits around the corpse where it is lying in state. In our context, the *Umuada* parallels the group of Mary Magdalene. Suffice it to mention that the group of the Christian Mothers is recognized first in Agbasiere’s presentation before the group of *Umuada* because it is a Christian funeral rite. Ordinarily, the *Umuada* group takes the precedence.

Why would an Igbo reader immediately identify Mary Magdalene and the women in her group with the *Umuada*, one might ask? Why are the *Umuada* supposed to be present and why must they be conspicuous? A further insight into who *Umuada* are and what they represent in Igbo world is necessary. We recall from chapter two of this study that although the Igbo community is

²⁸⁶ Igbo being a deeply religious set of people, the priests and the other religious men and women are always recognized first in any gathering. They are accorded special respect as those very close to God and can signify his presence. This is still obtainable till date.

²⁸⁷ Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought*, 169.

patriarchal, it is a patriarchy that is feminine-oriented. Women run institutions exert powerful influence in the social, economic, political, and cultural life of the community. Among these women institutions *Umuada* are the most recognized and most influential. Agbasiere underscores this fact when she says; “By far the most significant channel for the exercise of female influence within any Igbo community still remains that of the meeting of the *umuada* or *umuokpu*, daughter of the lineage.”²⁸⁸ Who are the *Umuada*? According to Cecilia Madu;

Umuada is an association of daughters of a given community in Igboland. It is an association to which all daughters of a particular village, clan, or town, old or young; single or married; divorced or separated is a member. *Umuada* simply means the daughters of a common male ancestor or “daughters of the soil.” It is an absolute right of every daughter of a particular place, without exception whatsoever, to belong to *Otu Umuada*, an association of the native daughters. ... Hence, women in the Igbo communities exert enormous powers by virtue of their position as daughters of the lineage.²⁸⁹

In terms of their roles and influence in the community, Madu adds that;

As a group, *Otu Umuada* is a powerful sociopolitical setup in Igbo culture and a functional forum for females that work for the resolving of conflicts and maintaining peace in Igbo communities. They are therefore, recognized in all Igbo culture as judges, peace brokers and enforcers. When they rule on an issue the decision is final and must be obeyed by all.²⁹⁰

Because of who they are, “daughters of the soil,” and what they represent, the “Mother Earth,” *Umuada* are regarded as sacred specie and have reverent aura surrounding them. Even men in their purported masculine superiority are no match to the power and influence of the *Umuada*. Within

²⁸⁸ Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought*, 40.

²⁸⁹ Cecilia Madu, “Mainstreaming Gender in Peace Building: ‘Umuada’ as Agent of Peace in Igbo Land,” *Quest Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science* 3, no. 5 (2015): 24-27 [25]. For other literatures on *Umuada* see, Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought*, 40-45; Kamene Okonjo, “The Dual-Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community Politics in Midwestern Nigeria,” in *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*, ed. Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay (California: Stanford University Press, 1976), 45-58; Cletus O. Obasi & Rebecca G. Nnamani, “The Role of Umuada Igbo in Conflict Management and Development in Nigeria,” *Open Journal of Political Science* 5, (2015): 256-263; Ani Kelechi JohnMary, “Conflict Resolution in Africa: A Focus on Umuada (Daughter) in Ahiazu-Mbaise, Nigeria,” *Journal of Gender, Information and Development in Africa* 6, no. 1 & 2 (2017): 27-43; Maduagwu Edith Abisola, “Umuada and the Phenomenon of Dual Identity in Ogbaruland,” *AFRREV LALIGENS. An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies* 1, no. 3 (August-December 2012): 134-154; Victor Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, 84-87.

²⁹⁰ Ibid. 25

their natal lineage the voice of *Umuada* reigns supreme.²⁹¹ They have right of arbitration, settling of quarrels concerning political, economic and ritual matters which are beyond their male relative's power to settle. Agbasiere underscores this point by observing that the "*umuada* of any unit of the patrilineage functions as the final arbiters in all conflict situations within the respective lineage. Their verdict are always final, even though the implementation of their decisions may be entrusted to the male relatives."²⁹² They even have power to punish, and as the case may be, to ostracize any man proven to be incorrigible in the community.²⁹³ Here I would like to mention that I witnessed an instance where the *Umuada* knelt a family man down (something unimaginable) for not cooperating with them during an event of settling a case where the man in question is found guilty of habitually beating the wife for no just reason. If the man were not to oblige the *Umuada* would have pronounced a curse on him or ostracized him from the communion of the community. The adverse implication to this is that *Umuada* will not attend any occasion or ceremony taking place in the man's home. Worse still, if the man happens to die without reconciling with them the *Umuada* will not attend his funeral. Such a boycott in itself is an abomination and something dreadful. No sensible Igbo man would like such a thing to happen to him. On the contrary, everyone wants blessings and good wishes from the "daughters of the soil." Every man wants to maintain warm and cordial relationship with them.

The women who followed and served Jesus are mentioned by Mark in the context of Jesus' death. The Igbos would perceive Jesus' crucifixion as an unfortunate event that has befallen the

²⁹¹ See Obasi and Nnamani who observe that, "*Umuada* weighs the power of finality in issues concerning women in the family, community and conflicts where men are unable to settle them." (Obasi & Nnamani, "The Role of *Umuada* Igbo in Conflict Management and Development in Nigeria," 257); Maduagwu notes that even "the elders will go to great length to avoid confrontation with the *Umuada*." (Maduagwu, "*Umuada* and the Phenomenon of Dual Identity in Ogburund," 143).

²⁹² Agbasiere, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought*, 42.

²⁹³ Ibid. 40.

community as a result of the unresolved conflict between Jesus and the leaders of the community. *Umuada*, as we have seen, have conflict resolution and management (they act as judges, peace brokers and enforcers) as one of the key roles they play in the community. This being the case, the question an Igbo reader would ask in Jesus' case as Mark presents it is this: Why are the *Umuada* not involved in resolving that conflict? This lack of *Umuada*'s involvement in such community conflict would be considered a very serious omission or mistake. But even in the midst of such negligence on the part of the authority, the *Umuada* have to appear physically to the scene of the crucifixion to show their solidarity with Jesus and to make a statement that what is taking place is an abomination, a polluting of the land, an injustice of the highest order.

Umuada are like “*isi anu adighi acho-acho n’ite ofe*” (the head of a slaughtered animal always stands out in the pot of soup). The meaning of this saying is that the *Umuada* are an institution that is always visible in every aspect of Igbo life. They are a force to be reckoned with. In the context of the risky atmosphere of Jesus' crucifixion,²⁹⁴ there is no group of women that would dare come close if not the group of *Umuada*. That is why an Igbo reader would easily associate Mary Magdalene and the other two named women in 15:40-41 with the *Umuada*. In fact, they would be regarded as “*Umuada Nazareth*” (with the understanding that Jesus is from Nazareth). If the language of ethnicity were to be employed, they are “*Umuada Jew*” (since Jesus is believed to be a Jew). They are there in their capacity as the “daughters of the soil,” representing both the human and the divine realms, to show solidarity to Jesus, their *nwanne*, who is suffering.

²⁹⁴ We recall from the sections on exegesis and scholarly discussions that part of the reason why the women of 15:40-41 are watching the crucifixion from a distance is because of fear of being associated with a condemned criminal, and hence face the same fate. Fander recalls that Josephus reports cases where women were arrested and crucified for being adherents of someone being crucified. This is to say that the women's presence at the crucifixion scene was not safe. See Fander, “Gospel of Mark,” 639. See also France, *Mark 8-16*, 1068. In Igbo contextual reading, it is only the group of *Umuada* who could dare to appear in such an environment. This is because they are untouchable.

In this sense their presence communicates more than what is physically perceived. It has an ontological implication and reflects the existential truth of being-for-one-another that is at the heart of the Igbo concept of *Nwanne*.²⁹⁵ In the context of African spirit of family-hood and solidarity, John Mbiti expresses this ideology as follows; “I am because you are, and since you are, I am.”²⁹⁶ Thus as far as the identity of the women in 15:40-41 is concerned, the emphasis would be on their collective identity rather than on individual identification. They are *Umuada* and everyone knows what they represent or signify.

4.3.3. Late mentioning of the women followers

In the preceding scholarship discussion we saw that Mark’s nuancing of the idea of a lonely Jesus on the cross with the sudden presence of some women marks a significant shift in his story, both narratively and thematically. The androcentric presentation that only men follow Jesus is at this point corrected. The reader is meant to learn that women belong to the circle of disciples since they used to follow and minister to Jesus when he was in Galilee. Mark 15:40-41 also marks the break from speaking about individual named women to speaking of them as a group. The mentioning of the names of three of these women followers is remarkable too. The three could be said to parallel the group of three spokesmen for the Twelve – Peter, James, and John. Hence, from the point of view of Mark’s portrait of women, 15:40-41 is a great disclosure, a revelation that discipleship is not all about men. It is all inclusive. Nevertheless, this great disclosure raises a basic question: why does Mark delay to relate such an important aspect of his story of Jesus? Why would he wait until the end of the gospel before making the women followers known? Do such

²⁹⁵ Okafor, “Onuru Ube Nwanne Agbala Oso,” 13.

²⁹⁶ Mbiti, *African Religion & Philosophy*, 106.

women followers exist or does Mark invent them to fill in the vacancy left by the male disciples who are nowhere to be seen at this point?

The above are some of the questions raised by the European and North American interpreters in their reading of 15:40-41. The flesh and blood Igbo readers who read this text from the context of Igbo family consciousness will be more disturbed (and disappointed too) about Mark's utter silence concerning the *Umuada's* role in this story. The story of Jesus' life and ministry develops in a manner that is clear to the reader that Jesus' ministry of preaching and healing puts him in tension with the authorities. This conflict builds up until it gets out of hand, leading to Jesus' crucifixion – shedding of the blood of a *nwanne*, something that is abominable. An Igbo reader would find it strange that in all those occasions of tension that Mark never reports about the intervention of the *Umuada* to resolve the issue. The basic question an Igbo interpreter would immediately ask is this: Does the clan of Jesus not have the “daughters of the soil”, endowed with the power of resolving conflicts and restoring peace among the *umunne*? As we saw in our discussion on the role of *Umuada*, there is no conflict that they cannot manage, even if not resolved. They are invited to mediate even where others fail. To this effect, the lack of the involvement of the *Umuada* in the conflict and the mere mentioning of their presence at the end of the gospel will remain a puzzle to an Igbo reader. Mark can never be excused for such an omission, whether intentional or by mistake.

4.3.4. Conclusion

The Markan notice to the reader in 15:40-41 that there are women who witness Jesus' death, and consequently his burial (15:47), and the empty tomb (16:1-8) is important. Like the case of the story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, the information brings to the fore a discernable

tension in Mark's portrait of women.²⁹⁷ On the one hand, the surprising notice is a great disclosure of the active involvement of women in the life and ministry of Jesus. That these women have been following and serving Jesus from the time of his ministry in Galilee qualifies them to belong to the inner circle of Jesus' company. Hence they can be regarded as Jesus' disciples. That these women followed Jesus all the way to Jerusalem and witnessed his crucifixion and death makes them faithful and committed disciples in contrast to the male disciples who deny Jesus, flee, and become completely invisible during his crucifixion. On the other hand, this important disclosure raises a fundamental question about Mark's silence concerning the discipleship of women: Why does Mark, prior to 15:40-41, give readers the impression that women are on the margins as far as Jesus' life and ministry is concerned? When the narrator eventually introduces them (when the male disciples are absent), he presents them as watching from a distance as if they are indifferent toward Jesus' fate. The ambiguity reaches its climax when Mark ends the gospel by portraying the same women fleeing from the tomb and refusing to carry out the mandate to communicate the news of the resurrection to Peter and the other disciples. At the end the reader is left to wonder if Mark is portraying the women followers positively or demeaning them.

Interestingly enough, the same tension is reflected in Igbo contextual reading of 15:40-41. On the one hand, it shows the exalted roles and the significance of women in the socio-cultural life of the Igbos. The presence of the women at the scene of the crucifixion communicates Igbo solidarity that is rooted in the *Nwanne* philosophy of life. It shows that, "*The meturu imi, meturu anya*" (what affects the nose affects the eyes). The ordeal of Jesus is the ordeal of the entire

²⁹⁷ Deborah Krause is very emphatic on this point. For her, any investigation of Mark's portrait of women must take seriously this tension since it is possible "that Mark's Gospel preserves traditions that reveals women in traditionally bound roles of domestic servitude, while at the same time preserving traditions that reveal women in liberated roles of equal discipleship." (Deborah Krause, "Simon Peter's Mother-in-law – Disciple or Domestic Servant? Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics and the Interpretation of Mark 1:29-31," in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (Sheffield: Academic Press, 2001), 50.

community. The women are present to demonstrate this. They symbolize the solidarity of both the human and spiritual realms. In the group of Mary Magdalene the Igbo reader is able to recognize the *Umuada*, the daughters of the lineage. Their identity is very clear since it is only the *Umuada* who can be around in such a scene because of who they are and what they represent. In this sense, an Igbo reader can say that Mark has recognized the women (in this context *Umuada*) and accorded them their proper place. On the other hand, an Igbo reader of Mark's story is disturbed and is left with so many questions about why Mark never made the *Umuada* visible and active in the earlier part of the narrative. Jesus has several conflicts with the leaders of the community. These would have been brought to the attention of the *Umuada* and they would have conveniently resolved them. This in turn would have prevented the death of a *nwanne*. Is Mark championing the course of *Umuada* or has he betrayed them as having failed in their responsibility as the "daughters of the soil," a status that goes with reverence and communicates more than what can be physically perceived? It seems Mark leaves an Igbo interpreter to draw a conclusion for himself or herself.

What is obvious, therefore, is that Markan readers are once again confronted with and are meant to appreciate the complexity of a tradition that both represents women as disciples and, at the same time, conceals or suppresses their discipleship. As Deborah Krause would always say; "There is more to the Gospel than simply the words on the page."²⁹⁸ Similarly, we can say that there might be more to women discipleship in Mark's gospel than what is explicitly represented in 15:40-41.

²⁹⁸ Deborah Krause, "Simon Peter's Mother-in-law", 39.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Our study began by asking two basic questions about the Markan portrait of women: 1) How does Mark portray women in his telling of the story of Jesus? 2) Are there women disciples in Mark? The attempt to respond to these questions shows that the questions are not as simple as they appear at the first glance. The tension discernable in the narrator's complex representation of women makes it difficult to proffer a simple answer.

As regards the first question, Mark's portrait of women, the exegesis of and scholarly discussion on the two passages, the story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (1:29-31) and the account of the women who witnessed Jesus' crucifixion (15:40-41), which serve as our lenses or paradigm texts for discussing the topic, show that the same texts that champion the course of women also cast shadow on them. Concerning the question of women discipleship, the Markan reader is left with the task of reconciling Mark's inability to narrate any call story or commissioning of any woman with the disclosure at the end of the gospel that there is a group of women followers who belong to the inner circle of Jesus' followers.

Significant, too, in our study is the knowledge that this tension or ambivalence apparent in Mark's portrait of women is encountered or experienced not only in the Euro-American scholarship, but also in the Igbo cultural reading. On the one hand, the Igbo women, especially the *Umuada*, are shown to shine gloriously through the modeled service of Peter's mother-in-law (embodying Igbo hospitality) and the presence of the women followers at the scene of Jesus' crucifixion (embodying Igbo solidarity). In this sense, an Igbo reader would say that the Markan narrator is pro-women. On the other hand, the same reader is not impressed that the picture Mark has presented about the *Umuada* is that they are "ministers without portfolio." The narrator seems

to use them as a decoration in the narrative. The active role they are to play in the story, (especially the role of resolving the conflict between Jesus and the community leaders) is denied them completely. This leaves the Igbo reader to wonder what type of *Umuada* those women are. Thus, Mark's inability to accord the *Umuada* their rightful place and role in the narrative makes an Igbo reader to be suspicious of the evangelist's disposition toward the women.

Lastly, our study demonstrates that the meaning of any biblical text is the outcome of the interaction or interchange between the text and real flesh and blood readers, culturally and historically positioned.²⁹⁹ Similarly, the new meaning that emerges from Igbo perspectival reading confirms that biblical texts can rend themselves to diverse interpretations in different cultures. This in turn is a proof that the word of God is not static or passive but dynamic, life-giving, and transcends space and time. Indeed, it is the "good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1).

²⁹⁹ Segovia posits that although biblical texts constitute an "other" to us and follow principles and conventions of another time and culture, at the same time such "otherness" is always apprehended through our own lenses as readers, socially and historically located as we are. (Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 11). Brian Blount argues on the same line: "Texts do not have 'meaning.' Instead, they have 'meaning potential.' Interpreters access this potential interpersonally, that is contextually." (Brian K. Blount, *Cultural Interpretation: Restoring New Testament Criticism* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995], viii).

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