

## THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION OF MARK 14:1-11 ON THE COMMITMENT OF MEN AND WOMEN IN GOD'S SERVICE

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### **Abstract**

*The fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of Mark reveals Jesus as the Son of God and Messiah who came to redeem mankind from the bondage of sin. Both the gospel testifies to the fact that Jesus is the Messiah. The Old Testament prophets prophesy that the fulfillment is being seen here in Mark as the anointing of Jesus by the woman prefigured about the burial of Jesus. The depth of the woman's love for Jesus is signaled by the "wastefulness" of her perfume according to the disciples. The act of the woman here models what it means to be a disciple: to serve, to love one another, and to share in Jesus' death. The work is purely an exegesis of the text of Mark 14:1-11 that portrays the nature of hypocrisy displayed by the male disciples of Jesus that has an almost direct bearing on the kind of commitment and devotion being seen among the followers of Christ in the contemporary church in Nigeria. The paper employed Draper's 'tri-polar model' of contextual exegesis to explain the character and the kind of devotion that runs through Mark 14:1-11 between a woman and men towards Jesus. The findings of the paper reveal that God is interested in genuine service, a sacrifice commitment, and devotion of every person regardless of sex and culture. Men should learn true service from the woman in Mark 14:1-11. Men and women should learn to be of great help to people when they are alive, not when they are dead.*

**Keywords:** Theology, Commitment, Men, Women, God.

### **Introduction**

The Gospel according to Mark is the shortest of the four Gospel accounts. It has historically been criticized for being overly simplistic and thus inferior to Matthew and Luke. But that is far from the truth and more recent scholarship has shown both Matthew and Luke's dependence on Mark as a source. The message and style of the Gospel is unique, which makes it clear and captivating to all generation. The book is far from being inferior as scholars considered it to be because it highlights the urgent message of its author and thus leads to its power. It is the most action-overflowing and succinct of the four Gospel accounts. In fact, its central themes punch us with clarity, especially in chapter 14 which is the focus of this paper. The "Tri-polar Model" (Grenholm and Patte, as modified by Draper) in African Contextual Hermeneutics is adopted for the paper. The tri-polar exegetical model is an approach that provides the best framework for the appropriation of the biblical message to the community of believers. Draper's 'tri-polar model' of contextual exegesis namely: *Distantiation* (ordering the text or allowing it to speak for itself through a process of exegesis of the text in its context); *contextualization* (analyzing the context of the reader/ hearer and relating it to the communication offered by the text) and *appropriation* (bringing the context of the text and the context of the

reader/ hearer into dialogue or conversation with the text and then the putting into action of this meaning by the reader/ hearer for benefit of the community).

### **Historical and Literary Background of the Gospel of Mark**

Mark wrote primarily for Roman readers, and his emphasis is on Jesus Christ as the Servant of God (Mark 10:44-45). Wiersbe explains that Mark portrays Jesus as the Servant of God constantly on the go and meeting the needs of all kinds of people. The fact that Mark explains Jewish customs and translates Aramaic words indicates that he had Gentile readers in mind. Mark also has an emphasis on discipleship and persecution. This means that the Gentiles were the recipients of the gospel. Mark is the only book among the gospels and even the entire New Testament that “calls itself a gospel”. The book is all about 'the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (1:1).

The book of Mark is a gospel and this gospel signifies a literary genre a particular theological message, or a canonical writing normative in the life of the church. Williamson elucidates that the “gospel of Mark is all three: a collection of traditions about Jesus presented in story form, a narrative constituting good news about God and His kingdom, a writing which occupies a place of fundamental importance in the scriptures of the church” (Williamson, 1983, p. 1). This indicates that the Gospel according to Mark is both a story and a narrative that bears witness to Jesus Christ as proclaimer and embodiment of the kingdom of God. It further shows that the central and dominating theme of the gospel of Mark is “Christology in nature”. This is because, from a critical look, every account in Mark focuses the reader's attention in some way on Jesus. Both Stein and Williamson affirm that the Gospel of Mark emphasizes the cross, discipleship, the teachings of Jesus, the messianic secret, the Son of God, and the humanity of Jesus (Stein, 2008 and Williamson, 1983). This further reveals that the gospel according to Mark is a historical Biography or narrative of Jesus Christ that focuses on his ministry, passion, and resurrection.

Mark 14 reveals the chief priest's plot to kill Jesus, his anointing by a woman, Judas betrayal, the last supper with the disciples and its institution to the church, Peter's denial foretold, Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane, the arrest of Jesus, disciples deserted Jesus, Jesus before the council, and Peter's denial of Christ. Then chapter 15-16 explains how Jesus was taken to Pilate, sentenced to die, the crucifixion, death, burial, and his resurrection. Therefore, Mark 14 set a unique stage for the passion of Jesus and holds a lot for this paper. However, my focus will be on 14:1-11 which explains the character and the kind of devotion that runs through the chapter (14:1-72) between a woman and man towards Jesus.

### **The Plan to Arrest Jesus and Kill Him (Verses 1-2)**

1 Ἦν δὲ τὸ πάσχα καὶ τὰ ἄζυμα μετὰ δύο ἡμέρας. Καὶ ἐζήτουν οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς πῶς αὐτὸν ἐν δόλῳ κρατήσαντες ἀποκτείνωσιν· 2 ἔλεγον γάρ, Μὴ ἐν τῇ ἑορτῇ, μήποτε ἔσται θόρυβος τοῦ λαοῦ.

The conjunction “δε” (then or and) in verse 1 connects this passage with the preceding narrative of 3:6; 11:18; and 12:12, which now comes to a climax here. The verse serves to

date and indicates the background of the incidents related in verses 3-9 and 10-11 that introduce the passion narrative as a whole. The mention of “*δύο ἡμέρας*” (two days) reveals how Mark gives a precise chronological designation of the time up to the passion narrative as seen in 14:12, 17; 15:1, 25, 33, 34, 42; 16:1, 2 of the Gospel. The words “*τὸ πάσχα καὶ τὰ ἄζυμα*” (Passover and the unleavened bread) are very important here. *πάσχα* “Passover” is an annual festival in Israel. It comes from the Hebrew word “*pasach*,” meaning 'to pass over,' or 'to spare,' a feast instituted by God in commemoration of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, and anticipatory of the expiatory sacrifice of Christ. *ἄζυμα* “unleavened bread,” both Stein (2008) and Cranfield (1959) opine that is the feast of unleavened bread celebration in Israel which in Hebrew is called 'massot'. The celebration lasted for seven days (Exodus 12:15-20; 34:18; Numbers 28:17), from the fifteenth to the twenty-first of Nisan. Both Passover and unleavened bread are major feasts that commemorate Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Passover memorializes the evening God spared Israel's houses while striking down the firstborn of the Egyptians (Exodus 12:12-13, 26-27); and the festival of unleavened bread recalls Israel's departure from Egypt the following morning (Exodus 12:17, 39; Deuteronomy 16:3). They are all celebrated together and are well known as the two great religious feasts of the time.

The phrase “*καὶ ἐζήτουν οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς πῶς αὐτὸν ἐν δόλῳ κρατήσαντες ἀποκτείνωσιν*” (also the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how they will guide him seizing to kill) expressed the chief priests and scribes plot Jesus during the Passover celebration in such a way that it will not cause riot (verse 2). They may be thinking of arresting Jesus after the feast since they are afraid of the *θόρυβος* 'riot' from the crowd but the plan was altered as a result of Judas's offer. So, Williamson expresses that the account of the plot against Jesus by his enemies in verses 1-2 is continued by the report of the complicity of a friend and his student in verses 10-11 (Williamson, 1983). This shows that Jesus was having enemies both within and outside. *οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς* 'The chief priests and the scribes' on the one hand and Judas on the other are preparing for Jesus' death by planning *ἀποκτείνωσιν* (to kill) him. However, in between the two parts of conspiracy, hatred, and display of hypocrisy towards Jesus by Judas; here stands the story of a woman who is planning well for Jesus in such a hostile time that lies ahead of him (Moule, 1965). Therefore, it is clear here that the attitude of men (the chief priests and scribes) towards Jesus is unhealthy.

### **In Bethany, a Woman Anoints Jesus with Expensive Perfume (Verse 3)**

*3 Καὶ ὄντος αὐτοῦ ἐν Βηθανίᾳ ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ Σίμωνος τοῦ λεπροῦ κατακειμένου αὐτοῦ ἦλθεν γυνὴ ἔχουσα ἀλάβαστρον μύρου νάρδου πιστικῆς πολυτελοῦς· συντρίψασα τὴν ἀλάβαστρον κατέχεεν αὐτοῦ τῆς κεφαλῆς.*

The *καὶ* 'and' link the narrative here with verses 1-2. It posits that while the men are busy conspiring against Jesus, in Bethany a woman is busy preparing to anoint Him. Bethany means “house of afflictions”. It was in Bethany that through Jesus, God came to help the household of Martha and Mary when they were in great affliction over Lazarus's fatal illness. This Bethany is “a small village about 1.5 miles from Jerusalem and lying on the

East slope of the mount of Olive” . It was where lived “Simon the leper” (verse 3) and Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (John 11:18 f). It was there the incident of the raising of Lazarus took place (John 11) . Mark explains that the host of the supper at Bethany is Simon the leper who was also believed to have been cured by Jesus. In a similar account of the Anointing of Jesus in John 12:1-8, John the evangelist did not tell us who the host is. However, based on the synoptic tradition especially here in Mark it is clearly mentioned the place of the supper is the house of “Simon the Leper,” which other commentators such as and Brown still hold that Simon is the father of Lazarus, Mary and Martha and Brown, 1966).

The phrase “ἦλθεν γυνὴ ἔχουσα ἀλάβαστρον μύρου νάρδου πιστικῆς πολυτελοῦς” (A woman came holding alabaster perfume oil of nard pure very costly). As Jesus and the disciples are reclining at the table, enjoying their supper; a woman comes in with an alabaster nard or flask of costly perfume oil and anoints Jesus with it. The *gunhV* (woman) here is not identified as Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (John 12:3), nor called a sinful woman as found in Luke's account. She remains here anonymous. But this woman did what she will be remembered for forever. Williamson elucidates that “the reprehensible roles in Mark 14:1-11 are played by men; the one praiseworthy character is identified only as 'a woman'” (Williamson, 1983, p. 247). The action that the woman displayed to Jesus is an expression of her “tender love and adoration” (Moule, 1965:111). The word *ajlavbastron* is only used here in Mark, by extension it is “a flask made of alabaster, described as a vessel with a rather long neck which was broken off when the contents were used” (Bratcher and Nida, 1993, p. 427). This indicates that the breaking of the flask was perhaps the expression of the wholeheartedness of her devotion to Jesus. So, having served that purpose, it would never be used again.

The Greek word “μύρου,” or “μύρον,” (*myron*) normally refers to a perfume or ointment made of myrrh. This is either as dried powder or liquid. The *myron* was made from gummy resin that excludes low shrubby balsam trees that grow in west-central south Arabia and Northern Somaliland. It was used as incense, in cosmetics, perfume, medicines, and burial preparations. But in this context, both Mark and John's usage of the word *myron* is more generic, in the general sense of “Perfume” for the *myron* is not of myrrh but of nard . The word *pistikh*=S (pure) again in verse 3 has an uncertain meaning but appears in the New Testament only in the Mark and John accounts of the anointing. However, *Pistikos* literary means “faithful” (Crown, 1966, p. 448). This designates how pure or faithful Jesus was to the *gunhV* life. But the action of the woman did not please the disciples.

#### **The Disciples' Alleged Concern for the Poor (Verses 4-5)**

4 ἦσαν δέ τινες ἀγανακτοῦντες πρὸς ἑαυτοῦς, Εἰς τί ἡ ἀπώλεια αὕτη τοῦ μύρου γέγονεν; 5 ἡδύνατο γὰρ τοῦτο τὸ μύρον πραθῆναι ἐπάνω δηναρίων τριακοσίων καὶ δοθῆναι τοῖς πτωχοῖς· καὶ ἐνεβριμῶντο αὐτῇ.

The phrase “δέ τινες ἀγανακτοῦντες πρὸς ἑαυτοῦς” (But some of them were indignant towards themselves) expressed the displeasure of the male disciples over what the woman disciple did in anointing Jesus with an expensive perfume. It looks so shameful here on

the action of the disciples towards a woman whom by culture they consider as nothing but displaying her devotion to Jesus wasting (ἀπώλεια) the amount of money that is worth helping the poor with. John speaks of three hundred denarii (John 12:5), but here Mark says more than three hundred denarii. This is just the opposite of the phenomenon encountered in discussing John 6:7 where Mark 6:37 speaks of two hundred denarii and John says more than two hundred denarii. Stein (2008) explains that the ἀγανακτοῦντες 'indignation by the disciples of Jesus has two considerations. The first, he said consists of the value of the jar and its content (5a). The second builds upon the first and raises the issue of what could have helped been done with the 300 denarii. This could have helped many poor people since the Passover of all times in the year, was a time in which the poor were to be remembered. One wonders, what actually is the motive of the disciples? Were they jealous of their master? Was Jesus not worth that perfume? Or they were considering the poor more than Jesus? This could be true as opine by Stein that maybe some of the disciples are "thinking of the financial needs of the new government that Jesus would soon inaugurate" (Stein, 2008, p. 634). However, whatever case it might be, these point out the hypocrisy and lack of sacrificial love of some men (disciples) towards Jesus in Mark's time.

#### **Jesus Silences the Disciples and Upholds the Woman's Devotion (Verses 6-9)**

6 ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν, Ἄφετε αὐτήν· τί αὐτῇ κόπους παρέχετε; καλὸν ἔργον ἠργάσατο ἐν ἐμοί. 7 πάντοτε γὰρ τοὺς πτωχοὺς ἔχετε μεθ' ἑαυτῶν, καὶ ὅταν θέλητε δύνασθε αὐτοῖς εἶ ποιῆσαι, ἐμὲ δὲ οὐ πάντοτε ἔχετε. 8 ὃ ἔσχεν ἐποίησεν· προέλαβεν μυρίσαι τὸ σῶμά μου εἰς τὸν ἐνταφιασμόν. 9 ἀμὴν δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν, ὅπου ἐὰν κηρυχθῆ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον εἰς ὅλον τὸν κόσμον, καὶ ὃ ἐποίησεν αὕτη λαληθήσεται εἰς μνημόσυνον αὐτῆς.

Jesus instead of praising the disciples silences them with a command in verse 6a to Ἄφετε αὐτήν 'leave her alone.' In fact, not only that, Jesus shamed them with a rhetorical question "τί αὐτῇ κόπους παρέχετε;" (why do you cause trouble to her?). This shows that what the woman did was acceptable to Jesus and it is only him who knew the significance of it (verse 6). For Jesus it was a real devotion in "ἐνταφιασμόν" 'preparation for his burial,' which even his disciples did not, understood it that way (verse 8).

In verse 7, the way Jesus silenced his disciples does not contradict his teaching on helping and doing well to the poor. He rather challenged them to know that doing good to others will not end. He further let them know that "πάντοτε γὰρ τοὺς πτωχοὺς ἔχετε μεθ' ἑαυτῶν," "for you will always have the needy and the poor with you to help always." So, what Jesus is saying here in no way minimizes the importance of ministering to the poor which was clearly his vital concern as indicated in 10:21 and Luke 4:18. The central message here is the poor will continue to be present, but the opportunity to minister to "Jesus was limited. It involves only hours!" (Stein, 2008, p. 634).

Verse 9 reechoes the action of the woman to Jesus in such a way that contrasts the action of the men (disciples) in 4-5. What the woman did will be remembered all over the world, what the disciples say should not even be mentioned among them. The woman will be remembered, not because of her name, which is unimportant, but for her act (Stein, 2008) of service to Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The emphasis of Jesus in verse 9 further

indicates that his followers have the duty not only to preach the gospel to all people before the end of the world (13:10) but to include in their “global evangelization the memory of this extraordinary woman's loving acknowledgment” of the precious death of Jesus as part of the gospel message.

### **The Action of Judas Iscariot (Verses 10-11)**

10 Καὶ Ἰούδας Ἰσκαριώθ ὁ εἷς τῶν δώδεκα ἀπῆλθεν πρὸς τοὺς ἀρχιερεῖς ἵνα αὐτὸν παραδοῖ αὐτοῖς. 11 οἱ δὲ ἀκούσαντες ἐχάρησαν καὶ ἐπηγγείλαντο αὐτῷ ἀργύριον δοῦναι. Καὶ ἐζήτηι πῶς αὐτὸν εὐκαίρως παραδοῖ.

The “καὶ” (then or and) here at the beginning of the verse shows the continuity of the narratives of Christ's Passion immediately after his anointing in verse 3. The plot of the priests and scribes belongs to the motif of growing conflict which began in 2:1-3:6. It was also mentioned or predicted in 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34 and 14:1-2. Then here in verses 10-11, Mark discloses how Judas Iscariot secretly collaborated with the high priests and scribes to arrest Jesus. It looks so surprising that the one being called, trained, and dining at the same table with Jesus even after the incidents of verses 3-9, failed to continue the fellowship with Jesus but went to betray his master for a sum of money. Heil explains that the chief priests promise to give Judas money for his betrayal of Jesus in verse 11 underlining how both the chief priests and Judas stand in ironic contrast to the nameless woman who generously anointed Jesus for burial (14:3-9). Whereas the woman expended her precious ointment worth more than three days' wages to demonstrate her devotion and appreciation of the death of Jesus, the chief priests will spend their money not for devotion to the dying Jesus but for deceitful betrayal leading to his death (Heil, 1992). This shows how Judas Iscariot was after more money than the mission he was called for. Though, Mark does not indicate Judas's motive, Matthew (26:15a), Luke (22:3), and John (12:6, 13:2) hint at him as one who “works for Satan” (Cranfield, 1959, p. 419). So, given the above, it is clear that Judas establishes a bond with the Jewish leaders and becomes the bribed agent in their plot to arrest Jesus and have him put to death.

### **The Commitment of Men and Women in the Church**

Having looked at the text in its context (Distantiation), the focus here will be on the contemporary context and Appropriation. This will pay attention to the way the text will suit the present context. The Gospel of Mark 14 begins with the narrative of the passion of Jesus Christ which to me focuses on two personalities and the role they played. The chapter revealed the kind of devotion displayed by male disciples and a woman disciple at such a critical moment in the life of Jesus. Verses 1-11 lay the foundation, expound, and project the kind of attitude that runs through the entire chapter. It explains the character of people who have directly and indirectly benefited from the ministry of Jesus Christ.

However, Mark seems to have a special interest in women in his Gospel, from the critical study of the entire Biblical worldview, both in the ancient Near East and the Graeco-Roman world. Women were regarded as second-class citizens who sometimes had no say in the public. They were considered as if nothing good would emanate from them. Men were seen as the custodians and taking the lead in everything at home, church,

community, and everywhere. It is from the same context that Jesus chose only the male disciples without the female one among them. The same colonial context of the past still has some impart in the church today in northern Nigeria, particularly in some evangelical churches where women are considered as nothing. Yet their commitment to the body of Christ is worth emulating.

In my context, men dominated the church. They are the priests, and elders and tend to take the lead in everything in the church but from a critical assessment, their commitment and number cannot be compared with that of the women's wing in the church. The attitude of men towards devotion to Jesus seems to be difficult. The Gospel of Mark 14:1-2 shows the priests and scribes that were called and serving as the custodians of the laws of God, yet turning against the work of God in the life of Jesus and planning to kill him. Men feel more comfortable in domination in the church than in service. This is clearly seen in verses 3-5 when the male disciples of Jesus full of indignation rebuked the unnamed and uncalled female disciple who expresses her devotion to Jesus. In fact, the entire chapter 14 of Mark reveals men as good planners in the church, but weak in sacrificial commitment and devotion for the sake of Christ. Their reference to the poor (verse 5) shows they are good planners. They can only plan or decide on what will be done than their involvement in doing it. Men are only pretentious in their attitude to service than the reality. Judas the male disciple pretends to be together with Jesus but goes to betray him only to get money than to give it for the course of the cross (verses 10-11).

Furthermore, verses 12-26 reveal the twelve male disciples of Jesus going to plan or prepare the last supper including Judas. In the course of the supper, Jesus foresaw the danger and how the life of hypocrisy is being displayed by the disciples. In verses 27-31, 43-45 Jesus told them one among them is going to betray him and all of them will desert him. In the spirit of pretends and hypocrisy Judas denies, Peter and the rest voice out that they will not desert him and they are one hundred percent ready to die with him. It looks so sad considering the commitment of Men to Jesus at this critical time when he needs their services the most. Those he chose to go and pray with at Gethsemane pretended they were praying along with him but were busy sleeping (verses 32-42). When the collaborators of Judas arrested Jesus (verses 43-49), the male disciples who promised they would not isolate him, isolated Him (verses 50-52). Even Peter declared publicly when confronted by a young girl, denied in totality for knowing Jesus (verses 66-72). These show the weak attitude of men in commitment and sacrificial devotion to the kingdom in the church today.

Given the above, women on the other hand though considered as nobodies, yet their commitment was applauded by Jesus especially the one in Mark 14. She sacrificed her expensive perfume in service to Jesus (vs.3). Her service reveals the hub of the passion of Jesus because the anointing was in preparation for the burial and resurrection of Jesus (vs. 8). There was no pretends or display of hypocrisy in her commitment and devotion to Jesus. Her service is a model that will be proclaimed all over the world (vs.9). Her act of service to Jesus and how Jesus applauded her breaks the dichotomy that existed as a result of colonialism in the past, and which ought to be addressed in the present for future use.

### **A Theological Reflection on Mark 14:1-11**

The gospel of Mark 14 discloses Jesus as the Son of God and Messiah who came to redeem mankind from the bondage of sin. The depth of the woman's love for Jesus is signaled by the “wastefulness” of her perfume according to the disciples (verses 3-5). The act of the woman here models what it means to be a disciple: to serve, to love one another, and to share in Jesus' death. God is interested in genuine service and a sacrifice commitment and devotion of every person regardless of sex and culture. Men should learn true service from women, especially from the woman in Mark 14:3 and Jesus who humbled Himself even to the point of death just to please God the Father and to salvage the whole world from the bondage of sin and Satan.

### **Conclusion**

The passage of Mark 14 reveals Jesus as the Son of God and messiah who came to deliver the world from bondage which had to go through the cross. It explained the attitude of the men's disciples and a woman's disciple towards Jesus Christ. All their act of commitment and devotion to Jesus will be remembered. The priests and scribes will be remembered for planning evil against Jesus, the disciples for deserting Him, the woman for anointing Him in preparation for his burial, and Judas for collecting money to kill Jesus. Both men and women should learn to be of great help to people when they are alive, not when they are dead, for God rewards those who serve Him with the right motive and faithfulness.

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