

Salome: Disciple of Jesus

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church
in Fremont, California,

on July 3, 2022, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.

Scripture: Mark 15:40-16:8 and Gospel of Thomas, Logion 61

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When you hear the name Salome, which character from the Bible pops into your mind, and what sort of images of her do you see? If you are anything like the folks at Bible Study this week, you thought of the woman who danced for Herod, who asked for John the Baptist's head on a silver platter. When I asked everyone how they knew this woman's name was Salome, they blinked and said, "It's in the Bible!"

My friends, it's **not** in the Bible. Here are the two accounts of the woman dancing for Herod as they appear in Mark and Matthew (the story is not in Luke or John):

Mark:

When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests, and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." And he swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter."¹

Matthew:

But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and she pleased Herod so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might ask. Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter."²

There are several things to take note of in these passages. The first is that the daughter is not named as Salome. In Mark's account, in the New Revised Standard Version, the dancer is named Herodias, the same as her mother. In Matthew, she is only identified as the daughter of Herodias, and not named. Nowhere in these two accounts is she identified as Salome.

What's more, note that in Mark, she is described as a *girl*. The Greek word used here is *korasion*. It's the same word used in Mark and Matthew to describe Jairus's daughter, the 12-year-old girl that Jesus raises from the dead. The word used for the dancing that she does is *orcheomai*, which is the same word Jesus uses to describe children dancing and singing in the street. The dancing daughter is not a woman; she's a girl, probably similar in age to Jairus's daughter, and probably

¹ Mark 6:22-25, NRSVUE.

² Matthew 14:6-8, NRSVUE.

no more than a teenager. The dancing that she performs is not the dance of the seven veils, but instead was something children would do in play.³

How is it that we have come to believe her name is Salome? One answer is in the writings of a first-century historian named Flavius Josephus. He was Jewish, but he defected to the Roman side and fought for the empire in the first Jewish-Roman war that destroyed the temple in the year 70. He wrote first-hand historical accounts of the events of his time, and he also recorded the family lineages of the Herodian rulers. He lists the daughter of Herodias as Salome.

Another reason we know her as Salome is through the arts. And this is why we believe she must have been a full-grown woman, dancing in a provocative way. Throughout the centuries, artists have imagined the dance and character of Salome, and it is likely that our understanding of who she was came through the works of painters like Titian, Caravaggio, and Henri Regnault. The Regnault Salome looks particularly provocative, with her off-the-shoulder blouse and self-satisfied stare directly at the viewer. I'm not exaggerating when I say that it was hard to find paintings of Salome that I felt I could display in church; most of them are depicted topless.

This is not the first time that history and the arts have twisted the reputation of a perfectly innocent biblical woman into an enduring image of a lascivious seductress. It is not the first time that a girl, or a very young woman was over-sexualized in popular culture. It is not the first time that a woman has been sexually objectified by that culture. And, sadly, it won't be the last. So it is vital that we dig into these myths and tell the truth. The daughter of Herodias was a girl, not a temptress.

And even if her name was Salome, she is not the Salome that Mark mentions in his account of the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. That Salome was a faithful disciple of Jesus, and very likely the leader of a Christian community in the years that followed Jesus's death and resurrection. Who was this Salome, this disciple of Jesus? There is scant evidence of her, but by pulling together those scant threads of detail about her, we can weave together her story.

We know from ancient inscriptions and ossuaries—the stone boxes that hold skeletal remains in tombs and catacombs—that “the name Salome was very common in the first century (second only to Mary), and so she is often confused with”⁴ other Salomes in history, including Herodias's daughter. This may be why Mark and Matthew change or omit the name of the daughter, so the reader will not be confused. Because there were so many women with the same name in the first century, women were often associated with their husbands or sons, as with “Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses,” one of the Marys that accompany Salome to the tomb. But Salome is not given a descriptor, perhaps because she is a widow or woman of independent means, a rare but not unheard-of circumstance. It may also be that Mark's community is familiar with who she is, and further description is unnecessary. They are expected to recognize this Salome.

³ Margaret Mowczko, “Salome: Was the ‘Dancing’ Daughter of Herodias a Child?” *Marg Mowczko*, Margaret Mowczko, 18 Dec. 2012, <https://margmowczko.com/salome-was-the-dancing-daughter-of-herodias-a-child/>. Accessed 30 June 2022.

⁴ Helen Bond and Joan Taylor, *Women Remembered: Jesus' Female Disciples* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2022), 23.

Though Salome is only briefly mentioned in Mark and none of the other gospels, she is mentioned “in a range of early Christian literature, often alongside Mary Magdalene as the foremost female disciple.”⁵ One of those early Christian writings is Logion 61 from the Gospel of Thomas that Joy read for us this morning. The Gospel of Thomas was among a collection of early Christian texts discovered in 1945 the desert at Nag Hamadi, Egypt, hidden in clay jars that had been buried for centuries. It’s not a narrative, like the other gospels. Instead, it’s a collection of sayings and dialogues of Jesus. In many of the verses, called logia, the disciples ask questions, and Jesus answers them. The answers, though, are quite inscrutable for the casual reader. Like a koan in the Zen Buddhist tradition, these sayings and answers must be pondered and contemplated in order for them to make sense to us. My main interest in sharing this passage from Thomas with you is not to contemplate the inscrutable text—that is perhaps the subject of a different sermon series—but to allow this passage from Thomas to tell us something about Salome.

In this logion, we learn several things about Salome. One is that she is the head of a household who has hosted Jesus at her table. “You have taken a place on my couch as a stranger and eaten from my table,” she says. This seems to be her first meeting with Jesus. He comes into her home, says one of his pithy, profound sayings, and Salome asks him who the heck he is and why he has such profound knowledge. “Who are you, mister?” she asks. Jesus tells her that he is from “the Undivided One,” another inscrutable saying, and we then learn that Salome has declared herself one of his disciples.⁶

In a later Christian work called the *Pistis Sophia*, which was discovered in 1773 and probably dates from the early to mid-third century, Salome is seen in several chapters of the work. In one chapter, Mary Magdalene interprets Jesus’s words to her, and in other chapters, Salome herself interprets the words of Jesus, and receives praise from him for her interpretation.

Another piece of evidence of Salome’s importance is found in a work by the Christian theologian Origen in which he refutes the criticism of Christianity by the philosopher Celsus. We don’t have Celsus’s original work, but Origen quotes Celsus liberally in his refutation of Celsus’s treatise. One of scathingly derogatory things that Celsus says about Christianity is that the “Christians won over ‘idiotic, low-class and stupid people, with women and children,’ [and ...] even had whole groups who followed women teachers: ‘there are Marcellians, so called from Marcellina, and Harpocratians from Salome, and others who derive their name from Mariamne, and other again from Martha.’”⁷ Oh, how scandalous, to be part of a church led by a woman!

One tangible piece of evidence for the importance of Salome in the early days of Christianity was discovered in 1982. Found while excavating a site in the south-west of Israel, the cave was originally a burial cave hewn out of the rock, dating from the early Roman period:

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Gospel of Thomas, logion 61 (my paraphrase of an English translation by Stephen Patterson and Marvin Meyer, found here: <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/thomas-scholars.html>)

⁷ *Women Remembered*, 18.

This cave, where the charcoal of ancient candles still adheres to the walls, is covered in graffiti in Greek, Syriac, and Arabic, testifying to a long veneration of “Holy Salome” at the “Shrine of Salome.” In the dark space of this cave there are appeals to Salome for healing, asking her to “have mercy” on people who honored her. People came for centuries to remember Salome and appeal to her [...] perhaps from the third century to at least the seventh.⁸

We have only these tiny vestiges in literature and carved into rock that help us think about who the real Salome was. These vestiges point to memories of early Christians who knew Salome, or who venerated her memory. If we take these glimpses of her seriously, they point to a woman who was close to Jesus, who sat at his feet with other disciples, and who witnessed the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. She was a woman of independent means who helped support Jesus in his ministry, who hosted him in her home, and who led and taught a group of his followers after his death.

For centuries, Christians have told the origin story of Christianity this way: Christianity was founded by Jesus and twelve male disciples. Because of this, women have been silenced, marginalized, and refused entry into church leadership. But when we brush away the cobwebs of history, we find that that origin story is not really accurate. Women like Salome were there from the beginning, learning, teaching, leading, and founding churches. When we tell their stories, we reclaim their memory and allow their stories to live again. May it be so. Amen.

⁸ Ibid., 43