

“And she was serving them” (Mark 1.31): Exegetical Stories about Peter’s Mother-in-Law

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Abstract

One of the tasks of biblical studies is to explain and make biblical texts accessible for different audiences. In doing so, different exegetical approaches tell different stories about the same biblical text. This article analyses exegetical stories about Simon’s mother-in-law (Mk 1:29-31) from the perspectives of historical-critical, socio-historical, feminist, depth-psychological (*tiefenpsychologische*), and cultural-scientific (*kulturwissenschaftliche*) exegesis. Simon’s house as a place, the mother-in-law as a character, and the phrase “and she was serving them” (1:31) are examined within the narrative and in the context of the entire Gospel of Mark. It becomes clear that “serving” and “following” are not opposites, but two sides of the same coin.

The task of biblical scholarship is to bring people closer to the biblical texts. In doing so, biblical scholars often work narratively and tell stories about stories. At the same time, different biblical scholars tell quite different stories. For example, *historical-critical exegesis* tells a story about how texts emerged,² whereas *social-historical exegesis* constructs a narrative about the worlds in which the biblical texts take place. *Narrative exegesis* speaks about the story world in which biblical texts are embedded and *cultural-scientific exegesis* about the lifeworlds and experiences on which the biblical texts are based. Approaches that are oriented to reception, such as *feminist exegesis*, tell how the texts are understood by different readers, and in *biblical-pastoral approaches* and *catechesis* the concern is with inculturation: the same stories are retold for other lived realities.

¹For the German original, see S. Huebenthal, “‘Und sie diente ihnen’ (Mk 1,31). Exegetische Geschichten über die Schwiegemutter des Petrus,” *SNTUA* 49 (2024), 27–46.

²Ernst Käsemann once pointed out that these can sometimes be adventurous or even fantastic stories as follows: “The so-called introductions are for large stretches to be placed in the genre of fairy tale books, despite the extent to which their dry tone and content may give the illusion of factual reporting.” See E. Käsemann, *Jesu letzter Wille nach Johannes 17*, 4th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1980), 12. Cf. idem, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17*, trans. G. Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 1.

1. Stories about Stories

In what follows, I would like to show what this can look like concretely with an example from the Gospel of Mark. At the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, after an opening of fifteen verses, Jesus passes along the shore of the Lake of Gennesaret and meets two pairs of brothers, whom he calls to follow him. Simon and Andrew and James and John leave everything and follow (after) Jesus. The way leads back to Capernaum, and on the Sabbath the following story takes place in their hometown: “As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.”

Thus, the biblical text in the understanding of the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE). What stories can be told by exegetes here? From the perspective of social-historical exegesis, a picture of the fishing house of Simon in Capernaum arises: multiple generations, a fishing family business in economically ascendant Galilee at the beginning of the first century CE. At the Lake of Gennesaret fishing rights were leased out and fishing boats were taxed.³ Fresh fish is an important commodity; as salted fish, it is also exported. In this respect, Capernaum was in competition with Tarichea/Magdala with its famous fish sauce that was even exported to Rome.⁴ In the fishing business, men and women work both inside and outside the house. Mary Magdalene slides briefly into the picture – it is possible that she is a fisher daughter from that very same Magdala. This might better explain her relation to the Jesus group than the seven demons that Jesus is said to have cast out of her. On the other hand, demonic possession is one of the greatest anxieties of the time, cutting across all levels of society and cultural backgrounds. The question of how life conduct and sickness are connected is a concern for people.

In Galilee, people asked about what could grant protection from demons. Amulets? Magical papyri? And how will one get free again from demons? There are exorcists, but not all of them are good. Some are even possessed themselves. Whoever can bind demons reliably and with authority is able to grant security. After the people in the synagogue of Capernaum experience how Jesus cast out a demon (Mark 1.23–27), their view of him changes. Simon, the Galilean fisherman, not only becomes Jesus’ host; he also entrusts him with his mother-in-law. The presence of God in Jesus liberates. This is also perceived by Simon and his mother-in-law. These are the sort of perspectives that we can gain through social-historical exegesis.

With a few brushstrokes a picture emerges of the world in which Simon and his mother-in-law live; a picture that enables the reader to feel their way into the story.

³For fishing at the Lake of Gennesaret, cf. the summary of the social and material-historical background in G. Gäbel, “Einmal Fischer, immer Fischer? (Der wunderbare Fischfang). Lk 5,1–11,” in *Kompendium der frühchristlichen Wundererzählungen*, vol. 1: *Die Wunder Jesu*, ed. R. Zimmermann (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2013), 543–58, here 547–53. On the economic situation in Galilee, see also S. L. Mattila, “Revisiting Jesus’ Capernaum: A Village of Only Subsistence-Level Fishers and Farmers?,” in *The Galilean Economy in the Time of Jesus*, ed. D. A. Fiensy and R. K. Hawkins, ECIL 11 (Atlanta: SBL Press), 75–138; on the general situation in the Roman Empire, see K. Ruffing, *Wirtschaft in der griechisch-römischen Antike*, Geschichte kompakt (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2012).

⁴A. Merz, “Das ‘Meer von Galiläa’ und die Jesusbewegung,” *Welt und Umwelt der Bibel* 24 (2002): 32–39.

This is not the case for all exegetical stories. In comparison, others may appear rather dry. Historical-critical exegesis does not fix its eyes on the fisher house and the lifeworld of the characters in the story but rather looks through the story at its emergence. It recognizes a typical healing story with the traditional elements of *introduction*, *exposition*, *miracle action*, and *demonstration* of the healing.⁵ The historical core of the story is an event in the house of Simon,⁶ which serves to provide local color in the Gospel of Mark. It is regarded as very old, because christological titles of majesty and kerygmatic interests are largely absent from it. The fact that the mother-in-law cares for the group with a meal and serves them at table need not have a special significance but is a typical building block of an ancient miracle story.⁷ Above all, it intends to show that the woman is completely well,⁸ and simply belongs, as a conclusion, to a good healing story from this time.

In *feminist exegesis* things become livelier. Feminist exegesis asks about women's roles and women's work and about what it means to live as a mother-in-law in the house of the son-in-law in the patriarchal society of the first century CE. What loss of honor

⁵Interpreters usually refer here to R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. J. Marsh (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 209–15 (GV = *Die Geschichte der Synoptischen Tradition*. Mit einem Nachwort von Gerd Theißen, 10th ed., FRLANT 29 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995], 223–30); or G. Theißen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) (GV = idem, *Urchristliche Wundergeschichten. Ein Beitrag zur formgeschichtlichen Erforschung der synoptischen Evangelien*, StNT 8 [Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1974]), or G. Theißen and A. Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, trans. J. Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 291–315 (GV = idem, *Der historische Jesus. Ein Lehrbuch* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011], 265–84; idem, *Wer war Jesus? Der erinnerte Jesus in historischer Sicht* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2023], 271–94). On this, cf. also B. Kollmann, *Neutestamentliche Wundergeschichten. Biblisch-theologische Zugänge und Impulse für die Praxis*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2011). Many interpreters take their orientation from R. Pesch, “In dubio pro traditione. Zur Überlieferungskritik von Erzählungen über Jesus,” *SNTUA* 34 (2009): 5–42.

⁶The remains of a house in Capernaum from the first century CE have often been connected with this story. For an appraisal, cf. C. Breytenbach, “Mark and Galilee: Text World and Historical World,” in *Galilee through the Centuries: Confluence of Cultures*, ed. E. M. Meyers, Duke Judaic Studies Series 1 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 75–80, here 80–81.

⁷In lesson plans and accompanying materials for the module “miracle” in the context of high school instruction in Germany (especially in Secondary Level II), insights from historical-critical exegesis are usually used exclusively and connected with religion-pedagogical approaches to miracle pedagogy. In this way, the potential of possible ways of understanding or approaches to New Testament miracle stories are unnecessarily restricted. On this, cf. <https://blogs.rpi-virtuell.de/stamerrusek2/modul-8-wunder/> with the “Conclusion (possibly TA/HE): Jesus' gift of healing is most reliably [sic!] attested. Jesus undoubtedly possessed uncommon powers of healing. Whether they broke through the boundaries of natural laws can neither be proven nor disproven. But this question is not decisive for our faith” (accessed on August 26, 2021).

⁸This, at least, is how it is viewed by the majority of historical-critical and, to some extent, also feminist approaches. Precisely also with respect to Mark 5.43, Monika Fander perceptively states: “At the end of a healing story one expects – if anything at all is said – that the one who is healed, to demonstrate her recovery, eats something, but not that the healer is served” (M. 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. L. Schottroff and M.-T. Wacker, trans. L. E. Dahill, E. R. Kalin, N. Lukens, L. M. Maloney, B. Rumscheidt, M. Rumscheidt, and T. Steiner [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012], 626–44, here: 628; GV = eadem, “Das Evangelium nach Markus. Frauen als wahre Nachfolgerinnen Jesu,” in *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung* [Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998], 499–512, here 501).

threatens the house if she cannot fulfill her obligation to care for the guests.⁹ With the help of social-history, stories emerge about what the mother-in-law of Peter does and what this can mean for women today. Were women disciples of Jesus? What does it actually mean to be a disciple? Here, a role is played both by narrative observations on the Gospel of Mark as a whole and by the hermeneutic of suspicion that biblical texts marginalize women and other *non-persons*. When women turn up at the cross of Jesus and it says of them that they had already followed and served Jesus in Galilee, this is understood as a witness to the discipleship of women. An arc can be made from these women to the mother-in-law of Simon and beyond that to the female followers of Jesus and their roles in the early communities. They were possibly much more important than the word *serve* leads one to suspect. If the overlooked women and their charisms become visible again, this changes the picture of the early church – and this also has consequences for the role of women in the church today.¹⁰

Thus, quite different stories can be told about a biblical text. And in doing so, the situation quickly becomes confusing. And one is also faced with the question of whether all these stories can stand alongside one another as equals. Are they equally “correct,” equally “important,” and equally “true”? And who actually determines the correctness or importance of an exegetical story? Can each of us tell whatever story we want or are there certain rules? In what follows, I will consider these questions with the aid of a story about the mother-in-law of Simon that is developed from the perspective of cultural-scientific exegesis.¹¹ Here, what stands in the foreground is a synchronic analysis of the text, which is supplemented by observations on social history. The interpretation of this text in the context of the Gospel of Mark as a whole takes seriously the fact that this text is a memory text that is identity-concrete, i.e., “related to a specific group and relevant to its identity.”¹² Accordingly, we will not ask – from a historical or institution historical perspective – about what the texts say about the social history of

⁹W. Carter, *Mark*, Wisdom Commentary 42 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2019), 32 ascribes to her in the social role of mother-in-law “some authority, dignity, and agency in an androcentric world,” without thereby falling into a dichotomy: “... the alternative ‘honor rather than servitude’ is a false one since it fails to investigate how honor is achieved, namely through the conventional but submissive female role of domestic service.” On this, cf. also H. Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus: A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2003).

¹⁰Taking its orientation from narrative exegesis, *performance criticism*, in which the biblical text itself is narratively staged, makes a connection between the service of the mother-in-law and the women under the cross (Mark 15,41). It tells stories about how, in the performance of the Gospel, the moment of surprise that the women who stand at the cross had already followed and served Jesus in Galilee can best be staged.

¹¹For an introduction to *kulturwissenschaftliche Exegese* (cultural-scientific exegesis or cultural science-informed exegesis), see S. Huebenthal, *Gedächtnistheorie und Neues Testament. Eine methodisch-hermeneutische Einführung*, UTB 5904 (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2022); ET = eadem, *Memory Theory and the New Testament: Methodological-Hermeneutic Introduction* (Eugene: Cascade, 2026). Cf. also eadem, *Memory Theory in New Testament Studies: Exploring New Perspectives*, Studies in Cultural Contexts of the Bible 10 (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

¹²The German term “identitätskonkret” (identity-concrete or identity-specific) is a term from Jan Assmann’s memory theory that means “related to a specific group and relevant to its identity.” See the glossary of Huebenthal, *Memory Theory and the New Testament*.

early Christianity and early forms of discipleship, community formation, and mission, but rather about what the story itself yields.

2. Cultural-Scientific Exegesis

The small narrative in Mark 1.29–31 offers many thought-provoking impulses. In what follows, we will consider three of them – the house of Simon as a place, the mother-in-law as narrative character, and the expression “and she was serving them.” Above all, this half-verse is especially significant. The question of how best to translate *kai diēkonei autois* (καὶ διηκόνει αὐτοῖς) and what this means for the (hi)story of discipleship is energetically and controversially discussed. In German versions of the Bible, one usually finds a translation such as “and she was serving them.”¹³ The great range of possible interpretations can be seen in two popular German translations. The *Gute Nachricht Bible* translates “and she prepared food for all,”¹⁴ while in the *Bibel in gerechter Sprache* it says “and she became, as the others, a disciple of Jesus.”¹⁵ A rule of thumb in comparing translations is as follows: *When translations diverge sharply from one another, there is a problem with the Greek text.* This problem does not necessarily have to be text-critical in nature. It can be a problem that involves choosing the meaning of a word from a spectrum of meanings or that concerns the appropriate translation in a certain context. In fact, the two translations anticipate the poles of the discussion – housework or discipleship. Since it is difficult to decide which viewpoint is more appropriate on the basis of the half-verse alone, the next step is to look more closely at the literary and historical context of the story.

3. The Story in Its Context

In the larger context of Mark 1.21–39, the reader experiences a Sabbath in the fishing town of Capernaum, the home of the two brother pairs whom Jesus called at the Lake of Gennesaret and who followed him.¹⁶ After Jesus heals a man possessed by a demon in the synagogue and those present are astonished by his authority, the five of them go a house further to Simon and Andrew. The action now changes from the public to the private sphere. There, the mother-in-law of Simon is lying ill with a fever. Made aware

¹³German: “und sie diene ihnen” (revidierte Einheitsübersetzung), which could also be translated with “and she served them.” In English versions, one often finds “and she served them” (RSV/NKJ/NASB/CEB) or “and she began to serve them” (NRSVUE/ESV/LEB/NET). The translation “and she was serving them” (DLNT/McKnight) is less common.

¹⁴German: “und sie bereitete für alle das Essen.” For comparable English translations, cf., e.g., GW/NOG/NLT (“and she prepared a meal for them”); EASY (“Immediately she prepared food for her visitors”); TLB (“and she got up and prepared dinner for them”); MSG (“she was up fixing dinner for them”); CEV (“and she served them a meal”).

¹⁵German: “und sie wurde wie die anderen eine Nachfolgerin Jesu.” From a cultural-scientific point of view, which is interested in contexts, it is quite interesting that there does not appear to be a counterpart to this translation in any of the major English translations.

¹⁶Expressed with *akolouthēō* (ἀκολουθέω); cf. Mark 1.16–20.

of the situation, Jesus goes to her and seizes¹⁷ her by the hand as she rises. The fever departs and the woman begins to care for the group. The Sabbath continues as a day of joy and rest (from work).¹⁸ After the sun has set and the Sabbath is over, the whole city appears before the house of Simon next to the synagogue and brings the sick and possessed in order that they may also be healed.

After so much excitement, a counterbalance is needed. Early in the morning, Jesus withdraws into solitude for prayer. But the place – which, in connection with the time in the wilderness (*eremos* / ἔρημος, Mark 1.12–13) is called a “desolate place” (*eremos topos* / ἔρημος τόπος, Mark 1.35) – does not remain desolate for long. Simon and his companions find him and say what is obvious: “all are looking for you” (1.37). Jesus, however, moves on, for the message from 1.15 – “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news” (NRSVUE) – must also be proclaimed elsewhere. The short summary report in 1.39 indicates that it proceeds in the synagogues in all Galilee just as it had in Capernaum. After 1.21–39, the reader can imagine what things looked like in the other locales: Jesus proclaims his message in public and private places, men and women listen, are touched, and the authority of his message manifests itself in exorcisms, healings, and table fellowship.

Mark largely leaves the conception of these scenes to the reader’s imagination, but they are not given much time, for only seven verses later the group is back in Capernaum and Jesus is teaching in the house of Simon, which is now also considered the house of Jesus (Mark 2.1). The man from Nazareth appears to have been received into the fellowship of this house.¹⁹ This explains the special role of Simon: After all, it is *his* house that he places at the group’s disposal.

3.1 *The House of Simon as Place*

If we follow the narrative thread of the Gospel of Mark, the house as a place – and usually also precisely this house of Simon – plays a role time and again. It is not just a place

¹⁷ Expressed with *krateō* (κρατέω); Mark 1.31

¹⁸ Whether it involves a high fever (and thus a life-threatening sickness that overrides the prohibition of healing on the Sabbath) is not decisive. On the whole, the Sabbath and the questions that are associated with it in the exegetical secondary literature play a secondary role. What is usually discussed is less the question of whether the concern is with a healing that was or was not permitted on the Sabbath but solely that it happened at all. That the mother-in-law with her service (precisely if it involved cooking *and* hosting) could have broken the Sabbath rest (cooking, baking, and kneading belong to the thirty-nine *melachot*; cf. m.Sab. 7.2; whether this also includes waiting on tables would need to be clarified) is not addressed at any point, including in feminist exegesis. In traditional historical-critical interpretations we find the question of whether Jesus violated rabbinic conventions of his time, because he let himself be served by a woman. In the meantime, this line of argument has been rejected as anachronistic, because the rabbinic comparative literature from the Babylonian Talmud is much later and therefore does permit one to draw any conclusions about the first century.

¹⁹ The idea that a firm group developed in the course of the healing and the table fellowship that followed it is already found in W. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, ThHKNT 2 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1989 [1959]), who speaks here of the “house of Jesus.” B. Bosenius, *Der literarische Raum des Markusevangeliums*, WMANT 140 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 275 writes: “After her healing, the mother-in-law of Peter inaugurates a continuous table fellowship. Jesus of Nazareth becomes a ‘long-term or regular guest (Dauergast).’”

of teaching and fellowship at the beginning of the narrative, but a place for action in almost every chapter.²⁰ In other words, the group around Jesus and Simon – who is called Peter from Mark 3.16 onward – returns time and again to his house and thus also back to his mother-in-law. It gradually becomes understandable why the activity of the mother-in-law described in Mark 1.31 is expressed in the imperfect, which in Greek describes a continuous activity.²¹

Wait a minute, a careful reader might say, how can that be? Does it not say at the beginning that the two pairs of brothers left everything in order to follow Jesus?²² And do we not know from Mark 10.29 that everyone who has left house or brother, sister, mother, father, children, or field – thus family and security – will be rewarded?²³ Are Jesus and the twelve not travelling about as charismatic itinerant preachers?

If one reads the Gospel of Mark as a whole with special attention to the house as a place of action, a different story becomes visible. Jesus himself appears to have found reception in the house of Simon, and the mother-in-law of Simon, who, just like her son-in-law, had a life-changing encounter with Jesus and his message, takes over in this house the care for the group. The itinerant group thus has a fixed point of contact, and Jesus develops the group ethos there.²⁴ The teachings about the organization of the community of disciples in the Way-Section in the middle of the Gospel (Mark 8–10) usually takes place in this house. Here – unlike with Jesus himself – family and discipleship, itinerancy and being locally settled, are not played off against one another or placed in a hierarchy, so that itinerant preachers would be better than those who are locally settled, since they have all placed their life entirely in the *service* of the message of Jesus.

²⁰In the literature, there is agreement that a series of episodes in Mark take place in the house in Capernaum, though there is debate over the exact number. The largest number is advocated by Bosenius, *Der literarische Raum des Markusevangelium*, who finds eleven episodes situated in this house (1.29; 2.1, 15; 3.20; 4.10; 6.30; 7.17; 8.26; 9.28, 33; 10.10). Mark 2.15 and 8.26 are not mentioned by most interpreters. The mainstream of interpreters is well represented by R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

²¹C. Breytenbach, "Alternation between Aorist, Historical Present and Imperfect. Aspects of Markan Narrative Style," *ETL* 95 (2019): 529–65, states that the main action in the Gospel of Mark is usually narrated in the aorist and the imperfect describes a (secondary) action that continually takes place in the background. Kinuwaka, *Women and Jesus*, 103, refers explicitly to this distribution of tenses. In most interpretations, however, reference is made only to the imperfect in Mark 1.31c and not to the aorist forms in Mark 1.31ab.

²²Thus, A. Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2007), writes: "The fact that Jesus accompanies Simon and Andrew to their home is in tension with the impression created by their call (vv. 16–18) that they abandoned everyone and everything" (175). Yarbro Collins sees this tension released in vv. 35–39, which does not, however, fit the further episodes in the house in Capernaum.

²³Here one must read carefully: The logical connection takes place through "or" and not through "and." Thus, it is not the case that one must leave "everything." On this, cf. also M. Fander, *Die Stellung der Frau im Markusevangelium: unter besonderer Berücksichtigung kultur- und religionsgeschichtlicher Hintergründe*, MThA 8 (Altenberge: Telos Verlag, 1989).

²⁴In a comparison of Mark 1.29–31 and Acts 28.7–10, Fander, *Die Stellung der Frau im Markusevangelium*, 29 speaks of the house as "point of departure and support (Ausgangs- und 'Stützpunkt') for further healings" (thus also M. Lau, "Fieberfrei auf dem Weg Jesu [Die Heilung der Schwiegermutter des Petrus]. Mk 1.29–31 [Mt 8,14f.]," in *Kompendium der frühchristlichen Wundererzählungen*, vol. 1: *Die Wunder Jesu*, ed. R. Zimmermann [Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2013], 214–20) and views Mark 1.29–31 as the "founding legend (Gemeindegründungslegende)" (31) of the community of Capernaum, which is connected to the mother-in-law of Simon.

Service is the decisive keyword here, since the concern – especially in Mark 9 and 10 – is with questions of *discipleship* as *service*. In the house, Jesus impresses upon the group of disciples that “the Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve” (10.45), after they had once again been contemplating how roles and hierarchies, power and authority should be distributed in the group. And this indeed for a second time, for the same question had already been taken up in the previous chapter (Mark 9.33–37). In Mark 9.36 Jesus even places a child²⁵ in their midst to make clear that *serving* is what matters and not *ruling* or *dominating*. One can almost imagine how Jesus winked to the mother-in-law as he formulated this saying about service, for it appears that *she* had immediately understood this correctly.²⁶ The keyword *diakoneō* (διακονέω) connects the two stories with each other, just like the location, the house of Simon, does.

3.2 Following and Serving

With only five occurrences in the Gospel of Mark, *diakoneō* (διακονέω) is a relatively infrequent and yet nevertheless central term.²⁷ Right at the beginning, when Jesus, after his baptism, spends forty days in the wilderness and is led into temptation by Satan, it says that he was with the (wild) animals and angels *were serving* him (Mark 1.13). Twenty verses later, the healed mother-in-law begins to *serve* Jesus and the two pairs of brothers who now *follow* him.²⁸

In the further course of the narrative, *discipleship* or *following* then stands in the foreground and we do not hear any more of *serving* until chapter 10. This, however, is not yet the end of the story. Right after the death of Jesus, the two keywords *akolouthēō*

²⁵Could this even be a child of Peter? After all, the group is in Capernaum in the house again, and it is known of Peter that he was married. There is mention of a daughter of Peter in Codex Bezae Cantabrigiae (Acts Pet.).

²⁶The intuitive understanding of the mother-in-law and the immediate implementation of her knowledge is emphasized by a number of interpreters who usually also highlight the pragmatics of this text. On the level of the text as a whole, the mother-in-law of Simon thus becomes a “model of exemplary discipleship that invites the reader to identify with her and to engage critically with their own discipleship” (F. Lentzen-Deis, *Das Markus-Evangelium: ein Kommentar für die Praxis* [Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2014], 49). A similar line of argument is found in H.-J. Venetz, *Er geht euch voraus nach Galiläa. Mit dem Markusevangelium auf dem Weg* (Freiburg/Schweiz: Paulusverlag, 2005) and (without an emphasis on the pragmatics) in M. Ebner, *Das Markusevangelium*, Neu übersetzt und kommentiert, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2009). The opposite position is advocated by D. 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. A.-J. Levine and M. Blickenstaff, *Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings 2* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 37–53, with reference to the fact that service of the mother-in-law is not voluntary: “her role as servant is a previously existing condition” (46).

²⁷Forms of *diakoneō* (διακονέω) appear in Mark 1.13, 31; 10.45 (twice) and 15.41; beyond this, the noun *diákonos* occurs in Mark 9.35 and 10.43.

²⁸In the literature, one encounters time and again the argument that *diakoneō* (διακονέω) has a different meaning for the angels and the Son of Man than for the mother-in-law and the other women. The argument is not convincing precisely in a synchronic analysis of the text, and the argument of Krause, “Simon Peter’s Mother-in-Law,” 44: “The verb should be translated consistently in each case. The angels tend to Jesus’ needs in the wilderness. The woman tends to the needs of Jesus and his disciples,” should, with a view to Mark 10:45, be supplemented: “And the Son of Man tends to the needs of the people.”

(ἀκολουθεῖω) and *diakoneō* (διακονέω) appear again together (Mark 15.41)²⁹ and are connected – just like at the beginning – with the message of the kingdom of God (Mark 15.43). In Mark 15.40–41, there is talk of Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James the small and of Joses, Salome, and many other women, who, already in Galilee, followed Jesus and served him.

The idea that “the hour of the women strikes” when the disciples falter or that “the women slip into the place of the disciples” – a typical reflex not only in biblical application but also in sermons and in the work of lay ecclesial ministers³⁰ and exegetes who fall victim to the “what you see is all there is (WYSIATI)” bias – thinks in terms of a competitive relationship that is unbiblical. The women do not “take the place of the disciples” but were always already there and have, in the sense of a division of labor, done their portion of the tasks. These women are not just witnesses of the crucifixion who held out on the Mount of Calvary while the disciples fled on the Mount of Olives.³¹ They also bear witness to the fact that Joseph of Arimathea – of whom it says that he was likewise waiting for the kingdom of God – renders Jesus the service of burying him. Neither under the cross nor in the service of Joseph is the presence of the women free of danger. Flavius Josephus states that closeness to and sympathy for the crucified could lead to one’s own crucifixion and women were not excluded from this fate (*J.W.* 2.305). Thus, engagement for Jesus’ message of the kingdom of God can indeed be dangerous.

At the end, after Jesus’ death, the central themes, as in the beginning, are brought together again: kingdom of God, discipleship, and service – and if one also considers Mark 16.1–7, also the task to pass on the message. “But go and tell his disciples, especially Peter: He is going before you to Galilee: there you will see him, just as he told you” (Mark 16.7) is what the young man in the tomb says to the three women.³²

The commission to proclaim that is issued to the women only makes sense, however, if they also have a chance to proclaim the message. Mary Magdalene, the other

²⁹G. Guttenberger, *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, ZBK.NT 2 (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2017), 55, has recently pointed out this nexus and connected it to the healing story: “In the further course of the narrative, ‘serving’ is highlighted as a behavior that is closely connected with ‘following’ or ‘discipleship’ (10.35–45; 15.41–42). This is not yet known to the readership here. But through the choice of setting and the relationship of the sick person to the first person called the connection between three fundamental motifs of his narrative – healing, following, and serving – is already hinted at here. These motifs are closely connected to one another again at the end of the second part of the story (10.46–52): an arc of suspense thus begins here, whose central pillar stands at the concluding portion of the second part and which reaches to the end of the story.”

³⁰The German term “Pastoralreferenten” refers to “lay ecclesial ministers” or “pastoral associates” in the Roman Catholic Church in Germany who serve the Church but are not ordained. This new profession was introduced after Vatican II.

³¹G. O’Collins, “Peter’s Mother-in-Law (Mark 1:29–31): More to be Said,” *ABR* 68 (2020): 67–75, here 74 states without further explanation: “Peter failed to turn up at Calvary. It would be supremely ironical if his mother-in-law was there.”

³²Is this young man one of the angels who served Jesus after the baptism in the wilderness (cf. Mark 1.12–13)? It is not without reason that many interpreters view tomb and wilderness as parts of a parallel structure of the Gospel of Mark. The mention of Peter also fits here. The first one called is to experience as the first one the message of the resurrection and – especially if Mark is indeed oriented to a *lectio continua* – meet Jesus also again as the first one in everyday Galilean life. In that case, Peter, entirely along the line of 1 Cor 15 and Luke 24, would also be the one to whom the Risen One appears first.

Mary, and Salome are exactly the right people for this. In 1969, Maria-Luisa Rigato, the first woman who was able to study at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, concluded, in the first exegetical article by a woman in the journal *Rivista Biblica*, that the otherwise completely unknown Salome could be none other than the mother-in-law of Peter.³³ Even though tradition-critical and tradition-historical studies see this very differently and hardly anyone has followed Rigato, this is, on the level of the Markan narrative, not only a plausible assumption but also a sensible one.³⁴

3.3 Roles and Discipleship as a Process that Involves a Division of Labor

At the end of the Gospel of Mark, the readers are faced again with the question of what matters in the encounter with Jesus and his message. What matters is *discipleship* or *following* and this expresses itself in *serving*. Peter and his mother-in-law – who turn up at the beginning and end of the Gospel³⁵ – appear as two different models here. He is on the way with Jesus; she places his house at the group's disposal and cares for them. Peter listens to the proclamation of Jesus, proclaims the message himself, and must first learn what his mother-in-law understood immediately when Jesus seized her hand and pulled her back into life:³⁶ discipleship means subordination and service.³⁷ The concern here is not with male or female roles. The mainstream of scholarship is now in agreement that *diakoneō* (διακονέω) has a broad spectrum of meaning, which also includes the connotation “host” or “wait on”; however, based on the use of the imperfect tense in Mark 1.31, it is likely that the meaning here goes beyond table service.³⁸

³³M.-L. Rigato, “Tradizione e redazione in Mc. 1,29–31,” *RivB* 17 (1969), 139–74. Fander, *Die Stellung der Frau im Markusevangelium*, 301 reports the early church position that Salome was the first wife of Joseph, which arises in the course of the discussion concerning the perpetual virginity of Mary and does not contribute to a historical clarification, since it is stimulated by harmonizing tendencies and dogmatic discussions.

³⁴The identification of the mother of James the small and Joseph (15.41, 47; 16.1) with the mother of Jesus – in 6.3 James and Joses and Judas and Simon are listed as brothers of Jesus – proves to be just as difficult. On the level of the Markan narrative it is an equally plausible inference, which is, however, disputed by tradition-critical and tradition-historical studies (cf. L. Oberlinner, *Historische Überlieferung und christologische Aussage. Zur Frage der “Brüder Jesu” in der Synopse*, FzB 19 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1975) and therefore represents a minority position. Cf. C. Focant, *The Gospel according to Mark*, trans. L. R. Keylock (Eugene: Pickwick, 2012); S. Huebenthal, *Das Markusevangelium als kollektives Gedächtnis*, 2nd ed., FRLANT 153 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018); eadem, *Reading Mark's Gospel as a Text from Collective Memory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020).

³⁵Thus also O'Collins, “Peter's Mother-in-Law,” 75, even though he does not explicitly express this last conclusion.

³⁶In the literature, reference is often made to the resurrection vocabulary in Mark 1.31. For example, Venetz, *Er geht euch voraus nach Galiläa*, gives his interpretation the heading “Auferweckungen” (Resurrections). O'Collins, “Peter's Mother-in-Law,” 74 sees “a certain inclusion” in the inverse position of *diakoneō* (διακονέω) and *egeirō* (ἐγείρω) in Mark 1.31 and 15.41/16.6. On the word-field, cf. also J. Marcus, *Mark 1–8. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 199.

³⁷O'Collins, “Peter's Mother-in-Law,” 75, correctly observes that the mother-in-law of Simon is the only person in the Gospel of Mark who does something for Jesus after she is healed by him.

³⁸For this reading, cf. Bosenius, *Der literarische Raum des Markusevangeliums*, 275; W. Eckey, *Das Markusevangelium: Orientierung am Weg Jesu. Ein Kommentar*, 2nd ed. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2008), J. Ernst, *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, RNT (Regensburg: Pustet, 1981), 69; Fander, *Die Stellung der Frau im Markusevangelium*, 371–72; France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 208; Focant, *The Gospel*

In general, the lexeme *diakoneō* (διακονέω) designates activities in which the subject, in the commission of another, brings news or objects from one place to another. This can be messages as well as baskets of bread so that an especially elevated or lowering activity cannot be derived from the term. In other words, in addition to intermediary and messenger activities of various kinds, the humble services in the ancient house, ranging from footwashing to providing food, can also be intended, which, in the absence of slaves, were carried out by free women and men.³⁹ In her dissertation on *diakonia* in the New Testament, Anni Hentschel has recently revisited the history of the term and concluded that *diakoneō* (διακονέω) is a term from elevated language that does not describe everyday activities but rather, precisely in the context of meals, suggests an especially stylish waiting on and thus a festive character of the meal.⁴⁰ Such an activity fits well with Jesus as an esteemed guest, whom the members of the house treat with appropriate respect and whose stay they experience as something special. A similarly reverential treatment also manifests itself in the anointing in Bethany and marks out Jesus as a special guest.

If one considers together the different shades of meaning, it becomes clear that *diakoneō* (διακονέω) does not designate a female-specific form of discipleship – for example, in opposition to *akoloutheō* (ἀκολουθέω) as a male form. Instead, with Simon and his mother-in-law, male and female, itinerant and locally-settled followers of Jesus appear as members of a team characterized by a division of labor, a team that jointly serves the kingdom of God through intermediary and messenger activities. None is played off against the other by the text.

Monika Fander describes the two groups as “itinerant-charismatics” and “settled sympathizers,”⁴¹ but evaluates the textual information historically. More specifically, through an extension of the text into reality, she attempts to make Simon an itinerant-charismatic and his mother-in-law a settled sympathizer. This works, of course, only if the house of Simon – contrary to what we find in the text – becomes the “house of a relative of Simon.”⁴² On the whole, this move reflects the widespread but hermeneutically problematic tendency to extend the textual world into the real world and to evaluate it for scenarios of the text’s origins. Rudolf Pesch keenly states “that every tradition transports ‘historical reality’; this applies even to science fiction novels that can say something about the research situation and author and his or her power of imagination.”⁴³

according to Mark, 72; Lau, “Fieberfrei auf dem Weg Jesu,” 218; Lentzen-Deis, *Das Markus-Evangelium*, 48; L. Schottroff, *Lydias ungeduldige Schwestern: feministische Sozialgeschichte des frühen Christentums* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994) (ET = *Lydia’s Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Social History of Early Christianity*, trans. B. and M. Rumscheidt [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999]).

³⁹ Thus, Schottroff, *Lydias ungeduldige Schwestern*, 299–313 (ET = *Lydia’s Impatient Sisters*, 205–23).

⁴⁰ Cf. A. Hentschel, *Diakonia im Neuen Testament. Studien zur Semantik unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Rolle von Frauen*, WUNT 2/266 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 433–34, 439.

⁴¹ Fander, *Die Stellung der Frau im Markusevangelium*, 313–16 (Wandercharismatiker / itinerant-charismatics) and 316–323 (seßhafte Sympathisanten / settled sympathizers).

⁴² Fander, *Die Stellung der Frau im Markusevangelium*, 318–19.

⁴³ Pesch, “In dubio pro traditione,” 18. On the discussion of the hermeneutical problem, cf. Hueben-thal, *Das Markusevangelium als kollektives Gedächtnis*, 355–72 (ET = *Reading Mark’s Gospel as a Text from Collective Memory*, 398–417).

Through the fact that Jesus speaks the saying about service in Mark 10.45 in the house and the house of Simon plays a special role in the Gospel of Mark, the role of the mother-in-law also obtains clearer contours. She does not care for the group only on a single occasion but rather in her enduring care for the group, she is a part of the fellowship, and evidently a settled one. While Peter and his wife travel around with Jesus,⁴⁴ she remains in the house and cares for the house.⁴⁵ This also means that in the case of the Jesus followers in the Gospel of Mark we are dealing with a group characterized by a division of labor that has a fixed point of contact in the house of Simon. Accordingly, the Markan Jesus also does not say that he has no place where he could lay his tired head.⁴⁶ On the contrary, he even needs to distance himself from the group now and then, when things become too tight for him.⁴⁷

Alongside the Jesus story, the Gospel of Mark also tells a story about the constitution and organization of the fellowship of disciples. Here, a special emphasis is placed on the house of Simon, which plays a central role as a place for gathering, teaching, and fellowship, and amidst all turmoil and challenges becomes a place of refuge time and again. Here, it should not be overlooked that it is only the healthy mother-in-law, who is able to look after the house,⁴⁸ that makes the itinerant life and the return to the house possible for Simon and his wife.

The extent to which this was the case historically and whether and how it fits with the Johannine tradition that Simon comes from Bethsaida, which would make it more likely that the house of Simon in Capernaum was the house of the parents of his wife, is of secondary importance for a cultural-scientific approach.⁴⁹ The mother-in-law of Peter is not only woman and mother-in-law but also widow, which is even clearer if it is actually the house of Peter's parents in which she lives (and is provided for by daughter and son-in-law). Interestingly, this point is rarely discussed in the literature, and studies devoted to the question of the extent to which the Gospel of Mark is transparent for the development of early Christian social forms and offices give no attention at all to the

⁴⁴Cf. 1 Cor 9.5. S. Schreiber, *Begleiter durch das Neue Testament*, 3rd ed. (Osterfildern: Matthias Grünewald, 2014), 248 is to be affirmed in his conclusion that the group around Jesus was a team made up of men / husbands and their women / wives.

⁴⁵The management and organization of the house is not simply "women's work" but rather an equally valid service (unless one wishes to derive a hierarchy from itinerant and settled Jesus followers in which the itinerants have a higher rank. This would contradict the spirit of the gospel that change of mind (μετάνοια) can also take place at home.

⁴⁶As in Matthew 8.20 / Luke 9.50.

⁴⁷Fander, *Die Stellung der Frau im Markusevangelium*, 379 says that Jesus "fled into solitude" from the "misunderstanding" of the crowd and the first-called as their spokespersons. R. Schnackenburg, *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, GSLNT 2.1 (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1966), speculates that Jesus wanted "to be in solitude" already in the house of Simon.

⁴⁸In her contemporizing story "Die Fischfrau" (The Fisherwoman), Ingeborg Kruse develops the idea of the healed mother-in-law who cares both for Jesus as a new member of the household and for all who knock on her door because of him into a small narrative. See I. Kruse, *Mädchen, wach auf! Frauengeschichten aus dem Neuen Testament* (Stuttgart: Kreuz Verlag, 1989).

⁴⁹This question, which is not decisive for a cultural-scientific investigation, is intensely discussed in historical-critical exegesis since it is relevant for the historical question and for the question of the growth of the text. Cf., e.g., A. Fuchs, "Entwicklungsgeschichtliche Studie zu Mk 1,29–31 par Mt 8,14–15 par Lk 4,38–39," *SNTU.A* 6/7 (1981–82): 21–76.

office of widow, which appears to have already developed in New Testament times.⁵⁰

The question of whether Mark recounts the founding legend of the community of Capernaum in Mark 1.29–31 also does not stand in the foreground for a cultural-scientific approach.⁵¹ Discipleship, which can have very different facets and roles, unites men and women, locally-settled followers and itinerants, but in a decisive point: After the encounter with Jesus and his message of the nearness of the kingdom of God what matters in discipleship is the attitude of *diakoneō* (διακονέω). And this has no echo of an office in the Gospel of Mark. Thus, the discussion of *diakoneō* (διακονέω) as a technical term for an early Christian office, which is repeatedly brought in from historical-critical and feminist perspectives, is not relevant, at least with respect to the Gospel of Mark. Fundamentally, it must be said regarding this discussion that it thinks less from the perspective of the New Testament text than from church history as the history of institutions and thus from the outset presses a question upon the text that is foreign to the subject matter.

4. Reading Exegetical Stories

If, after these reflections, we return to our starting point, it becomes clear that the seemingly completely contradictory translations “and she prepared food for all” / “and she became, as the others, a disciple of Jesus” are not so contradictory at all. The contradiction arises when one views the section 1.29–31 without context. In that case, the mother-in-law can indeed become one who serves in a subordinate women’s role and become a leading image for subordinated women’s roles in later communities – in part until today. As soon as the story – and with it the mother-in-law – is viewed in the context of the Gospel of Mark as a whole, the picture changes. In that case, Mark 1.29–31 is the key to a complete understanding of discipleship, which is limited neither to table service nor to women.⁵² On the contrary, in the Gospel of Mark discipleship consists very fundamentally in serving, and, shortly after the calling of Simon, Andrew, James, and John, our story concretizes wherein the appropriate response to the kingdom of God that has come near consists, namely, in the acceptance of service and responsibility. Receiving life as a gift makes it possible for one to put their life into action for others. Discipleship becomes a reciprocal event.⁵³

⁵⁰In the secondary literature there is discussion time and again of the question of the extent to which it is unusual that the mother-in-law lives in the house of Simon and not the mother. See, e.g., Fander, *Die Stellung der Frau im Markusevangelium*, 21; Lau, “Fieberfrei auf dem Weg Jesu,” 216.

⁵¹Thus in Fander, “Das Evangelium nach Markus. Frauen als wahre Nachfolgerinnen Jesu,” 501, based on her published dissertation, i.e., Fander, *Die Stellung der Frau im Markusevangelium*. On the archaeology and significance of the house in Capernaum, cf. Breitenbach, “Mark and Galilee,” 80–81 and Bosenius, *Der literarische Raum des Markusevangeliums*, Part III passim.

⁵²Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus*, 104 rightly maintains that in Mark *diakoneō* (διακονέω) is not reported in connection with men but only with women. The instructions of Jesus in the house, however, indicate that this behavior is equally required of the male followers of Jesus. The same view is found in A. Puttkammer, “Mach’s wie diese Frauen: Dient! Bibelarbeit zur Heilung der Schwiegermutter, Mk 1,29/31 und den dienenden Frauen aus Galiläa, Lk 8,1–3 und Mk 15,41,” in *Frauenbilder*, ed. B. Eltrop and A. Hecht, Frauen-BibelArbeit 1 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1998), 40–45.

⁵³Thus S. Miller, “The Healing of Simon’s Mother-in-Law: Mark 1:29–39,” *Expository Times* 117 (2006): 152–53, here 153: “She illustrates the reciprocity of discipleship by contributing to the well-being of others after receiving health from Jesus.” Cf. also Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus*, 105: “It is symbolic to see her raised

Interestingly, the discussion around the proper understanding of Mark 1.29–31 often goes in the same direction as the conversation in Mark 9 and 10: the concern is with power, hierarchy, and questions about roles.⁵⁴ In its effort to make women visible, feminist exegesis is prone to positive exaggeration just as traditional approaches are to negative exaggeration.⁵⁵ This fits in the context of the interpreters but not necessarily with the text. As differently as the *Gute Nachricht Bibel* (“and she prepared food for all”) and the *Bibel in gerechter Sprache* (“and she became, as the others, a disciple of Jesus”) translate, they are correct not on their own but together.⁵⁶ *Discipleship* or *following* means serving and in the first century *serving* also included the humble tasks of table service.

The topic of feminist exegesis is often women and their roles in the early church and less about human beings and their encounter with Jesus (and its consequences). The focus is placed thereby on institutional questions and not on the individual relationship of which Mark 1.29–31 speaks. In this way, the focus on power, hierarchy, and roles is almost already preprogrammed. Thus, in the words of Monika Fander: “Representatives of feminist theology have advocated, above all with reference to Mark 15.41 par., the thesis that there were female disciples of Jesus who accompanied him from Galilee to Jerusalem. In the meantime, this thesis has been adopted or no longer ruled out by some male exegetes, though most exegetes contest it.”⁵⁷ Whether there were female disciples and itinerant-charismatics and what this means for churches today is a reception-oriented question. Sometimes the modern discourse is only recognizable at second glance: In her study, A. Hentschl, critically considers the terminological history of the lexeme *diakoneō* (διακονέω) and rightly concludes that there is no specific “New Testament” usage.⁵⁸ This also means that the history of early Christian offices cannot simply be derived from the New Testament texts by extending the text into reality. The fact that questions regarding the diaconate as an office also play an important role in Hentschel’s work likewise shows an institution-historical perspective, which, despite its orientation to the linguistic usage in the Jewish and Hellenistic environment of the New Testament and early Christian texts, has a decidedly theological pragmatics.

The stories that scholars tell are often strongly shaped by the questions that arise from the contexts of the interpreters. This is something that they have in common with the stories that are told in the Bible. They too are formed by the questions of their con-

by the life-giving Jesus to her wholeness and to start following him. The reciprocity of the giving of life and the response works vigorously here again. It entails the community of living interactions.”

⁵⁴With her discussion of the “claim to ecclesial competence/authority” of women, the contribution of Barbara Mörtl is a good example of this tendency. See B. Mörtl, “Die Heilung der Schwiegermutter (Mk 1,29–31) – Freude und Ärgernis?,” in *Heilungen und Wunder. Theologische, historische und medizinische Zugänge*, ed. J. Pichler and C. Heil (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007), 130–42.

⁵⁵Krause, “Mother-in-Law,” 37–42 has worked out this thesis and thereby sparked off an intense discussion. Even though Krause’s analysis is not on target in all points, it sketches out a realistic picture of the conflict.

⁵⁶H. Kinukawa, D. Krause, and W. Carter argue in this same direction. See Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus*, 104; Krause, “Simon Peter’s Mother-in-Law,” 50–51; Carter, *Mark*, 32.

⁵⁷Fander, *Die Stellung der Frau im Markusevangelium*, 308.

⁵⁸Cf. Hentschel, *Diakonia im Neuen Testament*.

texts. This double contextual bondedness of text and reader is one of the fundamental axioms of cultural-scientific exegesis and part of the task of responsible biblical scholarship consists in mediating between these two contexts. This is also made clear by the story that is told by *depth-psychological exegesis*.⁵⁹ When Eugen Drewermann surmises from the fever of the mother-in-law a passive attitude of rejection in relation to the discipleship project of her son-in-law,⁶⁰ this says more about his own experiences with family conflicts and psychosomatic sicknesses than about the biblical text. This key fits many situations in pastoral care and thus to the sphere of spiritual counselors, but this does not yet say anything about the mother-in-law of Simon. In other words, depth-psychological exegesis makes it possible for one to connect experiences from one's own context, from one's own life reality, with the biblical texts and thus to open points of access to the lifeworld and experience-world of the early followers of Jesus beyond dogmatic lines of questioning. The line that separates the appropriation of the experiences described in the text from the colonialization of the texts by one's own contexts and for one's own lines of questioning is, however, thin, and the danger of crossing it is great.

While the liberating experience of the healing story may be more strongly emphasized in the pastoral context of a bible study group and thus made into a story that generates courage and empowers the group, scholarly interpretation must stress that this is not the only aspect and that this by no means exhausts the possibilities for understanding the story. As partisan and contextual readers, Bible study groups are not only allowed to read the text in this way, but it is the right and the strength of an *emic* reading,⁶¹ i.e., from the perspective of a group member, to be partisan.

Correspondingly, biblical-pastoral approaches and catechesis as well as theological and identity-political readings ask about what a text can mean for their *own* group or interpretive community. This is not to be confused with an *etic* reading, i.e., an outside perspective that places the texts in their historical contexts and discloses potential understandings without making them one's own or specifying the "correct" interpretation. It always works only for a specific context and is not possible from the outside perspective, which the etic approach represents.

Here, New Testament exegesis, which oscillates between both poles, working *etically* as an scholarly discipline and *emically* as theology, can become conflicted. In the scholarly-etic reading, the biblical text determines the appropriateness of an interpretation, whereas in emic readings the respective discourse determines it.⁶² We must live with this Janus-faced character, and it does not even have to be something bad. On the contrary, the double perspective can make New Testament scholars especially helpful

⁵⁹The German designation for this approach is *tiefenpsychologische Exegese*.

⁶⁰E. Drewermann, *Das Markusevangelium*, 1. Teil. Mark 1,1–9,13 (Southern: Walter Verlag, 1993), 202–9.

⁶¹The terminological pair etic / emic comes from social-scientific scholarship and designates different perspectives or angles of vision upon the object of observation. The emic perspective designates the standpoint of an observer, culture-creator, or text structure from the internal perspective of the respective group, while the etic perspective is that of an outsider.

⁶²For this reason, discourse analysis is also important precisely for biblical scholarship, for it is not simply the adjudicator when there are competing interpretations, even if its primary task as a scholarly discipline is the outside perspective, the etic view.

conversation partners when the concern is to discover polyphony and learn to see from different perspectives with reference to the texts of the New Testament, the founding document of Christianity. Here, exegetical stories as narratives about the Bible and its interpretation play a decisive role.

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