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Resurrection as Gossip: Representations of Women in Resurrection Stories of the Gospels

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Zusammenfassung:

Dieser Beitrag ist angeregt worden durch die Reaktionen auf mein jüngst veröffentlichtes Buch zu Klatschgeschichten und Geschlecht in den Pastoralbriefen. Hier wird "Klatschgeschichte" als Werkzeug für die Analyse der Repräsentation von Frauen in den Auferstehungserzählungen der Evangelien benutzt. Mittels der feministischen Methode der Dekonstruktion von Geschlechterstereotypien decke ich das kreative und dekonstruierende Potential von "Klatschgeschichten" auf, um die Erzählungen über Frauen und Erlösung auf neue Weise zu lesen: Nicht nur im Lukasevangelium werden Frauen als Verbreiterinnen von Klatschgeschichten konstruiert, um zu erklären, warum andere Jünger ihnen nicht geglaubt haben (Lukas 24,11). Zu Beginn gebe ich eine Studie wieder, in der Klatschgeschichten als bedeutsam für religiöses Erzählen gesehen werden, sodann untersuche ich Repräsentationen von Frauen in frühchristlichen Texten, die sich mit Erlösung beschäftigen, und stelle abschließend Überlegungen an zu der Beziehung zwischen Klatschgeschichten und Evangelium sowie der Etymologie der beiden Begriffe und ihrer Bedeutungsbreite.

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Introduction

"[S]ociology quickly bores me when I'm expecting the divine," Luce Irigaray complains in her critique of New Testament feminists who try to reconstruct the role of women in early Christianity by use of models from social sciences.[1] I find her point intriguing, although I neither share her boredom nor do I find a sharp distinction between sociology and "the

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divine." In contrast, I think interpreters like Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza shows that how we think about social relations among human beings, in past and present, is closely connected to what Irigaray calls the divine.[2] By use of gossip as an analytical tool to interpret resurrection stories, I will pay attention to this connection.

The title of this article places one of the most loaded theological terms, "resurrection," in immediate proximity to "gossip." By only the small word "as" to keep them apart, the divine core of Christianity is connected to one of the terms that are dearest to sociological studies.[3] Following the feminist technique of deconstructing gendered stereotypes,[4] I look at the creative and destabilizing potential of gossip, to suggest some new insights about early Christian women.[5] Representations of women in the resurrection stories are especially interesting and relevant for this study, since some gospel traditions construct women as gossipers in order to explain why the other disciples did not believe them (see in particular Luke 24:11).

When working on my recent book on gossip and gender in the Pastoral Epistles I was encouraged to also look for traces of gossip in other New Testament texts.[6] In my reading of the resurrection, I will try to use gossip both "to think with"[7] and "to play with;" one of gossip's unique talents is that it builds down the boarder between these two activities.[8] This article will first present a study in which gossip is seen as significant in religious storytelling, then look at representations of women in early Christian texts dealing with resurrection, and towards the end shift to a more open ended reflection upon the relation between gossip and gospel, playing with etymology and the two terms' variety of meanings.

1. Gossip as religious storytelling

In recent research on gossip, various definitions, taxonomies, and methods have been suggested.[9] The predominant attitude in history, including antiquity, has been to consider being gossipy as primarily a vice and typical for second class human beings.[10] Also publications from modern religious communities, both Christian and Jewish, focus on how dangerous and destructive gossip can be for a person's character and for religious standards.[11] In recent scholarly works, however, gossip is seen as something more, or rather

something different, than careless or fallacious talk about others. Indeed, gossip sometimes even seems to be the opposite: a genuine expression of care.[12]

Armin Geertz argues that gossip connects ideal discourses and practices with everyday discourses and practices. It functions as a publicly available social consciousness, judging the latest news from everyday behavior in the light of cultural, religious, and ethical norms. Gossip is talk about others that serves the process of self-performance. The stories which gossipers tell about others are fundamentally also stories about themselves. This is why Geertz considers gossip to be a mode of narrative ethics, in his article entitled "Gossip as Religious Narrative."[13]

Gossip is what makes the world go around, representing the continuation of society. For Geertz gossip is fundamental to human existence and relations, and he sees it as a narrative "Ur-Gattung."[14] But gossip uses dialog techniques that ordinary stories lack: it is always unfinished and constantly interrupted, and it is questioned and evaluated by the listener. The audience is included as participants and co-creators in the story. A good story can be taken away by the listeners and/or tellers and be repeated in other conversations, other contexts and even other cultures.[15]

With this understanding of gossip as my point of departure, I wonder whether what the women told about the empty tomb was such a good story. I am not the first within New Testament studies to look at the social function of gossip and "gossip networks," but few, if any, have focused on how gossip is gendered.[16]

2. Representation of women in resurrection stories

The four canonical gospels report in different ways what happened after Jesus was crucified, had died, and was buried. Women play central roles in all these stories.[17] Two non-canonical texts, the Gospel of Peter and the Epistle of the Apostles, give additional variations of the same scenes, both including women in their presentations. However, when Luke in Acts and Paul in Corinthians summarize the basic elements in Christian faith, all women have disappeared from the resurrection story. What is most striking when one compares these stories is that representations of women are articulated so differently from text to text. I will enter this landscape by first reflecting on the variety of names given to

these women, second, see how women are represented as witnesses to the resurrection, third, focus on how the empty tomb and women's presence were negotiable elements when the resurrection was remembered, and fourth, examine relevant intertexts to the resurrection story.

2.1. Named women

To be identified with a name and ascribed a central role in the most important text of a religious community is a privilege not given to many women. To be given a name is to be given the right to exist, to take up space on this planet, to be established as a person and to be acknowledged as a member of humankind. Women, if they ever reach the level of coming to the surface in ancient texts, are most often anonymous; they are "useful to think with," or function as literary devices in order to describe non-ideal behavior. In the resurrection stories of the gospels the problem is not that women are unnamed, it is rather the opposite: there are too many identified women, and the various sources seem to disagree about their names! They are identified by name, although the lists vary a lot. Ancient ideas about gossip, on the other hand, include that the sources of the information most often are anonymous.[18] Are there still reasons to view these women as gossipers?

Table 1: Named women in the resurrection stories

	Mark 16:1	Matt 28:1	Luke 24:10	John 20:1	Gos. Pet. 12:50	Ep. Ap., Ethiopic 9	Ep. Ap., Coptic 9
Mary Magdalene	x	x	x	x	x	x (last)	x (last)
Mary, mother of James	x		x				
Salome	x						
The other Mary		x					
Joanna			x				

Others with them			x				
Women friends of Mary Magdalene					x		
Sarah						x	
Martha						x	
The daughter of Martha							x
Mary							x

All sources in the table mention Mary Magdalene.[19] She is listed first in all the texts except the two versions of the Epistle of the Apostles, where she is placed last among the women.[20] Some other Mary'-s are also frequently mentioned, perhaps not surprising considering that a fourth of all Jewish women in Palestine at the time were named Mary.[21] But what about Salome, Joanna, Sarah, Martha, and Martha's daughter?

We have little information about each of these women, related to what social background or position they had, whether they were married, divorced, widows, single, or belonged to an ascetic community. Some of them are also depicted as following Jesus to the cross and to his grave, while others are not. The most prominent Mary among them are said to be from Magdala, and another Mary was the mother of James (according to Mark and Luke); the two versions of the Epistle of the Apostles mention Martha and Martha's daughter, respectively, and the Gospel of Peter identifies some women as friends of Mary Magdalene. Except for this information, very little is said about them. Although they are not nameless, they are nevertheless rather anonymous in the stories. Who are all these women and why did the various texts not synchronize their lists?

Many answers can be given to these questions. Richard Bauckham is concerned with the oral tradition behind the various written texts, an interest he shares with several scholars with feminist perspectives, in particular Joanna Dewey.[22] Bauckham argues that it most probably was one large group of women from which the various authors chose the women they found most prominent. Each author had his own reasons for naming the specific women he did, as Bauckham argues.[23] His point is that these differences would be expected and unproblematic in performance of oral tradition.[24] I guess this argument could explain the general challenge with the Synoptics and the fact that several different sources describe the same event differently, but I wonder if not gender play a more central role in the resurrection story.

Samuel Byrskog argues that as female eyewitnesses these women were already suspect, and by naming them they might become less suspect as seen from the outside.[25] Bauckham, on the other hand, questions whether this naming process added much to their credibility, and suggests rather that these women were named because they were "extraordinarily important."[26] To both these arguments, dealing with women being suspect and their importance in the tradition, I still miss a good explanation to why the lists of women's names are not the same. Would not identical and standardized name lists improve these women's credibility vis-à-vis outsiders, and if they were so "extraordinarily important" to remember how could their names so easily be forgotten or changed? No other gospel story has so huge variety in the names of the involved characters, and it is striking that such a name confusion appears when women are central characters. By providing so many different lists, the text material as a whole leaves the impression that the identity of these women are not so important; although various names are mentioned they almost appear anonymous, with Mary Magdalene as an exception.

2.2. Women's performance of the resurrection story
All resurrection stories agree that women find the empty tomb. In most gospels they are asked to go and tell the other disciples what they have seen and heard. How they respond to this command, however, varies a lot, although there seems to be some rather specific variations to choose between.[27] In what way did ancient ideas about gossip influence the different representations of women in the resurrection stories?

Luke

In Luke's gospel the disciples do not believe the women and think it is all empty talk (*leros*) (Luke 24:11).[28] As I have argued elsewhere, there are good reasons for identifying this term as belonging to the semantic field of gossip.[29] Neither in the Longer Ending of Mark (16:11) nor in the Epistle of the Apostles are the women believed when they tell the disciples. In the Epistle this scene is built out extensively: both in the Ethiopic and the Coptic version, the Lord first sends one woman to tell the disciples, Mary and Martha, respectively (10). The disciples' response is rather harsh, here in Elliott's English translation from Ethiopian: "What have we to do with you, O woman? He that is dead and buried, can he then live?"[30] They did not believe her, and she went back to the Lord and told him. He sends yet another woman, now Sarah and Mary in the two versions, but they do not believe the second woman either. Sarah who is said to report "the same news" is also accused of lying in the Ethiopian version. After this the Lord decides to go himself, but even then the disciples at first doubt, taking him to be a ghost.

The failure of the women to convincingly report to the disciples what they were told by an angel or by the Lord himself seems to be a widespread element of the resurrection story. To accuse them of talking nonsense, gossiping, or lying is shared by Luke and the Ethiopian version of the Epistle of the Apostles. To use Armin Geertz' vocabulary: These women tried to be religious storytellers, but were taken to be suspicious gossipers.

Mark

In the original ending of Mark's gospel (16:1-8), women came to the tomb when the Sabbath was over. They did not find Jesus, however, but a young man who asked them to tell Peter and the disciples that they should go ahead to Galilee and meet Jesus there. The women went out and fled from the tomb, Mark recounts, "for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." The Gospel of Peter, in which the women only came to the empty tomb long after several other people, has a similar comment about them: "Then the women were frightened and fled" (57).[31] In the Gospel of Peter they are not asked to tell the disciples, and in both of these two gospels these words are the last we hear about the women.

Perhaps the irony embedded in the ending of Mark builds on gender stereotypes: these women did indeed tell someone; otherwise it would never have been written down and

known to later readers. It is exactly their gender that holds the logic together; women could not hold their tongue, even though they were fleeing away and were afraid. It would not have served the same rhetorical purpose if male disciples had been depicted as fleeing away in fear; it would not have been so obvious that they told someone anyway. Women, on the other hand, could not hold a secret, and especially not the Messianic secret.[32]

Matthew

In the Gospel of Matthew the women are told by the angel to go and tell the disciples (2:7), but on their way Jesus suddenly appears, saying that they should not be afraid, but tell his brothers to leave for Galilee (28:10). That they actually told the disciples is never reported, but next time we hear of the eleven they are on their way to Galilee (28:16). It is only the women who see the empty tomb and listen to the angel, and they meet the risen Lord first, but they do not accompany the disciples to Galilee. Simultaneously, as the women are on their way to tell the disciples, another false rumor is created: unique for Matthew among the canonical gospels is the story about how the guards tell the priest and elders about what had happened, and they make up a false story where the disciples are accused of stealing Jesus' body (28:11-15).[33] Instead of reporting what the women said and taking the risk of the male disciples' (or male audience's) negative response or blaming women for talking nonsense or gossip, the Jews take over the role as rumormongers.

John

In the Gospel of John the whole empty tomb scene and the appearance concentrate on Mary Magdalene and no other women (20:1-18). She finds the tomb but the stone is removed, and she informs the disciples of this. Two of them run to the grave and find it empty. They return home, but Mary remains outside the tomb, weeping. She sees two angels and talks to them, and turns around to see someone standing there whom she confuses with the gardener. She then recognizes Jesus and he sends her away to tell his brothers. How they respond to this second message of hers is not reported, but they lock the doors of the house where they meet in fear of the Jews (20:19).[34]

In contrast to the Synoptics, John displaces the women from their role of witness to the empty tomb in favor of Peter, and, especially, the Beloved Disciple.[35] What is most striking with this story is that Mary Magdalene is alone at the grave, in contrast to all other

resurrection stories.[36] To blame a woman on her own for being gossipy would be absurd, since a gossiper she has no one to talk to.

Some scholars tend to recognize the portrait of Mary alone without the other women as a typical narrative element of John's gospel. "The effect of the brief narrative owes much to the one-to-one intimacy of the encounter," Bauckham observes.[37] The intimacy and "individualism" of John's gospel better serves the purposes of identification for the audience, as the argument goes. It is not given, however, that the best model of identification is a one-to-one encounter between a woman and a man. For me, Mary Magdalene in a group of female friends or gossipers, who eagerly told others what they had seen, is a more appealing object for identification than a Mary Magdalene in an intimate heteronormative encounter with the Lord.

2.3. The negotiable memory of the women at the empty tomb
Although all the sources presented above seem to agree about women's role at the empty tomb, it is striking that when Luke in Acts or Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 make use of so-called *kerygma* summaries, nothing about the empty tomb or the women's role related to the resurrection is mentioned. Paul summarizes that Christ died and was buried, was raised on the third day, then appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve, and then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers (1 Corinthians 15:4-6).[38] Were the women not worth mentioning? Were their words considered only loose talk? Do we here find an example of what Toril Moi calls her "basic conviction that much of what patriarchal minds like to trivialize as *gossip*, and as women's gossip at that, is in fact socially significant"?[39]

The central element in Paul and Acts is the rising of Christ, and the empty tomb event and thereby the women are not needed to prove his resurrection. What purpose did the empty tomb scene play in each gospel text if the proclamation of the resurrection did not necessitate an empty tomb?[40]

The Gospel of Peter is an interesting case here. However, the dating of this text is a scholarly challenge; both John Dominic Crossan and Robert Stoops argue that it probably is older than the canonical gospels.[41] Still, most interpreters situate this text to the second century. If the Gospel of Peter is later than Corinthians, Acts, and the other gospels, why is the story of women at the tomb found important enough to be retained in the narrative,

when it seems to serve no purpose? The women are neither the first witness nor the medium of communication to the other disciples.[42]

Most scholars would agree that Paul's version in 1 Corinthians 15 is more original than the gospels' versions and that he simply had never heard about the women at the empty tomb. Other explanations, more inspired by a hermeneutics of suspicion, argue that he knew it but chose to leave it out of the story, either as a response to unfavourable reactions from outsiders or because he in the Corinthian context did not want to provide support for women prophets who he thought had too much influence.[43] Yet others provide some particular reasons for why Paul did not know this tradition, using theories of storytelling and gender: Dennis R. MacDonald, in his book *The Legend and the Apostle*, is concerned with the oral tradition of women that lived as a parallel tradition alongside what became the authoritative and canonical writings of Paul. He is especially interested in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, and suggests that there existed an oral ascetic tradition among the early Christians where women "storytellers" had a central function.[44] In these communities women had important roles, although not necessarily reaching to the surface in written texts.[45]

From a similar perspective Carolyn Osiek suggests that Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 simply did not know the empty tomb tradition because this story was preserved in women's groups, and only later made its way into the male "mainstream" canonical tradition. Using ethnographical data, she argues that "women have their own oral traditions and storytelling practices, passed on from generation to generation, that portray life and events from the women's point of view."[46] The gospel stories of the empty tomb originate from the "private" world of women, in contrast to the "public" version that Paul knew and reported in 1 Corinthians 15. She suggests that Paul's silence about women is not because the story is secondary but "because it has not yet made its way from the 'private' female *kerygma* tradition to the 'public' male *kerygma* traditions."[47]

There is something very appealing about this explanation, and female storytelling is described with several elements that construct it similar to gossip. However, the various representations of women in the gospels do not put them in an exclusively positive light. Would private, female storytellers emphasize that women flee away in fear, saying nothing to anyone, or dwell upon how their words were dismissed as merely being empty talk,

sending off the male disciples so that the facts could be confirmed? And finally, it is difficult to operate with "point of view" in singular when the term "women" is in plural, since all women did not have the same point of view.[48]

When it comes to Luke in Acts (e.g. 2:29-31; 13:34-37) it cannot be argued that he did not know about these women's role related to the resurrection, since he presents them in his gospel. He must have had other reasons for not mentioning them. Perhaps the best explanation is that the *kerygma* summaries must have been a widespread but flexible genre.[49] In his case, the comment in Luke 24:11 – where he reports that the disciples did not believe the women, saying it was merely loose talk – was perhaps also his own reason for summarizing the resurrection event in Acts with no women participating.

One last source to discuss when dealing with how women could or could not be included in resurrection stories is the second century critic of Christianity, Celsus. The polemical book he wrote, *The True Doctrine,* is lost, and what is known about it is put together from Origen's citations when he argues against him. One thing Celsus is critical of when it comes to the credibility of Christianity concerns women followers and their role as witnesses to the resurrection. He argues: "But we must examine this question whether anyone who really died ever rose again with the same body… But who saw this? A hysterical woman, as you say, and perhaps some other one of those who were deluded by the same sorcery, who (…) wanted to impress others by telling this fantastic tale" (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2:55).[50] Although this woman is not given a name, the text most probably refers to Mary Magdalene traditions. In the version of Christianity that Celsus knew, a woman was present at the resurrection scene. To him, however, this showed how ridiculous and untrustworthy this faith was. His rhetorical weapon is taken from the gospel traditions and not from the *kerygma* summaries in Acts or 1 Corinthians 15.

Celsus' words have been taken as one of the arguments for explaining why some early Christians left women out of their resurrection stories: if women were the most prominent witnesses, then the resurrection had some issues concerning credibility. But, this explanation can be challenged by one important detail in Celsus' accusation: he does not only mention a hysterical woman, but also "perhaps some other one." The grammatical gender of this expression is masculine, indicating that a hysterical woman was together with *a male character* who was deluded by the same sorcery.[51] Who is this suppose to be?

Perhaps this actually reduces the relevance of this text as an argument for how problematic it was with *female* witnesses to the resurrection, since alongside this woman Celsus mentions a man who is as unreliable as her. She is hysterical, but he is also influenced by the same sorcery and wants to impress others. The resurrection scene Celsus construct couples Mary Magdalene with a male character as a witness and a storyteller. By mentioning these two unreliable persons, Celsus uses far more than stereotypes against women as his rhetorical device. If the witnesses to the resurrection were seen as loose talkers and gossipers, he shows that also men could be seen as gossipers.[52]

2.4 Other representations of women as "revelation mediators"
In order to explain both why some of these resurrection stories include the disciples' hesitance towards women's words, and also the fact that the *kerygma* summaries leave out women, several hypotheses have been introduced. As I see it, before suggestions can be given to what texts it is relevant to compare with, it is necessary to discuss what kind of event the gospels construct.

Is the women's function primarily to be witnesses to the empty tomb? The name lists may support this suggestion. Then a relevant context would be to look at women's role related to legal matters and their status as witnesses, and many scholars have used material from Jewish law texts to enlighten these stories. When women relate the story of the resurrection, however, the scene is not situated in a law court. They are not merely witnesses to the event; they are also reporting this information to others. They are storytellers. These women are conveying unbelievable news to someone who finds it hard to take them seriously.

Does the disciples' response reflect that women's words in general were unbelievable, according to gender standards at the time, or was it the message they presented that was unbelievable?

My answer to the latter pair of questions is that both seem to apply. Relevant intertexts may therefore be taken from ancient sources that deal both with gender and with some sort of "supernatural" revelation. Several texts bear witness to the prejudice among educated men that women were gullible in matters dealing with religious issues, in particular that they were prone to superstitious fantasy and excessive religious practices.[53] An anecdote from

Plutarch, for instance, deals with a similar pattern as the encounter between women and disciples in some of the gospels: Cicero's nurse foretold that Cicero would be a great blessing to all the Romans, as he eventually did, but Plutarch reports that "these presages were thought to be mere dreams and idle fantasies" (*fluaron*).[54] One of the terms used here to devaluate the nurse's prophecy also appears in the Pastoral Epistles to caricature the young widows' speech (1 Timothy 5:13), and has some common etymological roots with the term used to describe the women's tidings on the resurrection as "loose talk" in Luke 24:11, as I have discussed at length in my book on gossip in the Pastoral Epistles.

In Acts 12:13-16, the maid Rhoda plays a central role when the disciples and others are together in the house of Mary to pray and work out what to do now that Peter is in prison. As a maid, Rhoda belongs to the bottom of society, but her name is mentioned, a rare phenomenon in ancient literature where female slaves are most often anonymous.[55] She witnesses and reports the supernatural and unbelievable news that Peter, who they all knew was in prison, is suddenly at the door. They do not believe her, and no one bothers to check. They only accuse her of being out of her mind. When Peter again knocks at the door, the end of this scene is that he enters, and then tells them himself all of what has happened.

Bauckham has found some similar examples from the Jewish tradition in Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*: on two occasions Pseudo-Philo portrays biblical women receiving and communicating messages from God that is not believed by those for whom it was intended. First, Miriam is visited by an angel in a dream about her unborn brother who will be cast into the water, but who will later save God's people and exercise leadership. Pseudo-Philo writes that "[w]hen Miriam reported her dream her parents did not believe her."[56] The parallels with the canonical gospels are striking: Matthew and Mark report that the women met angels, and in Luke they are not believed.[57] When the revelation is given by a divine character to a woman there seems to be a problem of belief.

The second instance in Pseudo-Philo is taken from the re-telling of the biblical story of the birth of Samson.[58] His parents were yet childless and they quarrel over whose fault it was. When the mother prays that this will be revealed to her, God sends an angel, who discloses that it is she who is sterile, but that God will give her a son, who will deliver Israel from the enemy. She reports this to her husband, but he does not believe her. He becomes confused and sad and prays to God: "Am I not worthy to hear the signs and wonders that God has

done among us or to see the face of his messenger?" (*Bib.Ant.* 42:4-5). This story from Pseudo-Philo highlights a biblical text in which divine revelation comes to a woman, and to the man only through her.[59] In this story Samson's father complains because he finds God's preference for his wife unfair.

On the basis of these stories Bauckham argues that it is not only women's unreliability as witnesses or susceptibility to delusion in religious matters that are at stake, but something dearer to patriarchal religious assumptions: "the priority of men in God's dealings with the world."[60] Could a way to deal with women's privileged position in the resurrection be to associate what they said with gossip, as a way to reduce their importance?

So far, this study has shown that representations of women in the resurrection stories of the gospels seem to be built around some core elements: Mary Magdalene is the key figure arriving first at the tomb. She finds it empty and goes away confused.[61] It was not easy for others to believe her when she told what had happened. These elements could generate a variety of different stories: adding some other women to the scene, or leaving women out when the resurrection story was told. Religious storytelling dealing with the resurrection seems to be unfinished and interrupted, changed and negotiated, from the very start. It is really fascinating that the resurrection story, which came to be one of the most important narratives in the Christian tradition, was so flexible and came in so many variations. Women's roles were ambiguous: they were named, but not according to synchronized lists; their presence could be negotiated and women could be left out of the story. Their words, which actually were the first report ever given of the resurrection, could be dismissed as lies, loose talk, or gossip.[62]

3. Resurrection as gossip

In this last part of this article I shift to a kind of postmodern play with meanings and etymologies, building on the gospel's representation of women at the resurrection and inspired by other scholars of gossip. The term "gossip" can be used in many different ways in the English language. It can mean a particular type of talk, spreading around like rumors or chitchat. The verb "to gossip" is used to indicate that this activity is taking place, while the noun "gossip" or "gossiper" stands for a person who engages in such talk. Accordingly,

the flexible usage of the term opens up for a variety of possible interpretations of the formulation "Resurrection as gossip."

3.1 Resurrection as loose talk, myth, and rumor

The privileged position of the resurrection in the Christian tradition has been challenged over the last 2000 years. Did the resurrection of Christ ever take place, or did some early Christians construct this story in order to cope with the fact that Jesus had left them? Was it a myth or a historical fact?[63].

Also in some of the gospels there are elements that construct the news about the resurrection as unreliable lies, loose talk, or gossip, and as noted in this article, gender plays a central role here (Luke, Ep.Ap. and the Longer Ending of Mark). When women report of the empty tomb, the male disciples do not believe them. For a brief moment the resurrection event only exists as women's loose talk in the gospel narratives, before it is confirmed by more reliable male disciples. If gossip is used as the interpretive key, Christianity started with some women whose words about the Lord's resurrection were taken to be gossip. Perhaps female witnesses and news bearers were questioned by male disciples in some of the gospels and left out of the *kerygmas* of Luke and Paul since their presence served to associate resurrection with gossip?

Bauckham suggests that the real challenge with women as the first witness was that it questioned "the priority of men in God's dealings with the world."[64] Osiek, on the other hand, does not read strong competition in which male dominance was challenged into this situation, since these stories represent a "'private' female *kerygma* tradition" that only later made its way into the mainstream tradition.[65] To re-phrase their suggestions, resurrection can be considered female gossip in two different ways: as a challenge to men's roles having priority in divine intervention, or as an alternative, parallel *kerygma* tradition, that later made its way into the public tradition.

3.2 Resurrection as a person

The term "gossip" used about a person has several meanings and a rather interesting etymological history. Today "a gossip" most often indicate a person who listens to and passes on gossip, and according to several lexicons, most often used of women. Alexander Rysman has analyzed how the English term "gossip" developed from being a positive term

used about a close friend of the family or even a god-parent of either gender, to become a negative characterization only after it started to be used exclusively in regard to women.[66] He argues that women's solidarity is threatened since they risk being called gossips every time they meet or talk with one another. They do not dare to be seen together, because they are afraid of arousing suspicion. According to Rysman, "[a]ny relation between women (...) is subject to the charge of being a gossip and hence any woman who relates to other women is subject to stigmatization as a 'gossip.'"[67]

Could resurrection be seen as a gossip? If resurrection is personified, like virtues and duties have been personified in many ways throughout history, we can have her incarnated together with the angels at the empty tomb. She meets her female friends and tells them the most unbelievable news. They all know it will be hard for others to believe it, but who else than these women can be her messengers? She knows that when something really unbelievable has to be communicated, she must use someone with experience in telling stories that blend facts and fiction.

4. Conclusion: Resurrection, gossip, and gospel

The English term gossip is a contraction of the Old English "god sib," which means "one related to the god."[68] A gossip was originally a person relating to God in one way or the other. In a similar way to gossip, the "d" in "god's spell" dropped to form the word "gospel."[69] Both terms deal with human relations, talk, and god. A study of gossip in the gospels may therefore negotiate the distinction between what Irigaray calls "sociology" and "the divine."[70]

If gossip is seen as a mode of talk in which ideal discourses and practices are connected with everyday discourses and practices, gossip resembles a way of doing religious storytelling. It almost looks as if the resurrection gospel started out as a good story that women carried away and repeated in other contexts, that was unfinished and interrupted, that was questioned and evaluated, inviting the listeners to be co-creators – in short, the gospel almost looks like gossip.

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[1] Luce Irigaray, "Equal to Whom?," in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward, *Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), 212.

[2] See her groundbreaking pioneer work Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1983).

[3] According to Max Gluckman, "Gossip and Scandal," *Current Anthropology* 4, no. 3 (1963).

[4] See similar usage of gossip in Jennifer Coates, "Gossip Revisited: Language in All-Female Groups," in *Women in Their Speech Communities: New Perspectives on Language and Sex*, ed. Jennifer Coates and Deborah Cameron (London: Longman, 1989), Louise Collins, "Gossip: A Feminist Defense," in *Good Gossip*, ed. Robert F. Goodman and Aaron Ben-Ze'ev (1994), Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, "Female Gossipers and Their Reputation in the Pastoral Epistles," *Neotestamentica* 39, no. 2 (2005).

[5] On "destabilizing potential," see Teresa J. Hornsby, "The Annoying Woman: Biblical Scholarship after Judith Butler," in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, ed. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St.Ville (New York: Columbia, 2006), 83.

[6] Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, *Gossip and Gender: Othering of Speech in the Pastoral Epistles*, vol. 164, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009). In Chapter 5 I briefly discuss female drivellers/gossipers in the gospels. This book builds on my doctoral dissertation, supervised by Turid Karlsen Seim, and the title of this article is identical with the trail lecture I was given when I defended my dissertation at the University of Oslo in December 2007. I thank the members of the committee Margaret MacDonald, Jorunn Økland, and Halvor Moxnes for such an inspiring title!

[7] See Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, *Contextualizing Gender in Early Christian Discourse: Thinking Beyond Thecla* (T & T Clark, 2009), 6.

[8] See Mary Leach, "Feminist Figurations: Gossip as a Counterdiscourse," in *Working the Ruins: Feminist Poststructural Theory and Methods in Education*, ed. Wanda S. Pillow and Elizabeth St. Pierre (New York: Routledge, 2000).

[9] See Erik K. Foster, "Research on Gossip: Taxonomy, Methods, and Future Directions," *Review of General Psychology* 8, no. 2 (2004).

[10] This attitude related to ancient sources is discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 in Kartzow, *Gossip and Gender: Othering of Speech in the Pastoral Epistles*.

[11] Timothy Williams, *Gossip and the Gospel* (Enumclaw: Winepress Publishing, 2004), Stephen M. Wylen, *Gossip: The Power of the Word*, . (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, 1994), Michael D. Sedler, *Stop the Runaway Conversation: Take Control over Gossip and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 2001). Scriptural quotations are in these publications the starting point for a moral condemnation of gossip, and several examples from "everyday life" are presented, including practical advice on how gossip can be avoided in the community and on an individual level.

[12] See e.g. Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), Alexander Rysman, "How 'Gossip' Became a Woman," *Journal of Communication: Gossip as Social Communication* 27, no. 1 (1977).

[13] Armin W. Geertz, "Sladder Som Religiøs Fortelling - Kognitive Og Socialpsykologiske Betraktninger," in *Det Brede Og Det Skarpe: Religionsvidenskabelige Studier. En Gave Til Per Bilde På 65-Årsdagen*, ed. Armin W. Geertz, Hans J. Lundager Jensen, and Jens Peder Schjødt (Copenhagen: Forlaget Anis, 2004), 61, 56 and 51. His expressions are translated by me.

[14] Ibid., 52.

[15] Ibid., 48-49.

[16] See e.g. Pieter J. J. Botha, "Paul and Gossip: A Social Mechanism in Early Christian Communities," *Neotestamentica* 32, no. 2 (1998), Richard L. Rohrbaugh, "Gossip in the New Testament," in *Social Scientific Models for Interpreting the Bible* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2001), Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1998), Christoph Gregor Müller, "Wider die Geschwätzigkeit! Mahnungen zur Zügelung der Zunge in frühchristlicher Tradition," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 46, no. 2 (2002).

[17] Many important studies have focused on these texts. See in particular the various articles in "Part 2, Women, Jesus, and Gospel" in Mary Rose D'Angelo and Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Women & Christian Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). See also how resurrection texts are discussed in the various articles in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed. *Searching the Scriptures. A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad,1993).

[18] Discussed in Virginia Hunter, "Gossip and the Politics of Reputation in Classical Athens," *Phoenix. Classical Association of Canada* XLIV, no. 4 (1990).

[19] She is also central in several Nag Hammadi-texts, but in this article I have focused on the gospels that report on the resurrection scene. See Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2003).

[20] For an introduction to this text, see Manfred Hornschuh, *Studien Zur Epistula Apostolorum*, Patristische Texte und Studien; 5 (Berlin 1965).

[21] See Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2002). See also Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 298-99.

[22] Joanna Dewey, "From Storytelling to Written Text: The Loss of Early Christian Women's Voices," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 26 (1996), Joanna Dewey, "From Oral Stories to Written Text," in *Women's Sacred Scriptures*, ed. Pui-lan Kwok and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (London: SCM Press, 1998). See also Holly E. Hearon, *The Mary Magdalene Tradition: Witness and Counter-Witness in Early Christian Communities* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2004).

[23] Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels*, 299.

[24] Ibid., 304.

[25] Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History - History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament; 123 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 77.

[26] Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels*, 297-98.

[27] See Bauckham's informative table, where he shows the variety in women mentioned (Cross, Burial, Empty tomb) in the source material. Ibid.298. See also Carolyn Osiek, "The Women at the Tomb: What Are They Doing There?," *Ex Auditu* 9 (1993): 97.

[28] See the discussion in Turid Karlsen Seim, *The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke-Acts*, Studies of the New Testament and Its World (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 156-63.

[29] Kartzow, *Gossip and Gender: Othering of Speech in the Pastoral Epistles*, Chapter 2 and 169-71.

[30] J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

[31] For Greek text and translation, see Andrew E. Bernhard, *Other Early Christian Gospels: A Critical Edition of the Surviving Greek Manuscript* (London: T & T Clark International, 2006), 79.

[32] For other explanations dealing with the ending of Mark, see Susan Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel*, vol. 259, Journal for the Study of the New Testament. Supplement Series (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 185-88. For various other perspectives, see the 13 articles in Beverly Roberts Caventa and Patrick D. Miller, eds., *The Ending of Mark and the End of God: Essays in Memory of Donald Harrisville Juel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox,2005).

[33] Brook W. R. Pearson and Felicity Harley, "Resurrection in Jewish-Christian Apocryphal Gospels and Early Christian Art," in *Christian-Jewish Relations through the Centuries*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Brook W. R. Pearson, *Roehampton Papers; 6* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 70. See the Gospel of Peter, 38-49.

[34] Hearon, *The Mary Magdalene Tradition*, 57-62.

[35] Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels*, 283.

[36] Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Reconstructing 'Real' Women from Gospel Literature: The Case of Mary Madalene," in *Women & Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 111.

[37] Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels*, 284.

[38] If *adelfoi* here is interpreted as also including sisters, Paul could have intended to include women among these five hundred, but they are not mentioned as being the first witness at the empty tomb.

[39] Toril Moi, *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 268.

[40] This question is also asked in Osiek, "The Women at the Tomb: What Are They Doing There?," 102.

[41] John Dominic Crossan, "The Cross That Spoke: The Earliest Narrative of the Passion and the Resurrection," *Foundations & Facets Forum* 3 (1987): 3. See also Robert F. Jr. Stoops, "Peter, Gospel Of," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York, London: Doubleday, 1992), 287.

[42] Osiek, "The Women at the Tomb: What Are They Doing There?."

[43] See Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels*, 307. See Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul's*

Rhetoric (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990). See also the discussion of the relation between oral tradition and "written remains" in Dewey, "From Storytelling to Written Text: The Loss of Early Christian Women's Voices."

[44] Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983).

[45] Ibid., 35.

[46] Osiek, "The Women at the Tomb: What Are They Doing There?," 103.

[47] Ibid. See also Bauckham, who discusses this private-public dichotomy as a relevant explanation, Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels*, 291-92 and 308.

[48] See in particular intersectional critique of feminism in various recent articles: Jennifer C. Nash, "Re-Thinking Intersectionality," *Feminist Review* 89 (2008), Gudrun-Axeli Knapp, "Race, Class, Gender: Reclaiming Baggage in Fast Travelling Theories," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 12, no. 3 (2005), Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 3 (2005).

[49] Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels*, 305.

[50] For full text and broad discussion, see Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion. The Power of the Hysterical Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 104ff.

[51] Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels*, 271 and note 26.

[52] Gossip and masculinity is discussed in Chapter 6 in Kartzow, *Gossip and Gender: Othering of Speech in the Pastoral Epistles*.

[53] E.g. Strabo, Juvenal, and 2 Tim 3:6. See sources in Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels*, 270-71, esp. note 25.

[54] Plutarch, Cicero I.1-2 in *Lives*.

[55] Harrill emphasizes that Rhoda is only a stock character in this story, presented in a literary pattern well known to ancient readers, J. Albert Harrill, "The Dramatic Function of the Running Slave Rhoda (Acts 12:13-16): A Piece of Greco-Roman Comedy," *NTS* 46 (2000): 150ff.

[56] *Bib.Ant.* 9:10. For text and translation, see Howard Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo's "Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum": With Latin Text and English Translation*, 2 vols., Arbeiten Zur Geschichte Des Antiken Judentums Und Des Urchristentums ; Vol. 31

(Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996). See also Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels*, 272.

[57] Josephus also records a similar dream about Moses, but then the dreamer is his father, who tells it to his wife, and they both believed God's promises. Ant. 2:210-18. See Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels*.

[58] *Bib.Ant.* 42:1-5. See Ibid., 273.

[59] Ibid., 274. See also his references to much later Jewish exegeses of the same story.

[60] Ibid., 275.

[61] Osiek, "The Women at the Tomb: What Are They Doing There?," 103.

[62] See Anne Thurston, *Because of Her Testimony: The Word in Female Experience* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1995), 91.

[63] See Rudolf Karl Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner, 1958).

[64] Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels*, 275.

[65] Osiek, "The Women at the Tomb: What Are They Doing There?".

[66] Rysman, "How 'Gossip' Became a Woman," 176ff.

[67] Ibid.: 180.

[68] *Sib* is defined as "related to blood," see Spacks, *Gossip*, 25, Leach, "Feminist Figurations: Gossip as a Counterdiscourse." See also Leach, "Feminist Figurations: Gossip as a Counterdiscourse," 234. Barbara G. Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), Rysman, "How 'Gossip' Became a Woman." More on www.oxfordreference.online.

[69] Rysman, "How 'Gossip' Became a Woman," 176. *Spell*, then, is defined as "a form of words used as a magic charm or incantation… in order to control or influence people as though one had magical power over them," see www.oxfordreference.online. The *Online Etymological Dictionary*, on the other hand, has argues that "gospel" comes from Old English *godspel*, "good news," from *god*, "good," + *spel*, "story, message," translation of Latin *bona adnuntiatio,* itself a translation of the Greek *euangelion* "reward for bringing good news."

[70] See the quotation in the beginning of this article.

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