

women IN SCRIPTure

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Joanna, Wife of Cuza: A Faithful Disciple

by Stephanie Catmull



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Luke 8:1-3 After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another,

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*proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: **Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.***

*Luke 24:9-10 When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to Eleven and to all the others. **It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles.***

Enter Joanna, a disciple of Christ, who is named in a mere two verses. As typical of many women during the Biblical era, virtually no background information is written about her. We don't know whose family she comes from, what village she grows up in, or if she has any children. We do know Joanna:

- was married to King Herod's steward, Cuza;
- was healed by Jesus either from an evil spirit or disease;
- personally financed Jesus' missions;
- was present when Jesus' tomb is rolled away after the crucifixion; and
- served as a witness to the 12 apostles upon Jesus' resurrection.

Joanna's staggering impact on Jesus' ministry cannot be underestimated. To glean who she is as a person and why she is so important to Christ's mission, we must first study her through the reflective mirror of the men who encompass her life: King Herod, her husband Cuza, and Jesus Christ.

King Herod (Antipas) is tetrarch of the Galilean territory during Joanna's lifetime

as well as during Jesus' ministry between 4 B.C.- 39 A.D. Keep in mind he is the son of, and not to be confused with, the notorious King Herod the Great who rebuilt the Jerusalem temple and had all boys under the age of 2 executed for fear the future "King of the Jews" would dethrone him.

King Herod the Great, crowned by emperor Caesar Augustus to rule over Judea, is of Jewish descent (albeit not a practicing Jew), which is the primary reason behind his appointment to the throne. The region is an unsettled cacophony of Roman and Jewish citizenry, with tensions running at an all-time high. Augustus uses King Herod for his grand experiment to broker negotiations between the Roman legions and the Jewish nation in hopes of dismantling racial tension.

Herod's prolific building, especially the reconstruction of King Solomon's temple, and extensive military campaigns are successful aspects of his reign. Yet, Herod the Great is most known for his murderous, authoritarian rule.

Herod even has his own son Aristobulus killed for fear of a conspiracy against his throne. King Herod the Great has six sons by 4 different wives, and Herod Antipas, the one who orders Jesus' crucifixion, is one of these sons.

Herod Antipas is not nearly as ruthless as his father. Instead, he is a weak, indecisive figure easily influenced by those around him. Antipas divorces his first wife Phasaelis and marries Herodias, his niece who is also his sister-in-law, under the disapproving eye of his father.

This second marriage leads to disastrous consequences of the Roman

territory as Phasaelis's family leads a huge military campaign against the Roman territory as retribution. The region is chopped up into four quarters, and Herod Antipas is slapped with ruling the insignificant, small region of Galilee as punishment.

Herod Antipas, unlike his father, is unremarkable for his building efforts and an ineffective ruler. His cruel father, have full knowledge Jewish culture, insensitively erects pagan statues inside Solomon's sacred Temple. Antipas, however, naively constructs the town of Tiberius atop a Jewish cemetery, unwittingly offending the Jewish people he is trying to please. Instead of brokering peace between the two nations, Herod Antipas instead drives a permanent wedge between them.

To make matters worse, Herod Antipas' second marriage to Herodias, though legal under Roman law, flies directly in the face of Mosaic law and brings the wrath of the popular evangelist John the Baptist upon them. It is *this* marriage John the Baptist directly denounces by saying, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." (Mark 6:18, NKJV)

But Herod Antipas does not yet execute John the Baptist for these seditious words, as his merciless father would have, since he recognizes this would instigate a rebellion. More importantly, King Herod "feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled and liked to listen to him." (Mark 6:20, NKJV) Though easily manipulated by his wife, Herod at least recognizes the truth of John's

teachings.

Unfortunately, Antipas does not have the strength of character to stand up for this truth. In Luke 13:32, Jesus nails King Herod's true character by calling him a fox—cunning, sly, untrustworthy, and worse than a dog. Herod suspects Jesus is a risen John the Baptist, after he reluctantly orders John the Baptist beheaded at Herodias's bequest. Herod's ultimate act of cowardice to eliminate any threats to his reign is his condemnation of Jesus to death through his minion Pontius Pilate in 33 A.D.

So, what does this have to do with Joanna? Remember, Joanna is married to Cuza – the manager of Herod Antipas' household. Cuza would be considered Herod's chief financial officer in today's world, and as such controls the treasury and property of the court. Cuza, and by extension Joanna, could have been either Jewish or Roman since their lineage is unspecified.

Likely, Antipas would surround his court with fellow Romans, but Herod is also trying to mesh the cultures together and conceivably hire a Jew to run his finances. Joanna is decidedly a Jewish name, but this does not mean she is one in practice. Whether Roman or Jewish, Joanna is not a mere peasant, but rather a rich wife of a very important officer of the kingdom who enjoys the privileges of high society while living inside the palace walls.

Most assuredly, Joanna hears Herod and Herodias' loud, contentious quarrels over John the Baptist. She probably hears John's teachings either directly or indirectly since he is the itinerant preacher of the time. She likely

knows Herod befriended John in prison, and he holds great respect for John. Accordingly, Joanna is at least introduced to the coming Messiah through John's teachings in and out of prison, and would be curious about this new Rabbi.

After John the Baptist is beheaded, Jesus heals Joanna from either evil spirits or disease. Since Jesus is obviously not present in King Herod's court, Joanna presumably seeks Jesus out for herself. Clearly, she hears of Jesus' healing miracles, and her probable attempts to hire physician pagan priests, a customary practice during that time, are unsuccessful.

Leaving the palace is easy as she has the funds and wherewithal to travel where she pleases. Imagine Joanna discreetly inquiring where Jesus would be preaching next so as to not be obvious about her destination. She determinedly meets the traveling Rabbi.

Picture Joanna purposefully placing herself in Jesus' listening audience, standing out like a wealthy sore thumb amongst the rubble of Jewish peasantry in hopes Jesus will take mercy on her. Here, in this moment, Joanna demonstrates her courage as a great woman and her unwavering faith in Jesus even before He heals her. She rightly fears her presence could lead to her execution by King Herod or Herodias, especially since she is demonstrating a betrayal of his

court. Dying by some infirmity or dying by execution, Joanna chooses the only path that gives her life and thus becomes one of the many healed by the

Savior.

Joanna subsequently dedicates the rest of her life to following Jesus and earns her place as one of the rare women disciples. She doesn't give Jesus money as payment for her cure as if He were a mere palace witch doctor.

Instead, she wholeheartedly gives Jesus her life, soul, and entire wealth to His ministry, as she knows her body's health pales in comparison to eternal salvation.

Does Joanna return to King Herod's court after her healing? Probably, because that's where her husband resides, and she likely shows him her miraculous recovery. And since Joanna already demonstrates strong courage by attending Jesus' sermons, she could easily return to court without caring if anyone discovers where she has been. Bravely, Joanna would not hide her healing, and permits herself to be a light in a dark land.

Quite possibly, she gains King Herod's ear since Antipas is sympathetic to John the Baptist's teachings. Now, Joanna has direct evidence to prove their worth and validity. Moreover, King Herod's foster brother Manaen (Acts 13:1) is also a teacher in the church. It's easy to speculate that Joanna converts either one or both of these men to Jesus' teachings. Ultimately, she leaves the court and follows the man who healed her.

This upstanding steward's wife of King Herod's court, ironically, is the one who finances Jesus' ministry. As a woman married to Rome's carpetbagger,

she would have been very unpopular among the Jews. Jesus always has a way of upending the customary ways of the world. But how does Joanna get the money?

- Joanna doesn't have free access to her husband's income besides the mere pittance he might allot her. Perhaps Cuza divorces her, in which case she would rely on the *ketubbah*,

or substantial dowry, set aside in case of this eventuality. Cuza would have every right to demand a divorce since Joanna seemingly abandons their marriage by accompanying Jesus and His disciples unchaperoned

- Perhaps Joanna acquires her means from King Herod as guilt money for his beheading of John the Baptizer? Not likely, but still within the realm of possibility considering King Herod reluctantly executes John, and is now "haunted" by John's risen ghost in the person of Jesus.

- Maybe Joanna draws on King Herod's accounts which are left unguarded due to her social standing in court. Maybe as a convert, King Herod gives her the money to privately finance a ministry he couldn't publicly support.

In any case, Joanna financially provides for Jesus through her own means, paving the way for His food, shelter, and hospitality and those of His disciples during the remainder of Jesus' three year ministry.

As a woman, it is unheard of to travel alone, let alone immersing oneself with the

poorest indigents of society. But Joanna's character is strong. The only person's approval she cares about is the person who saves her—Jesus Christ. She willingly chooses a life of wandering, discomfort, poverty and fear together with a life of generosity, courage, and faithfulness. She is likely there for all of Jesus' sermons, listens to him intently, and becomes one of the first women disciples. She honors the Lord with her property and wealth, and exemplifies grace through giving.

Joanna could easily have been one of the unnamed women witnesses watching Jesus' crucifixion at a distance. She is specifically named at the His resurrection empty tomb. Because of her support, she likely prepares the expensive spices and oils that embalm Jesus' corpse and sorrowfully accompanied Mary Magdalene and Mary, mother of James, to his sepulcher the third day after his crucifixion.

Notably, only three women witness this resurrection event; Joanna is one of these three. To the apostles, she excitedly relays meeting the angels at the tomb's entrance and Jesus' ascension into heaven. She is an eloquent, confident, persuasive speaker who is well known to the apostles, and her accounting of the event could only be believable enough to override their skepticism. Joanna obviously commands their respect even though she is a mere woman.

Since Joanna continues to travel in the apostles' company, she is quite

possibly one of the women mentioned in the Upper Room during Pentecost (Acts 1:12-14), where the Holy Spirit fills them with power to evangelize to the nations. As a witness to the resurrection and a faithful follower of Christ, she would be welcomed into their inner circle with these other women. In such case, she is one of the first woman missionaries.

Scholars further conclude the disciple Joanna is Junia—the Roman name Junia is a form of the Hebrew name Joanna, presumably her adopted name after becoming a missionary—mentioned by Paul in his Epistle to the Romans (Romans 16:7). Paul notes she was a believer of Christ *before* his conversion in 34 A.D. For Paul to give Junia such an accolade as a famous apostle, she is likely a witness from Jesus' baptism until his crucifixion. Only a few women deserve that title, and only one woman changes her name from Joanna to Junia.

Legend has it Junia is later imprisoned and persecuted for her Christian missionary work.

Joanna's conversion is genuine. Her love for Jesus is deep and unequalled, and her stewardship is faithful and uncompromising. Impossibly leaving a wealthy lifestyle to accompany illiterate men in an impoverished lifestyle is the hallmark of Joanna's dedication to the man who healed her, saved her, and gave her the grace and power to become one of His most powerful disciples and evangelists the world has ever known. Two lines in the Bible are accredited to Joanna. But her life speaks volumes.

Amen.