

Women in the Bible

Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS



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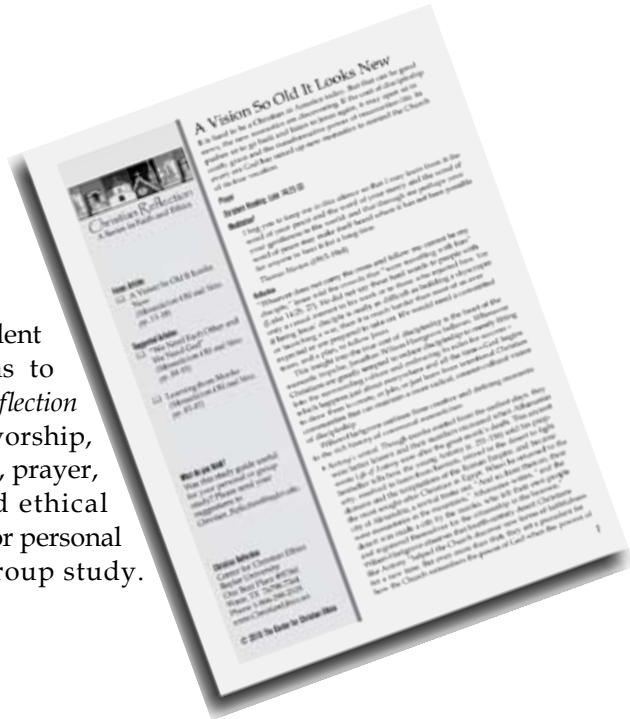
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In light of the biblical grand narrative of redemption and restorative justice, patriarchy and androcentrism can no longer be seen as normative, but as regrettable conditions that God and God's human agents are working to overcome. Understanding so-called 'difficult passages' in the light of the grand narrative begins to dissolve and relativize the problems in these texts.

WHO IS MARY MAGDALENE?

The traditional image of the Magdalene as a repentant prostitute, not to mention contemporary speculations about her being a priestess or goddess figure or bride of Christ, are quite mistaken. They fail to do justice to the biblical and historical woman behind the legend.

WOMEN'S ROLES IN THE LETTERS TO TIMOTHY AND TITUS

The letters to Timothy and Titus reveal a growing consciousness about reputation in early Christian communities. Behavior that outsiders might find distasteful – especially the behavior of women – could be perceived as immoral, compromising the honor of the group. How do these observations (and prescriptions) bear on the present?

DEBORAH'S DAUGHTERS

As prophetess and judge, Deborah became a potent symbol of female authority and speech, an obvious exemplar for women aspiring to claim a public vote in the nineteenth century. Here are women – preachers, devotional writers, suffragists, and abolitionists – who were Deborah's daughters.

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In the Orthodox tradition, icons – like the saints and stories they portray – point to the power of the larger story of Scripture, and show how great a God is our God. The photographs in the *Women with Icons* project reveal how the icons of patron saints, and the women who hold them close, point to Christ.

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Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

Studying the stories of women in the Bible can point us to the heart of the scriptural narrative. Without ignoring some of the difficult androcentric passages in the Bible, our contributors show us the liberating implications, for both men and women, of studying the women in the Bible.

There are significant reasons to study the women in the Bible. As Lisa Wilson Davison has suggested, this is an effective way “to right the wrongs of sexist interpretations of the Bible and the resulting oppression of women throughout history in culture and in the Church.” Furthermore, studying the women in the Bible may point us to the heart of the biblical narrative as it applies to our discipleship. “Overwhelmingly when a woman (or girl) appears in the biblical text, this rarity *heralds* an upcoming event as important,” Robin Gallaher Branch has noted. “Narrators may intentionally use a woman’s or girl’s entrance into the text to raise, as it were, a *red flag* that announces the significance of this part of the story.” Our contributors advance both of these goals: they help us interpret the difficult androcentric passages of Scripture and they show us the liberating implications, for both men and women, of studying the women in the Bible.

Many people today are tempted to dismiss the Bible as “written by men, about men, and for men,” Junia Pokrifka admits in *Redeeming Women in the Grand Narrative of Scripture* (p.11). Yet she believes “a grand narrative approach can help us to understand the Bible as authoritative and redemptive for both women and men.” The scriptural narrative, since it is centrally concerned with redemption and restorative justice, “places injustice against women in a light...[in which] patriarchy and androcentrism are no longer seen as normative, but as regrettable conditions that God and God’s human agents are working to overcome.”

In *Women's Roles in the Letters to Timothy and Titus* (p. 30), Mona LaFosse reviews the cultural and social context of early Christian women, especially the concern for honor and the role of patronage in ancient Mediterranean communities. This leads her to a balanced interpretation of some troubling teachings about women. She concludes that while the biblical writer may be overly "anxious about reputation and culturally specific moral behavior, he also commends individuals who cultivate reputable attributes such as steadfastness, integrity, and faithfulness. Such character, rooted in faith and tied into the responsibilities of each stage of the life course, promote behavior pleasing to God and fruitful for the community."

The stories of certain women in the Bible have long inspired its readers. Joy Schroeder shows in *Deborah's Daughters* (p. 40) how the biblical prophetess and poet became "a potent symbol of female authority and speech" in the nineteenth century. "Deborah stirred the imagination, providing evidence of the great things females could accomplish in politics, literature, law, and religion, if only women's innate abilities were recognized, cultivated, and respected."

Another biblical woman, Mary Magdalene, would be a wonderful model for discipleship, were it not for the common misconceptions about her in church tradition and popular culture. In *Who is Mary Magdalene?* (p. 23), Mary Ann Beavis separates the biblical and historical Mary from the many legends—that she was a priestess or goddess figure or bride of Christ—and mistaken identities that surround her. She notes that "the Gospels portray her as a faithful follower and supporter of Jesus, chosen by the risen Christ to proclaim the good news to the other disciples."

Indeed, this Mary is the winsome figure that we see in Bronzino's *Christ Appears to Mary Magdalen (Noli me tangere)* (on the cover), as Heidi Hornik explains in *The First Witness* (p. 52). In related articles Hornik explores the artistic depictions of two other women in the biblical tradition—the matriarch Rebekah in Lorenzo Ghilberti's *Story of Jacob and Esau* (p. 54), and the heroine Judith in Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (p. 56).

In the Orthodox tradition, a believer associates with a saint from Scripture or church history whose story is related to her personal path in the faith. Jocelyn Mathewes shares some of her marvelous photographs of women from different walks of life and of different ages holding icons of their patron saints in *Women in Icons* (p. 70). She writes, "icons—like the saints and stories they portray—point to the power of the larger story of Scripture, and show how great a God is our God." In Mathewes's images we can see how the icons of saints, as well as the women whose lives are being shaped by holding them close, point to Christ.

The worship service (p. 59) by Jeanie Miley is for proclaiming the reconciliation of men and women. "In the human Jesus, we see the perfect balance of masculine and feminine strengths," Miley writes, "strengths that call us to become more fully human, more completely creative and productive,

and more loving as we learn how to balance all the qualities God inscribed within each person, made in his image." She provides new songs – the hymn "Pilgrims on this Earthly Journey" to a tune by C. David Bolin, and two songs "Can You Hear It?" and "Holy, Holy, God of Power" to her own melodies arranged by Kurt Kaiser – that celebrate God's image in all people, young and old, male and female.

"Given that women experience and interpret the world differently from men in some, if not many, respects, it would be nice if the viewpoints of women scholars were seriously considered in Christian preaching today – not least in dialogue with women's stories in the Bible," Scott Spencer writes in *Preaching about Women in (and on) the Bible* (p. 85). He continues, "I have been repeatedly blown away by the insights of feminist biblical studies, often responding, 'I would never have thought of that.'" An instance of this might be Katherine Callahan-Howell's sermon, *Ripples of Freedom* (p. 81). She imaginatively reconstructs the story of the unnamed slave woman in the marketplace of Philippi (Acts 16:16-34). Though "God's ways are sometimes bewildering" as in this story, Callahan-Howell concludes, "I believe this often includes God using our freedom to free others. God is a God of deliverance, and we are invited to work alongside God in the freeing of our fellow humans. As we live our lives faithfully, may God use us to impact others in the name of Christ and to offer salvation to those in bondage."

In *Feminist Scholarship on Women in the Bible* (p. 89), Sheila Klopfer briefly sketches three eras of feminist biblical scholarship. Its roots are in the writings of the brave women who led the nineteenth century abolitionist movement and the struggle for women's suffrage, but it was developed by a generation of professional scholars during the Civil Rights struggle of the 1960s. From the earliest days, interpreters became sharply divided: some "naively regarded the Bible as affirming gender equality" while others "pessimistically regarded it as patriarchal and thereby denied its authoritative nature." In the midst of this "interpretive tug-o-war," Klopfer commends three resources – Carol Meyers, ed., *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*; Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. Macdonald with Janet H. Tulloch, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity*; and Andrew Sloane, ed., *Tamar's Tears: Evangelical Engagements with Feminist Old Testament Hermeneutics* – that "acknowledge the difficult androcentric nature of Scripture, but they also affirm Scripture's liberative and authoritative nature." These books represent a third wave of feminist biblical scholarship. They offer "a constructive way forward for modern interpreters who are committed to feminism and who maintain a high view of scriptural authority." ❖

Redeeming Women in the Grand Narrative of Scripture

BY JUNIA POKRIFKA

In light of the biblical grand narrative of redemption and restorative justice, patriarchy and androcentrism can no longer be seen as normative, but as regrettable conditions that God and God's human agents are working to overcome.

Many feminists believe that the Bible cannot speak authoritatively to feminists and feminist concerns due to the pervasive presence of androcentric features within it. Yahweh is the God of the *fathers*, the patriarchs, making God and the divine blessings appear patriarchal and androcentric. Men often have center stage, with women in the periphery. Some texts appear to be patently misogynistic, treating women as inferior to men. It seems impossible not to conclude that the Bible is written by men, about men, and for men.

I believe that a grand narrative approach can help us to understand the Bible as authoritative and redemptive for both women and men. This approach can also give us a redemptive hermeneutical lens with which to interpret the so-called "problem texts" in Scripture. The biblical grand narrative concerned with redemption and restorative justice places injustice against women in a light that breaks the back of patriarchy. In that light, patriarchy and androcentrism are no longer seen as normative, but as regrettable conditions that God and God's human agents are working to overcome.¹

As is typical of great stories, the story of the Bible has a plot marked by a beginning (Genesis 1-11), a middle (the rest of the Old Testament), and an end or perhaps the beginning of the end (the New Testament). Each stage in the plot is marked by *three parallel themes*: creation or inau-

gured new creation (or partial redemption), rebellion and its consequences, and the promise or hope of complete new creation (full redemption). In turn, each theme includes *three elements* – the image of God, procreation or fruitfulness, and dominion – that particularly concern the identity and destiny of women in God’s purposes. This way of understanding the grand narrative provides an effective hermeneutical and theological lens through which to interpret the Bible’s so-called “difficult passages” concerning women.

THE BEGINNING OF THE GRAND NARRATIVE

Creation. In the beginning, God’s “very good” creation (Genesis 1:31) is gloriously reflected in God’s making of humans, female and male, in the divine image (1:26-27). Being made in God’s image implies the created unity and equality of male and female. Likewise, Genesis 2 affirms the essential harmony and parity of the woman with the man. The initially “not good” state of the man’s life (2:18a) is remedied by the formation of woman, who completes humanity. The man praises the woman as “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (2:23), recognizing the fact that she is essentially like him. They are “one flesh” and “not ashamed” (2:24-25).

God gives mandates to both woman and man as one: to multiply and fill the earth and to rule over the earth (1:28). The divine blessing of procreative fruitfulness (1:28) finds fulfillment in the institution of marriage (2:24). It is notable that Genesis 2:24 suggests that the man leaves his own family to be with his wife and presumably with her family. Such an arrangement contrasts with the more common patrilocal practices in the Ancient Near East in which the husband and his father own or otherwise control the woman and her children.

The mandate to have dominion finds an immediate application in Yahweh’s commands to “till” and “keep” (2:15) the garden, which anticipates the intrusion and temptation by the serpent in chapter 3. Although the command is initially given to the man, the formation of the woman as *‘ezer kenegdo* – i.e., the helper equal to him (2:18) – presumes that the woman will share the responsibility to have dominion. The Hebrew term for “helper or help” is predominantly used of God the “helper,” or deliverer (sixteen times out of twenty-one occurrences). Thus, the term points away from the subordination of woman and asserts her equality. In sum, Genesis 1 and 2 present human life as it was meant to be, a life that is as good for woman as for man.

Rebellion and Its Consequences. Tragically, the idyllic life in paradise does not last. In Genesis 3, there is a sudden shift from a blissful to painful state of being. The first humans disobey God’s authority and command. As a consequence, God exiles them, separating them from the life-sustaining presence of God. Humanity “falls” into a sorry state of alienation, shame, aversion, and male-domination.

Human dominion over the cursed and hostile creatures and the unyielding ground is now frustrated (3:17-19). Unfulfilled dominion appears to find its distorted outlet in human-to-human domination, for God predicts the typical post-fall patriarchal social order: “and he shall rule over you” (Genesis 3:16b). The fracture and distortion in the paradigmatic horizontal relationship of husband and wife soon escalate into Cain’s fratricide and Lamech’s murder in Genesis 4. Society in general breaks down in a thoroughgoing descent into violence and corruption that culminates in the sin-saturated world of Noah’s time (see 6:11–12).

Alienated from the Giver of life, there is also frustrated procreation, indicated by the statement that the woman will bring forth children in distress² and groaning³ (Genesis 3:16). These expressions do not refer to “labor pains” in isolation, but to anything that hinders fruitfulness—including barrenness, miscarriages, birth defects, and infant or maternal mortality. In the context of the judgment oracle, the frustrated procreation likely results from the serpent’s hostility against woman and her offspring. Evil has now corrupted every aspect of the once “very good” creation. As such, Genesis 3 represents a complete antithetical parallelism to Genesis 1–2, powerfully evoking the sense of tragedy over humanity’s loss of paradise and exile into a cursed earth.

Hope for restoration. While Genesis 3–11 represents an antithesis to Genesis 1–2, Genesis 3 also contains hope for a redemptive “overcoming” of the effects of sin. Most importantly, the woman’s child will “strike” the head of the serpent (3:15c), which is often interpreted as “messianic” by Jews and Christians. In the context of the two-testament Christian canon, this is the *proto-euangelion* (“proto-gospel”) that points to a cosmic struggle between good and evil and to Christ’s ultimate triumph over Satan. Within the Old Testament, the “seed of the woman” may also refer to a promised child, such as Isaac, or collectively to Israel, who will disable the “serpent” and its evil workings. In any case, Genesis 3:15c implies that evil and its effects, including male domination, will ultimately cease. The conditions proclaimed in the judgment oracle in Genesis 3:14–19 are *not* inalterable divine mandates or prescriptions. Rather, they are descriptions of a corrupted state of affairs that should and will be overcome.

THE MIDDLE OF THE GRAND NARRATIVE

Even after the judgment of the flood, the depressing parade of evil marches on, as evidenced by the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. God must “recreate” humanity and start again with his own elect people. Yahweh clearly expresses his intention to redeem all creation and restore its original comprehensive goodness in his call of and promises to Abram and Sarah and his partial fulfillment of those promises in and through Israel (see Genesis 12:2-3). But God’s redemption and restoration come only through conflict with the serpent’s diabolical hostility against

God and against the woman and her seed. This is exemplified first in Sarah's barrenness, then in the Egyptian enslavement and oppression, and then in the formidable military foes of Israel. There is a partial restoration of an "edenic" life in the Promised Land, but it is curtailed by the Israelites' persistent rebellion against God and eventual exile from the land of promise, their new Eden. Yet this middle part of the grand narrative, which tells of the ancestors and the Israelites, closes with hope for a greater restoration of all things: a Messianic new creation that would entail the fullest realization of covenant blessings and the universalization of the "edenic" life. With this overview of the middle of the narrative in mind, we will turn to an analysis of the three themes and their three foci in this part of the story.

New Creation Inaugurated and Redemption Achieved. There is little or occasional evidence in ancient Israel for a healed image of God or restored unity and equality of men and women, but it is significant. Israelite law and culture move away from typical expressions of patriarchy in the Ancient Near East and toward more just, egalitarian ideals in important ways (e.g., Leviticus 25; Exodus 22:21–27; Deuteronomy 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:19–21; 26:12–13). The status of women is improved, which shows that God is propelling the Israelites in a redemptive and liberating trajectory.⁴ In addition, the commandment to honor both mothers and fathers respects women as teachers of the law and guardians of the religion of Israel (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 6:7; cf. Proverbs 31).

Other texts recall the pre-fall, male-female relationship that embodied the image of God. Song of Songs portrays a pleasant, loving, reciprocal relationship between a man and a woman. This paradigmatic love relationship honors the edenic matrilocal marital norm from Genesis 2:24, in which the man leaves his parents and cleaves to his wife (Song of Songs 3:4; 8:2). The woman and the man in Proverbs 31 respect, value, and benefit each other—a model of a restored and mutually-empowering marital relationship. These texts showcase God's covenant blessings on the obedient and God's redemption of women from the evil effects of sin.

The fruitfulness of the womb is among the explicit covenant blessings given to Israel (Leviticus 26:9; Deuteronomy 28:4), which represents a clear reversal of Genesis 3:16. Accordingly, the matriarchs of the newly-created people of God overcome the obstacles of barrenness and become fruitful. God honors Sarah and Hagar as mothers of many nations and kings (Genesis 16:10; 17:16). Israel proliferates greatly in Egypt, even under the most adverse conditions. In light of the judgment oracle of Genesis 3, the triumphs of the matriarchs and later women of Israel are expressions of the victory over the hostile serpent that resists women and the proliferation of her seed.

Thus, there is occasional evidence for restored dominion for women, some of whom are portrayed as empowered agents of redemption and

leaders of God's people. Deborah is a prophet and a judge (or ruler), who governs Israel for twenty years during Canaanite oppression, then for another forty years after a decisive victory (Judges 4:3-4; 5:31). Her rule is presented as an extension of Yahweh's reign over Israel, as Moses' leadership had been. The authoritative, prophetic leadership of the prophet Huldah (2 Kings 22; 2 Chronicles 34) is instrumental in Josiah's massive reforms. Esther acts as a key player in the preservation of the Jews from Haman's intended annihilation.

Rebellion and Its Consequences. Despite the redemptive and restorative trajectory within it, Israel's history is typically marked by a depressing cycle of rebellion, divine punishment, and temporary spiritual renewal, which tragically eventuates in the destruction and exile of a divided Israel. The breakdown of vertical relationship with Yahweh means the breakdown of horizontal human relationships and oppression. Thus, the lower status of or injustices against women in Israel or in exile (some of which I will mention below as "problem texts") do not represent God's intentions for women, but regrettable expressions of sinful and, thus, cursed life.

Hope for a Messianic New Creation and the Future Reign of God. After the exilic death, Israel is resurrected in two ways. On one level there is an initial "restoration of Israel to the land," as recorded in books like Ezra and Nehemiah. This resurrection, however, is rather underwhelming, with sin continuing to plague the people after their partial restoration (e.g., Nehemiah 5). On the second level, there is hope

for a far greater resurrection of Israel in the context of a future eschatological redemption or new creation (Ezekiel 36-37), which has positive implications for people of all nations. While the prophets do not explicitly mention the restoration of perfect unity and equality between woman and man or the demise of patriarchy and male domination, they are included in the universal *shalom*, unity, and equity

that God will establish (see Psalms 96:10, 97:2, 99:4; Isaiah 54:1; 60:18). In the future messianic age, *all* evil effects of the Fall will be completely vanquished and all aspects of life lavishly blessed (cf. Isaiah 11:6-9; 65:17; 66:22). The new creation will be an expanded Eden.

The middle part of the grand narrative, which tells of the ancestors and the Israelites, closes with hope for a greater restoration of all things, a Messianic new creation that entails the fullest realization of covenant blessings and universalization of "edenic" life.

GLIMPING THE END OF THE GRAND NARRATIVE

Against the backdrop of Israel's expectation for God's messianic and eschatological redemptive solution to sin and oppression, God launches a final age of "new creation" through Jesus Christ as God's messiah. In Christ, God decisively inaugurates the messianic age foretold in passages like Isaiah 61 (see Luke 4:18 ff.). This is the third and last act in God's work, though it does not happen overnight. As such, the events recorded in the New Testament might be better called "the beginning of the end." In any case, the great achievements of Jesus Christ have significant implications for women, which we can again understand in terms of the three themes and their three elements of image of God, procreation, and dominion.

New Creation and Redemption. Having obeyed unto death, Christ restores the original, pre-fall humanity that the first Adam lost through disobedience. Being *the* unqualified image of God (Colossians 1:15), Christ restores the image of God in both woman and man and creates humanity's "new self" (Ephesians 4:24). In addition, Christ reconciles humanity to the Father and to one another, restoring loving relationship with God and with fellow human beings. The various distinctions – male and female, free or slave, Jews or Gentiles – that resulted in social stratification, discrimination, and oppression are abrogated in Christ, in whose "body" the oneness of the new humanity is created (Ephesians 2:14-18; Galatians 3:27-28). Furthermore, Jesus declares to his disciples, women as much as men: "I do not call you servants any longer" but "friends" (John 15:15). His friends are given the mission of being "fruitful" (John 15:16).

This fruitfulness finds a new expression in spiritual rather than biological children. By making disciples, Christians become the victorious "seed of the woman" in a corporate sense. Jesus' incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection disable the serpent (cf. Genesis 3:15) and grant Christ, the representative human king, all authority (Matthew 28:18; cf. Daniel 7:14). Then, just as Adam and Eve were given dominion over the whole earth, so now the disciples of Christ, male and female alike, are given the delegated authority to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20; cf. Daniel 7:27).

Even though Jesus lived and worked within the conventions appropriate in fallen, patriarchal culture (e.g., his twelve apostles were all male), he sometimes broke out of them. He welcomed and taught women as his followers, disciples, friends, and evangelists (e.g., the Samaritan woman at the well and the women who were the first heralds of his resurrection). What Jesus began is then given a fuller expression in the post-Pentecost church.

With his resurrection and ascension, Christ sets the stage for a new order for women and men alike. This new age begins in earnest at Pentecost. Women are explicitly included from the beginning as key players in the unfolding drama. Peter proclaims that the Spirit of God is now being poured out on all people, men and women, old and young, free and slave, enabling them to prophecy (Acts 2:17-18; cf. Joel 2:28 ff.). Through this

“democratization” of the Holy Spirit, the early followers of Jesus experience a greater egalitarianism. The Spirit equips “all flesh” with spiritual gifts, empowering them to be fruitful ministers of the gospel. Accordingly, there is a greater freedom than within Old Testament Israel for women to be leaders (apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers, elders, deacons)—as evidenced by Priscilla, Phoebe, Junia, and more. In principle, women are positioned to be equal partners in the advancement of the gospel and the kingdom of God.

Rebellion and Its Consequences. Yet, the realities of living with imperfect women and men within fallen and corrupted social orders—whether Jewish or Greco-Roman societies—required that a number of accommodations or restrictions would be imposed upon marginalized groups (including women and slaves) for the sake of the gospel. The restrictions do not represent God’s abiding rule for his covenant people, but are ways to navigate through situations that could defame Christ’s name or bring confusion, thus hindering the furtherance of the gospel. It should be noted that these temporary restrictions on woman’s roles (as we saw in the Old Testament) often represent a significant improvement over the status of women in surrounding cultures, again showing a redemptive direction in which God is moving the people of God, a trajectory that should continue until the divine ideal is reached.

Consummation. Despite the ongoing reminders of sin, including patriarchy in both Church and society, early Christian communities were animated by the hope that both sin and its effects would one day be completely overcome at the second coming of Christ. This hope is consistent with the Old Testament expectation of the ultimate fulfillment of the messianic hope. On that day, this sin-corrupted age will come to a close and God’s perfect kingdom of universal justice and peace will be consummated.

READING THE PROBLEM TEXTS

The grand narrative sketched thus far helps us to respond rightly to some much-discussed “problem texts” related to women. In the Old Testament, there are many problematic texts for women. In Judges, we find the shocking treatment of Jephthah’s daughter in chapter 11 and of the Levite’s concubine/wife in chapter 19. While these do not explicitly denounce the atrocious violence in the stories, the larger narrative context *does* denounce it as an extreme expression of lawlessness. Likewise, the stories of Bathsheba and Tamar in 2 Samuel demonstrate the horrific sins of those in power and indirectly expose and judge such misuse of power against women. The apparent divine silence concerning the rape of Tamar and Absalom’s adulteries is better understood as indication of divine punishment of sin through the “natural” process of sowing sin and reaping its evil fruits (cf. Romans 1:24 ff.). This means that sexist attitudes and actions in these texts are not an inevitable feature of human life, but evils that God seeks to root out and deter.

In the New Testament, two “problem” Pauline passages stand out: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15. The particular difficulty of these two passages, as “complementarian” interpreters have been quick to point out, is that they appear to ground abiding role-restrictions for women in God’s original intentions for creation. If this is the case, then it would provide significant evidence that the way of interpreting Genesis 1-3 I have offered is either completely mistaken or runs counter to New Testament texts. However, these controversial texts should not cause us to question this grand narrative approach. Let me explain why.

First, we need to remember that Paul and his associates were writing for a “time between the times,” between the epochal events of the First and Second Coming of Christ. In keeping with the “already but not yet” character of God’s kingdom in the church age, any restrictions or accommodations these texts make do not represent God’s ideal or final will for women, but are temporary means of negotiating gender matters within fallen social contexts. For example, in Ephesus, to which 1 Timothy was written, there was a danger of certain people—especially untrained women—promoting false teaching that could undercut both the gospel and the church founded on it. In that light, it makes sense that Paul would temporarily limit the role of women as church teachers and leaders, until they were properly trained.

Second, since the New Testament does not make clear distinctions between women and men in regard to central theological and ethical matters (e.g., sin, grace, salvation, empowerment by the Holy Spirit, discipleship, the Great Commandment, and the Great Commission), interpretation of the few passages that do speak of clear sex or gender distinctions should be guided by the general principles or narrative contours established by those central matters. In other words, given the character of 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 and 1 Timothy 2:9-15 as situation-specific teaching in contextual, occasional letters, their restrictions or accommodations should not be used to inculcate a static or abiding church polity in which men are always leaders and women always followers.

Instead of allowing these texts, let alone faulty interpretations of them, determine the way we read the grand narrative and women’s place within it, the grand narrative should limit and guide the interpretation of these texts. This is hermeneutical good sense. With more insightful, canonical interpretation (and sometimes more accurate translations), these texts can be liberated from the undeserved label of “problem texts.”

With these preliminary considerations in mind, let me briefly indicate how the three main narrative themes (new creation inaugurated, rebellion and its consequences, and hope of redemption/final new creation) with their three foci (image of God, fruitfulness, and dominion) are significant for interpreting 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15.

Paul makes two appeals in the first passage, one for men (v. 7) and one for women (v. 10), which are supported by creational details about the man

and woman in Genesis 1-2. The appeal to men is that “a man ought not to have his head veiled,” which means, according to verse 14, that a man should not have long hair. The reason for this is that “he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man” (vv. 7bc-8). At first glance, it would appear that verse 7bc is directly contradicting Genesis 1:27 and promoting a theology of male superiority (as many have insisted). But letting the grand narrative bear upon the text leads to rather surprising conclusions. First of all, we need to note that in verse 14 Paul appeals to “nature” (rather than God’s created order) to achieve his situational goal of affirming culturally-defined differentiation between male hairstyle (short as honorable) and female hairstyle (long as glorious). Second, we need to note that according to Genesis 1-2, the woman is also the image of God as much as man, which implies that she is also the glory of God. Third, Paul’s omission of such obvious truths about woman’s creational identity, therefore, must be understood as another “move” to achieve his situational goals and not as an attempt to offer a settled and measured theological conviction about women. By affirming man as the image and glory of God, he supports his point that the man should not wear a culturally offensive hairstyle that would dishonor God. Affirming that the woman is also “the image and glory of God” would not help him set up a strong differentiation between culturally acceptable hairstyles for men and women. Fourth, when Paul says that “woman is the glory of man” (v. 7c), he is likely not offering a theological innovation or new revelation, but a rabbinic-style interpretative conclusion based on Genesis 2:20-23, in which the “not good” state of the man being alone is gloriously rectified by the formation of the woman, which is met with the man’s joyful praise of the woman. In other words, Paul suppresses the more obvious truths about the woman as the image and glory of God and highlights the more subtle point about her relation to the man. This creates a contrast between the man and woman that helps him make his case about appropriate, distinct hairstyles. Paul’s insight that the woman is the glory of man – that is, the woman is the crown, or completion, of humankind – far from asserting the superiority of man, upholds the woman’s exceedingly exalted status.

Paul’s appeal to the woman is, when translated straightforwardly without added words, “the woman ought to have authority over her head” (v. 10), that is, over her metaphorical head, which is “man” according to verse 3. The main biblical reason for the women’s authority is given in verse 9, “neither was man created because of woman, but woman because of man” (my translation). While this verse has been interpreted to mean that the woman exists for the man’s sake (see the New American Standard Bible) or for his use, reading it in light of Genesis 2 produces wholly new results. We recall that in Genesis 2, the woman was made because the man was incomplete without an equal “helper” or partner. The woman was given

equal authority with the man to help him serve and guard the Garden, especially from the threats of the tempter who was seeking to overthrow them. In a cultural context that otherwise suppressed women's voice, Paul is appealing to the creational story to encourage the women of Corinth to reclaim their creational authority to pray and prophesy freely, not only over women, but also over men. Since such authority was controversial for women (especially for many Jews), Paul has to highlight it here (v. 10). Yet, in an apparent effort to curtail any overestimation or misapplication of the authority of women, Paul then reinforces the interdependence, mutuality, and complementarity of men and women and their ultimate dependence on God in verses 11-12. This interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is consistent with the examples of biblical women who did speak or prophesy authoritatively over both men and women and even the entire nation of Israel (e.g., Deborah and Huldah). Jesus' teaching of women and affirmation of women as authoritative witnesses, which present a strong departure from the Palestinian Jewish culture of his day, also support this interpretation, not to mention Paul's unqualified recognition of women leaders in several epistles.

What about 1 Timothy 2:11-15, which issues a requirement and a prohibition: "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission" (v. 11) and "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent" (v. 12)? Why would Paul say this, when God used women to both teach and exercise authority over men and women throughout the Old Testament and even in the churches with which Paul was familiar?⁵ It is most natural to say that the restriction on the woman here must be temporary and contextual, restricted to the churches in Ephesus or similar churches. But there is a potential challenge to this interpretation in verses 13 and 14. Paul finds the reasons for the new requirement to learn and the prohibition to teach in the creational order of Genesis 2 ("For Adam was formed first, then Eve," v. 13) and in Eve's deception in Genesis 3 ("the woman was deceived," v. 14). Paul's grounding his points in the creation order and the Fall narrative has been used to assert male superiority (assuming temporal priority means ontological superiority) and to institute universal role restrictions for women (assuming all women are gullible). But since our grand narrative affirms the creational and redemptive equality between women and men and highly esteems godly and authoritative women prophets and teachers of Israel and the early church, we can press on for a better explanation of Paul's appealing to Genesis 2-3. I suggest that since Paul is drawing on the narrative flow of Genesis without making the details explicit, he is offering Genesis 2-3 as an illustrative example. Paul's logic would run like this: "Adam was formed first," meaning that he received God's instructions directly (Genesis 2:16-17) and was thus more qualified to teach and make decisions. The woman was made after God had given Adam the command about the tree, and thus was more susceptible to deception. But since she made the decision to eat the forbidden fruit entirely independent of the man

and even gave some to him to eat, she usurped authority over man. The woman Paul describes in verses 13-14 is a paradigm of any one in danger of deception due to lack of proper education. Thus, for the unlearned woman of Ephesus, Paul prescribes the medicine of learning in quietness and submission – the opposite of “teaching and usurping authority.” That said, the writer’s earlier directive that women “should learn” albeit “in silence with full submission” (v. 11) is already a significant redemptive improvement on the Jewish traditions that barred women from education in Torah. Education in the Church serves as a long-term solution to the problem of women and other uneducated persons being deceived and deceiving others with false teaching. As such, this text does not pose a great threat to a woman’s identity or rights, but lays down a wise ground rule through which properly trained and educated women teachers such as Priscilla can be produced.

1 Timothy 2 concludes with a strange, yet positive, statement: “Yet she will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty” (1 Timothy 2:15). Without resolving all the interpretative issues this verse raises, there are reasonable interpretations that highlight its emphasis on redemption for women in intentional contrast to verse 14’s emphasis on the fall of Eve. Most importantly, the Greek term for “saved” here can also mean “kept safe.” When translated as such, the text simply states that godly Christian women are “kept safe through childbearing,” which as a result of the Fall became a dangerous ordeal with many women’s lives being lost during child-birth.⁶ In this interpretation, God’s redemptive work in godly women generally alleviates or overcomes the post-fall “frustrations” in fruitfulness or procreation. This is in keeping with similar redemptive themes in the Old Testament, such as the midwives’ testimony that the Hebrew women were not like the Egyptian women, but were more vigorous and gave quick and uncomplicated live births (Exodus 1:19).

Understanding passages like 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 1 Timothy 2:9-15 in the light of the grand narrative of creation, fall, and redemption or consummation begins to dissolve and relativize the problems in these texts.

Understanding 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 1 Timothy 2:9-15 in light of the grand narrative of creation, fall, and redemption or consummation begins to dissolve and relativize the problems in these texts. In light of this larger story, we see that God’s intention from the beginning has been to bring both women and men into the fullness of life as those created in the image God and invested with resultant dignity and responsibility. Whether in the form

of the mitigation of sin and its effects in the Old Testament or in the fuller salvation available through Christ and the Holy Spirit, those who are redeemed are ultimately not bound to live within the limits of any sinful social order, including patriarchy. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom"! (2 Corinthians 3:17; cf. Acts 2:17 ff.).

Yet even as the texts of Genesis 3, 1 Corinthians 11, and 1 Timothy 2 would warn us, our freedom must not be abused, but must be used in godly, loving dependence on God and interdependence with other members of Christ. Before the day of God's consummated kingdom, God calls us to exercise self-giving love that is patient with others who, like us, are in process. We recognize that no person, church, or culture is yet fully sanctified or redeemed, but we hope and expect that one day they will be.

NOTES

1 For a more detailed defense of a grand narrative approach in respect to the issue of patriarchy in the Old Testament, see my article "Patriarchy, Biblical Authority, and the Grand Narrative of the Old Testament," in *Tamar's Tears: Evangelical Engagements with Feminist Old Testament Hermeneutics*, edited by Andrew Sloane (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 274-314. The current article condenses my longer treatment of the Old Testament from this chapter and adds a treatment of the New Testament.

2 The Hebrew term *'itstsavon* is usually translated into "pain" in relation to the woman in 3:16 and into "toil" or "painful toil" in relation to the man in 3:17, but both are unusual translations for the term *'itstsavon*. The more usual translation would be "distress" or "sorrow."

3 The Hebrew term *heron* is not the typical word for childbearing or conception. See Umberto Cassuto's comments in support of this in *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, translated by Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961), 164 ff. A more literal translation of *heron* is given by the Septuagint, *stenagmon*, which means "sighing" or "groaning."

4 See William Webb's helpful comments on a "redemptive" hermeneutic and trajectory in his *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

5 I here assume that Paul is the author of 1 Timothy, but my argument does not depend on this assumption.

6 See the recent, able defense of this interpretation by Moyer Hubbard in "Kept Safe through Childbearing: Maternal Mortality, Justification by Faith, and the Social Setting of 1 Timothy 2:15," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 55:4 (December 2012), 743-762.



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Who is Mary Magdalene?

BY MARY ANN BEAVIS

The traditional image of the Magdalene as a repentant prostitute, not to mention contemporary speculations about her being a priestess or goddess figure or bride of Christ, are quite mistaken. They fail to do justice to the biblical and historical woman behind the legend.

For western Christians, Mary Magdalene has long been viewed as a repentant sinner, a prostitute forgiven by Jesus and subsequently devoted to him. In recent decades this image has been challenged by feminist biblical scholars who have clarified Mary's portrayal in the Gospels and the early church. After explaining how the traditional image of the penitent Magdalene developed and why it does not do justice to the biblical and historical woman behind the legend, I will introduce some new directions in recent Magdalene studies.

Let's begin with what the Gospel writers say about Mary Magdalene. She is mentioned in all four Gospels as one of several Galilean women who followed Jesus and supported him and the other disciples out of their personal means (Matthew 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41; Luke 8:2-3). Luke 8:2 adds the unique detail that Mary Magdalene had been liberated from "seven demons," an exorcism attributed to Jesus in Mark's secondary ending (16:9). John 19:25 places her at the foot of the cross with Jesus' mother, the beloved disciple, and Mary Clopas. She, with other women, witnesses the burial of Jesus (Mark 15:47; Matthew 27:60-61; Luke 23:50-24:10). Matthew (28:1-10) and John (20:11-18) portray her as first witness to the resurrection, as does Mark's secondary ending (16:9). In both Matthew and John, Jesus commissions her to tell the other disciples about the resurrection (Matthew 28:10; John 20:17; see also Mark 16:10).

The term "Magdalene" is usually regarded as referring to Mary's hometown of Magdala, a fishing center on the Sea of Galilee (although it should

be noted that there is no first-century reference to a town by that name). A minority view is that Magdalene (“Tower”) is honorific, referring to her status as a beacon of faith (St. Jerome, *Letter to Principia* 127, 255). Her importance is signified by the fact that in lists of female disciples, she is always mentioned first (Matthew 27:56, 61; 28:1; Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1; Luke 8:2-3; 24:10).

A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

The Gospel portrait of Mary Magdalene as disciple, supporter and proclaimer of the good news of Jesus bears little resemblance to the western cultural stereotype of the penitent sinner. The notion that she led a sinful life before she met Jesus seems to be the result of confusion between an unnamed woman, identified as “a sinner,” who anoints Jesus’ feet in Luke 7:36-50, and another Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus of Bethany, who anoints Jesus’ feet when he is dining at their home (John 12:1-8). The two women are described in very different terms: Luke’s “sinner” appears uninvited at a dinner party in Capernaum (Luke 7:1) in the house of a Pharisee (Luke 7:36). The point of the story is the woman’s faith and the forgiveness of her sins (7:47-50). In John’s story, which takes place in Bethany, Mary is identified as a beloved friend of Jesus (11:5) who anoints Jesus in her brother’s home (12:1) in gratitude for the raising of Lazarus, and Jesus connects her act of devotion with his own burial (12:7).

Although all four Gospels contain stories of women who anoint Jesus (see Mark 14:3-9; Matthew 26:6-13), none of them is identified as Mary Magdalene. However, there are several references in post-biblical tradition to the sisters Martha and Mary of Bethany visiting the tomb and meeting with the risen Jesus, which led some early Christians to conclude that Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany were the same person.¹ Eventually, the composite “Mary” figure was expanded to include the anonymous sinner of Luke 7:36-50, whose story is told immediately before Luke’s listing of Jesus’ women disciples from Galilee: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna (8:2-3). However, it was not until 591 that Pope Gregory the Great authoritatively pronounced that Luke’s sinner, Mary of Bethany, and Mary Magdalene were one and the same (*Sermon* 33.1). Although Gregory did not actually call her a prostitute, he interpreted the “seven demons” of which she had been exorcised as the totality of vices, and asserted that the ointment she used to anoint Jesus’ feet had previously been used by her to perfume her body for sensual purposes. Subsequently, the legend of Mary Magdalene, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, as a beautiful, vain, and lustful young woman saved from a life of sin by her devotion to Jesus became dominant in western (Catholic) Christianity, although the eastern (Orthodox) church continued to regard Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany as distinct saints, and identified neither with Luke’s sinner.

THE GNOSTIC MARY

Both academic scholarship and popular culture have made startling claims about the role of Mary Magdalene in a movement in early Christianity

known as Gnosticism (from the Greek word for “knowledge”). Although Gnostics varied in their doctrines and practices, they were unified by the belief that knowledge or insight into the true nature of the human soul and its relationship to God was the key to salvation. Some Gnostics were more open to female leadership, and to female images of the divine, than other ancient Christians.

There are, in fact, several Gnostic documents that portray “Mary,” sometimes specified as “Mary Magdalene,” as a preeminent Gnostic, an enlightened woman who understands the teachings of the Savior better than the male disciples, and who was especially loved by him (e.g., *The Gospel of Mary*, *The Gospel of Philip*, *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*, and *Pistis Sophia*). For example, the *Gospel of Philip* 63 calls Mary Magdalene Jesus’ “companion” whom he loved more than the other disciples; the *Dialogue of the Savior* 139-140 refers to Mary as one who understood everything and who showed the Revealer’s greatness; *Pistis Sophia* 19 extols Mary’s greatness and spiritual purity.

Although Mary’s authority, understanding, and relationship to Christ are highlighted in these documents, the notion that “Mary Magdalene” was a Gnostic heroine needs qualification. In fact, many of the references to the Gnostic Mary do not actually refer to her as “Magdalene”; this is even the case in *The Gospel of Mary*. The Gnostic Mary is actually a composite figure who partakes in characteristics of both Mary Magdalene – faithful disciple and resurrection witness – and Mary of Bethany, who learns at the feet of Jesus (Luke 10:38-42), is beloved by him (John 11:5), and who is commended by him (Luke 10:42; John 12:7-8). Much as the composite Mary functioned as a model of faithfulness and (later) repentance for non-Gnostic Christians, the Gnostic Mary was the ideal enlightened disciple.

Unfortunately, while the role of the biblical Magdalene in the “Mary” figure has been emphasized by scholars (for instance, in books like *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*), the qualities of Mary of Bethany in the character have been overlooked.²

The legend of Mary Magdalene as a beautiful, vain, and lustful young woman saved from a life of sin by her devotion to Jesus became dominant in western Christianity after the sixth century.

THE WIFE OF JESUS?

Perhaps the most sensational claim that has been made about Mary Magdalene is that she was not only a faithful disciple and teacher, but that she was actually married to Jesus, and that she secretly bore his child, an heir to the messianic dynasty. This idea has not been taken seriously by most academics, but it has been disseminated by works of popular scholarship such as Baigent, Lincoln, and Leigh’s *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and a series of

books by Margaret Starbird.³ Even more influentially, Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) and the ensuing film presented the speculations of these authors as historical fact. Subsequently, novelists such as Kathleen McGowan have published similar works of fiction. Several of these books present Jesus and Mary Magdalene as a model of equality and mutuality for married couples.

The theory that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were husband and wife is developed differently by the various authors. Among the data often used to support their conjectures are the Gnostic references to Jesus' particular love for Mary (*Gospel of Philip* 63; *Gospel of Mary* 10). However, as noted above, the tradition of the Savior's love for the Gnostic Mary is traceable back to John 11:5, which mentions that Jesus loved Martha, her sister (Mary of Bethany), and Lazarus. Indeed, the love of Jesus for all his brothers and sisters is a theme of the Gospel of John (e.g., 13:1, 34, 35; 14:21; 15:9). Another piece of evidence presented by such writers is a doctrine held by a medieval sect known as the Cathars ("Pure Ones"), who allegedly taught that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were husband and wife. In fact, there are two medieval references from southern France—where local Catholics believed that Mary Magdalene was buried—that claim the Cathars taught that Christ and the Magdalene were married. Another medieval source claims that the Cathars taught there were two Christs, one good and one evil, and that Mary Magdalene was the evil Christ's concubine.⁴

The Cathars were extreme ascetics who preferred celibacy to marriage; they regarded Christ as a purely spiritual being so heavenly that he never left paradise, but who manifested on earth (which they regarded as hopelessly corrupt) only through the apostle Paul. Thus, it is unlikely that the Cathars viewed the relationship between Jesus and Mary as a paradigm for human marriage affirmative of sexuality, or that they believed the couple had children. Furthermore, these references to Cathar doctrines are from Catholic witnesses who regarded the Cathars as deplorable heretics, and so were inclined to present Cathar teachings as bizarre and shocking. In addition, there is evidence that the Cathars had a tendency to interpret biblical and theological metaphors literally. For example, some Cathars apparently interpreted the theological axiom that the Virgin had conceived Christ through her ear, referring to her obedience to the divine word, to mean that she had actually conceived—and given birth—to Jesus through her ear canal. Possibly, the Cathars similarly literalized romantic French legends that emphasized the extravagant love of Mary Magdalene for Jesus, and the writings of medieval theologians who extolled the spiritual "marriage" between Christ and the Magdalene as a model for cloistered women. While it is easy to sympathize with the Cathars, who were brutally exterminated in the Albigensian Crusade (1209-1229), it is unlikely that their esoteric doctrines shed much light on the historical Mary Magdalene.

MARY MAGDALENE AND THE SACRED FEMININE

Another feature of the claim that Mary Magdalene was Jesus' wife is the assertion that as Christ's female counterpart, she symbolizes the feminine divine. For example, the hero of *The Da Vinci Code*, Robert Langdon, is a Harvard "symbolologist" researching a book on "Symbols of the Lost Sacred Feminine." The secret of Mary Magdalene is not simply that she is Jesus' wife and the mother of his messianic heir, but that she embodies the sacred feminine who to this day is worshipped by her devotees as "the Goddess, the Holy Grail, the Rose, and the Divine Mother."⁵ This sacred marriage points to the meaning of sex as a "mystical, spiritual act" in which "man" achieves the "spark of divinity...through union with the sacred feminine," and, presumably, by which woman unites with the sacred masculine.⁶ Surprisingly, for Margaret Starbird, who is a strong proponent of the marriage of Jesus and Mary, and who believes that they were the parents of a daughter, the royal bloodline hypothesis is "basically irrelevant": she deems much more important its implications for the "full humanity" of Jesus, and for the restoration of Mary as the Lost Bride of Christ, image of the sacred feminine.⁷

Although, from a feminist perspective, the notion of Jesus and Mary as male and female messianic counterparts may be somewhat appealing, there is no biblical or historical evidence of any such doctrine. Some Gnostics recognized female divine figures, but there is no evidence that Mary "Magdalene" was among them. The references to Cathar belief in a married Christ reflect the medieval legend that Mary Magdalene was a sinful woman saved from her depravity by Jesus; the witnesses to this Cathar belief state that they identified her with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:7-30) and the woman taken in adultery (John 8:2-11). Although the Cathars believed in a purely divine Christ, there is no evidence that they regarded Mary Magdalene as a divinity.

This does not mean that metaphors of the divine in feminine terms are foreign to the Bible or to Christianity. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott has shown that there are many biblical images of God as female—for example, as a mother in labor (Isaiah 42:14), as a nursing mother (Isaiah 49:15), as a midwife (Psalm 22:9-10), as a mother hen (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34), or as a bakerwoman (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21).⁸ Catholic theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson has shown that the figure of divine Wisdom, personified as a woman (*Hochmah, Sophia*), is a powerful female image of the divine in the biblical Wisdom literature (especially in Proverbs and the deuterocanonical books of Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon) that shaped New Testament Christology (e.g., Matthew 11:19; 1 Corinthians 1:22-24).⁹ As Jann Aldredge-Clanton notes, "What Judaism said of personified Wisdom...Christian writers came of say of Christ: the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15); the radiant light of God's glory (Hebrews 1:3); the firstborn of all creation (Colossians 1:15); the one through whom God created the world (Hebrews

1:2)."¹⁰ Semitic-speaking early Christians often spoke of the Holy Spirit as Mother due to the feminine gender of the Hebrew and Aramaic words for "spirit" (*ruah, ruha*).

MARY MAGDALENE AS PRIESTESS?

A variant on the claim that Mary Magdalene represents the sacred feminine is the notion that she was a priestess. Barbara Walker's *Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (1983) suggested that Mary was a priestess in a pagan temple. A novel by Cythia Kinstler, *The Moon under Her Feet* (1991), portrays her as having been brought to the Jewish temple to be trained to serve the Queen of Heaven. As an adult high priestess, she marries Jesus to perform the rite of "sacred marriage" with him. Another popular scholar, Lynn Picknett identifies the Magdalene as a priestess of Isis who initiated Jesus into her mysteries through sacred sex.¹¹ Although there is evidence that in pre-exilic times goddesses were worshipped in the Jerusalem temple (Jeremiah 7:18; 44:17-18, 19, 25; Ezekiel 8:14), there is no trace of any such practice in the time of Jesus. It is highly unlikely that a Jewish woman like Mary Magdalene would have honored any deity but the God of Israel.

CONCLUSION

For most of western Christian history, traditions about Mary Magdalene have not done justice to the biblical figure. Far from merely being a repentant prostitute, the Gospels portray her as a faithful follower and supporter of Jesus, chosen by the risen Christ to proclaim the good news to the other disciples. Contemporary speculations about a "sacred marriage" between Christ and the Magdalene as his female counterpart are not supported by the Gnostic and Cathar sources often cited by pop culture writers. Nor are conjectures about a royal bloodline, or notions of Mary Magdalene as a priestess or goddess figure.

Another biblical woman whose role has been distorted throughout the centuries is Mary of Bethany. Not only was she merged early on with Mary Magdalene and subsequently labeled as a prostitute, but her role in extra-biblical tradition as one of the women at the tomb was forgotten in western Christianity (although it is remembered in the Orthodox tradition, which regards Mary and Martha of Bethany as among the "Holy Myrrh-Bearers" at the tomb). Although Mary Magdalene was often called "apostle to the apostles" by medieval theologians, the earliest use of this title is found in an early Christian homily where it refers to the Bethany sisters, Martha (who is mentioned first) and Mary (Hippolytus of Rome, *On the Song of Songs* 25.6). As noted above, scholars have virtually overlooked Mary of Bethany's role in the Gnostic figure of Mary "Magdalene."

Although pop culture speculations that Mary Magdalene was Jesus' wife and a manifestation of the female divine find little support in the historical evidence, this does not mean that these ideas are insignificant. The widespread public fascination with these claims can provide opportunities for

discussions of many matters relevant to contemporary Christians. Such issues include the humanity of Jesus, the role of women in ministry, the theology of marriage, and the meaning of the biblical teaching that both sexes were created in God's image (Genesis 1:27). From a feminist Christian perspective, an issue that begs for redress is that after twenty-five years of feminist theology, the significance of Mary of Bethany in early Christianity has been eclipsed by the enthusiasm for Mary Magdalene. The roles of both biblical women as disciples, witnesses, and proclaimers of the reign of God deserve equal recognition.

NOTES

1 For a fuller discussion, see Mary Ann Beavis, "Reconsidering Mary of Bethany," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74:2 (2012), 281-297.

2 See, for example, Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2003), and Jean Yves Leloup, *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 2002).

3 Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2004 [1982]). Margaret Starbird's books include *The Goddess in the Gospels: Reclaiming the Sacred Feminine* (Rochester, VT: Bear & Company, 1998); *Mary Magdalene: Bride in Exile* (Rochester, VT: Bear & Company, 2005); and *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar: Mary Magdalen and the Holy Grail* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Company, 1993).

4 For a fuller discussion, see Mary Ann Beavis, "The Cathar Mary Magdalene and the Sacred Feminine: Pop Culture Legend vs. Medieval Doctrine," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 23: 3 (2012), forthcoming.

5 Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 334.

6 Brown, *Da Vinci Code*, 408.

7 See Starbird, *Alabaster Jar*, 178; *Bride in Exile*, 142.

8 Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

9 Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

10 Jann Aldredge-Clanton, *In Search of the Christ-Sophia: An Inclusive Christology for Liberating Christians* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1995), 10.

11 Lynn Picknett, *Mary Magdalene: Christianity's Hidden Goddess* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2003), 149-161.



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Women's Roles in the Letters to Timothy and Titus

BY MONA TOKAREK LAFOSSE

The letters to Timothy and Titus reveal a growing consciousness about reputation in early Christian communities. Behavior that outsiders might find distasteful—especially the behavior of women—could be perceived as immoral, compromising the honor of the group. How do these observations (and prescriptions) bear on the present?

Women's roles in the letters to Timothy and Titus appear troubling at best. There are references to old wives' tales (1 Timothy 4:7) and women "gadding about from house to house" (1 Timothy 5:13), taken "captive" by those who spread a false faith (2 Timothy 3:6). They are admonished not to be gossips and drunks (Titus 2:3), not to live sensually (1 Timothy 5:6), and not to braid their hair or wear jewelry (1 Timothy 2:9). According to these letters, women should love their husbands, bear children, manage their households (Titus 2:4-5; 1 Timothy 5:14), and remain silent, not teaching or exercising authority over men (1 Timothy 2:12)—a statement apparently justified by the sins of Eve (2:13-14). It is difficult not to see these texts as promoting a patriarchal view of women's roles.

Yet, alongside the negative portrayals of women in these letters, certain women are given special, even honorable, positions: mothers and grandmothers (2 Timothy 1:5; 1 Timothy 5:2, 4), older women who instruct younger ones (Titus 2:3-5), "real" widows (1 Timothy 5:3, 16), old widows (1 Timothy 5:9-10), a woman who "has widows" (1 Timothy 5:16), and women associated with the role of deacon (1 Timothy 3:11).

The historical and cultural context of these letters can sharpen our perception of what they say about the relation of older and younger women

in certain early Christian communities, and help us reflect on how those observations (and prescriptions) might bear on the present.

READING THE LETTERS IN CONTEXT

The authorship of these letters has been disputed for well over a century.¹ The tone, vocabulary, style, theology, and apparent circumstances of the letters to Timothy and Titus are quite different from the letters that Paul wrote in the 50s and 60s. Thus, many scholars have posited that they were not written by Paul, but by a later admirer of Paul who wanted to bring Paul's voice and authority to a later set of crises. Though they cannot be dated with any certainty, there is some agreement that these letters were written around the end of the first century. It was a time of crisis, when the founders of many early Christian communities had grown old or died, and a new generation of believers had conflicting ideas about how they should live as followers of Jesus.

The possibility that these letters were not written by Paul may lead some modern readers to dismiss them, or ascribe to them less scriptural importance than Paul's undisputed letters. Yet, their inclusion in the New Testament and their relevance to the present cannot be discounted.

Another crucial aspect in studying these letters is to consider the cultural and social context of early Christian women. Entering the social world of Christians in the late first and early second centuries is for us a cross-cultural experience. We encounter a way of thinking that is quite unlike modern Western worldviews. In the letters of Paul, for example, we are reading the thought of a man who was a first-century Jew, steeped in the traditions and perspectives of a certain kind of Judaism presented to Gentiles in the common Greek language of his day, who formulated arguments on the basis of conventions of ancient rhetoric and letter writing. Likewise, in the letters to Timothy and Titus, we glimpse how an unnamed admirer of Paul struggles to address problems in certain Christian communities for which he feels intensely responsible. They are by a man with particular perspectives; women are described and indirectly addressed but not given a voice. Thus, reading what he writes about women entails considering the male values and male assumptions about women and gender roles embedded in what he says.²

Finally, no matter how well-informed we might be as readers, we never read a text with complete impartiality. Our assumptions and experiences, some of which overlap with the long history of interpretation and application of the texts of the New Testament, are always part of our reading. As a historian, I bring certain assumptions and biases to reading the texts. While my historical reading is an attempt to access an accurate picture of the ancient world on the basis of solid research, as a reader I cannot escape the fact that what I choose to research, the questions I ask, and the way I see the texts is influenced by my own questions and life experiences.

The potential roles for me as a woman today, both relational and vocational, encompass a much larger range of possibilities than the roles for women in

the ancient Mediterranean world. Yet, there are similarities. Like many women then, I am at least partly defined by my familial roles of daughter, sister, wife, aunt, and mother, and relationships with female friends and colleagues who do not fit neatly into such categories. While some women, both then and now, possess other important identities and fulfill other roles in society, some women have fewer choices.

THE LIFE OF WOMEN IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN

In the ancient Mediterranean, a girl of the non-elite classes was educated primarily in household duties by her mother and other female kin. She was expected to marry a man of her parents' choosing in her late teen years. The marriage arrangements included a dowry, probably consisting of the household items she would need, like linen and kitchenware, prepared by the young woman and her female kin. Her husband was often five to ten years her elder. In the urban centers of the Roman Empire, a young bride most likely lived near to her natal kin. If her family had any property, it legally belonged to her first family rather than the family into which she married.

Since life expectancy for children was rather dismal, she could expect half of her children to die before their tenth year. Since few adults grew to old age, the threshold of which would be about sixty, she could expect her parents to die sometime in her twenties or thirties, and her grandparents long before that. She was likely to be widowed, perhaps more than once. If she was still of childbearing age, she was expected to remarry. If she was past childbearing, she would likely remain alone, hoping to support herself or receive support from her adult children.

If she was fortunate enough to see her children grow to adulthood, marry, and have children, she would become a mother-in-law and grandmother. It was this stage of her life, in her late forties and fifties, beyond childbearing and childrearing and having cultivated her reputation, that she commanded the most respect from her family and possessed the most social power within her life course. If she grew into old age, she might remain fairly active until ailments drew her life to a close, having no equivalents to modern medicine or aids to prolong life or bring relief.³

This general picture of the female life-course provides a backdrop to the roles of women in early Christian communities. Since the household was the site of early Christian gatherings, women must have played increasingly important roles as they aged, for the household was the domain of women.⁴

OLDER AND YOUNGER WOMEN IN TITUS 2:3-5

Since Paul's authorship is doubtful, it is helpful to think of the letter to Titus as a fictive portrayal—a story of a fictive Paul and a fictive Titus, written in a letter form.⁵ "Paul" uses his authority to instruct "Titus" on how to direct a post-Pauline community in the author's own time. (For simplicity, I often refer to these fictive characters simply as Paul and Titus in what follows.) We learn that the community believes in Jesus as their savior (3:3-7), but has

encountered divergent teachings (1:9) associated with particular interpretations of Jewish law, apparently in regard to what is clean and unclean (1:10-16; cf. 3:9-11). The letter is an attempt to elucidate what the author understands to be healthy teaching (1:9, 2:1; cf. 1:8).

Paul admonishes Titus to "speak what is fitting for healthy teaching" (2:1, my translation), with authority to exhort and rebuke (2:15). He then gives a list of what it is "fitting" to pursue and avoid by older men (2:2), older women and younger women (2:3-5), younger men (2:6), and slaves (2:9-10; the gender of slaves was irrelevant to their social status, but we can assume he meant male and female slaves). "Fitting" behavior promoted a good reputation of the community (2:5, 8, 10); in this way, members would have honor, unlike those who are promoting the divergent teachings (1:11). The desire to maintain honor is one reason why those who continue to promote division should be spurned (3:10-11).

Honor was a pivotal cultural value in the ancient Mediterranean.⁶ The group, especially the family, counted more than the individual. Honor represented the reputation of a person and the person's family, especially as it was measured against and perceived by other families or individuals. Women and men had different roles in this system. Generally speaking, men were expected to defend family honor in the face of public challenges or threats; women were expected to embody family honor by their modest, chaste, and submissive behavior. Honorable behavior was expected of all family members in order for the household to remain honorable in the eyes of others.

Gender, class, and age were important in determining how people would conduct themselves in social situations. Household codes (such as Ephesians 5:21-6:9 and Colossians 3:18-4:1) described ideal public behavior of family members: a wife was to be deferential to her husband, children were to be deferential to their parents, and slaves were to be deferential to their masters. Children were to respect their parents and grandparents, caring for them in their old age; parents were expected to provide for their children, including an inheritance if they were able. This included more than material provision. In 2 Timothy 1:5, for example, the author portrays Timothy's faith as having been passed down from his grandmother and mother.

Age hierarchy was evident along gender lines: younger men deferred to older men (unless there was an obvious class difference, so that an older male slave would defer to his master's adult son), and younger women deferred to older women. Age hierarchy among women appears to have been an important foundation of early Christian communities. In Titus 2:3-5, we glimpse aspects of women's roles that reflect this cultural norm.

According to Paul, the behavior of older women is to be similar to that of older men (2:2-3): they are to be "holy in behavior, not slanderous, not enslaved to much wine, teachers of what is excellent" (2:3, my translation). In the literature of the ancient world, an older woman is often stereotyped either as a hag who could compromise honor through shameful behavior

such as gossiping and drunkenness (the two prohibitions listed here), or as an ideal matron who embodied the honor of her family by exemplary virtue.⁷

Given the importance of “teaching” in *Titus*, the fact that the author highlights older women as “teachers of what is excellent” (all one word in Greek, *kalodidaskaloi*) is noteworthy. Their pupils are specified as younger women (2:4-5). Note that the older men, older women, younger men, and slaves are groups that Paul suggests Titus should address, but the younger women form a subset to be addressed, not by Titus, but by the older women. This kind of gendered age structure, in which older women are responsible for younger women, is common in many cultures.⁸

These older women could be mothers, mothers-in-law, aunts, grandmothers (less likely, given life expectancy in the ancient world), or other older women who acted as surrogate mothers or patrons to younger women. In a second-century Christian story, a young woman named Thecla is supported emotionally and financially by a surrogate mother, Queen Tryphaena, as she faces martyrdom (*Acts of Paul and Thecla*). In Acts 9:36-41, Tabitha’s good works and acts of mercy may be part of her role as patron to younger women around her.

Patronage, an important aspect of ancient Mediterranean culture, was an informal system in which persons of greater wealth and precedence would act as patrons for their clients. Both patron and client entered the relationship voluntarily, but the bond was usually long-term. The patron provided financial support, stability, protection, and other benefits; in return, the client was loyal, proclaiming the patron’s honor, and providing services when needed. An older woman past childbearing age would be in a good position to offer patronage to younger women, especially if she had some wealth. In a first-century memorial inscription called the *Laudatio Turiae* (“in praise of Turia”), a man recalls how his childless wife mothered her female kin, taking them into her home and providing them with dowries for good marriages (11.44-49).

In *Titus*, the older women seem to be encouraged to assume such a role. They are to teach by example, with self-control, modesty, and wisdom (implied by the verb *sophronizō*; 2:4). They should teach *behavior*, namely that which is honorable and ideal for married women in the ancient world: loving their husbands, loving their children, being modest and pure and good managers of their homes, and being submissive to their husbands. Since women’s modest behavior embodied the honor of their community, these behaviors reflected well-ordered, reputable families and communities. It is evident that the community’s reputation was important, for the author adds a reason why older women are to teach younger women these things: so that the “word of God” (that is, the message that comes from the healthy teaching; 1:9) would not be criticized or maligned (2:5). The author repeats this call for honorable behavior to avoid outside criticism two more times in this section (2:8, 10). In other words, dishonorable behavior could compromise the honor of the group, but honorable behavior embodies the healthy teaching.

WIDOWS, REPUTATION, AND "PROPER" BEHAVIOR

As in the case of Titus, I read the first letter of Timothy as a portrayal of a fictive Paul writing to his fictive younger colleague, Timothy. (Again, for simplicity, I will refer to them as Paul and Timothy). The author's goal is to address problems in a post-Pauline community that are divisive (1:19-20; 4:1-2; 6:3-5), related to problematic teaching (1:3-7, 6:3-5, 20-21), and compromising the reputation of the community (5:14; cf. 3:7). He outlines "how one ought to behave in the household of God" (3:15), a favorite metaphor for his community of Jesus followers. The author is adamant that what he deems *proper* behavior—behavior expected among members of a household in the ancient Mediterranean—should govern the behavior of the community. Proper behavior would serve two purposes: to combat the "other" teaching that was going on within the community (1:3-7; 4:1-3), and to refute negative views of the group from the perspective of outsiders (3:7; 5:14). It seems that the "other" teaching was promoting behavior that was threatening the reputation of the group.

The categories of people in 1 Timothy 5:1-2 resembles the list in Titus 2:2-6, dividing the community into older and younger men and women. These two verses form an apt introduction to the sections that follow on older and younger women (5:3-16) and older and younger men (5:17-25). The lengthy section on women's roles is an enigmatic section of the letter, but one that fits well with the author's appeal to behave properly in the household of God. The main problem seems

to hinge on how outsiders might (or did) perceive women in the community. Since women embodied the reputation of the group, their behavior was crucial.

The rhetoric of this section might help us understand the historical situation. Sometimes Paul exhorts Timothy, issuing him specific commands to speak kindly to an older man (5:1), honor real widows (5:3), proclaim these things (5:7), and inter-

cede for young widows (5:11)⁹. At other times, Paul directs third parties through Timothy. These are times when the author provides a glimpse into his own late first-century situation, and especially his concerns about how women's roles play a part in the community's reputation. A widow's children and grandchildren are to repay her (with care; 5:4); if someone does not care for one's own, that person is worse than an unbeliever (5:8); let an exemplary

Given the importance of "teaching" in Titus, the fact that older women should be "teachers of what is excellent" is noteworthy. Their pupils are the younger women. This kind of gendered age structure is common in many cultures.

widow be put on a list (5:9); and if some believing woman has widows, let her care for them, so that the community might be free to care for the real widows (5:16).

The “real widows” are the bookends of this section: they are alone (5:5) and need the help of the community (5:16). The problems, however, are with those who do not care for their own, especially those in their own households (5:8).

This lack of care comes in two forms. First, there are those who should be providing care to their widowed mothers and grandmothers, but apparently are neglecting their duty (5:4). In ancient Roman society, filial piety was a prime cultural value; adult children always cared for their parents. Neglect of a parent was seen as scandalous. According to 5:8, even an unbeliever would not do such a thing! Such neglect among members of the Jesus community would reflect poorly on the community as a whole in the eyes of outsiders.

Even more troubling was the situation of the younger widows (5:11-15). They are clearly posing a threat to the community’s reputation: they are idle, go from household to household, say things they should not be saying, and are being led astray. Paul says he wishes these women to assume roles that are proper and honorable for young women of that culture: marry, bear children, and manage a household (5:14). These roles are very similar to the ones we saw in Titus 2:4-5, where the establishment of younger women’s roles involved older women.

At the conclusion of the section on younger widows in 5:11-15, the author highlights the “believing woman who has widows” (5:16, my translation). This is the pinnacle of his argument and is best understood as a believing woman who has *younger* widows as her responsibility – perhaps as their mother, female kin, or patron. That is, older women, who properly had responsibility for younger widows, are not fulfilling their responsibilities – namely, finding marriage matches and dowries to make sure the young widows got remarried.

The role the young women play in compromising the community’s reputation (5:13-14) is linked to another problem. As sexually awakened women without husbands, they do not fit into a “normal” category of women. In the ancient world, a woman was normally married through her childbearing years, even if that meant remarrying after being widowed or divorced. The author of 1 Timothy states that “when their sensual desires alienate them from Christ, they want to marry,” but this desire constitutes a breach of their “first faith” or “first pledge” (5:11-12). Yet, Paul says he wants them to marry (5:14)! The role of the older women makes sense of this apparent paradox. Perhaps some of the older women, convinced by the “other” teaching that “forbade marriage” (4:3), are counseling younger widows against remarriage, despite the young widows’ desire to remarry (5:11; cf. 2 Timothy 3:6). Without older women to help them with the process, perhaps the young widows are looking for new husbands themselves, outside of the faith community and the normal channels, and are being perceived as “gadding about.”

The meaning of 5:11 is critical in thinking about this text. Most commentators and translations suggest that younger widows are to be denied a place on the list in 5:9, meaning that they are not eligible for charity, or not eligible to be part of an "order of widows" (a later office that is not obvious in this early text). But "intercede for" as a translation of the word (Greek: *paraitou*) lends itself more clearly to the context where Timothy is told to "honor widows who are really widows" (5:3) and "intercede for younger widows" (5:11, my translation). The believing woman would take care of them, as she properly should, leaving the church to care for the real widows (5:16). The direction to "enlist" an exemplary widow who is over sixty (5:9) is meant as a measuring stick for older women. Such a woman would be honored, as if her name was placed on a list of honored members of the community, for her lifetime of virtuous deeds (5:10). She would be a model of admirable behavior, especially a model for older women who are neglecting their responsibility.

In sum, the real problem was primarily the behavior of a group of older women, swayed by the "other" teachings, and neglecting their responsibilities. By abandoning their duties to the young women in their care, the young women were being perceived as behaving in dishonorable ways. Perhaps these older women are the ones that the author perceives as "living luxuriously" (5:6, my translation), and dressing in expensive clothes with braided hair (2:9). Perhaps he harshly condemns them not to teach or have authority over a man (2:11-12) because, in his mind, they are being led astray, and leading others astray. And it may be their "old wives' tales" that he has Paul warn Timothy about in this letter (4:7).

WOMEN IN 1 TIMOTHY 3:11

There is one other group of women that receives much less attention in 1 Timothy than those already mentioned. In a section on *diakonoi* (a word that literally means "servant," but here suggests a specific role in the community; it is often translated "deacon"), one sentence mentions "women" (*gunaikai*) (3:11). Whether these are wives of deacons or female deacons has been a matter of debate, but there is good evidence to suggest they were female deacons. The word *diakonos* is used of Phoebe in Romans 16:1, who is also clearly a patron to Paul, and a woman of honorable reputation.

In 1 Timothy 3, Paul outlines who qualifies as an overseer and *diakonos*, listing qualities of character rather than function.¹⁰ The characteristics that are listed in 3:11 are not particularly feminine ones, but ones that all community members, and especially those in special roles, should exhibit. Such a woman should be worthy of respect (like older men in Titus 2:2, and deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8), not slanderous (a prohibition listed for older women in Titus 2:3), and self-controlled (also used of older men in Titus 2:2). She is also to be faithful in all things, as Paul himself is (1 Timothy 1:12). Those who are faithful are those who know the truth, not being deceived by the "other" teaching (1 Timothy 4:3, 10). Faithful people are those entrusted to teach in

the community (2 Timothy 2:2). The same word for “faithful” is used for the “believing [or faithful] woman who has widows” (1 Timothy 5:16).¹¹ Thus, there were important roles for women in the community, if they embraced and embodied characteristics and behavior consistent with their faith.

CONCLUSION

The letters to Timothy and Titus reveal a growing consciousness about reputation in early Christian communities. Behavior that outsiders might notice and find distasteful—especially the behavior of women—could be perceived as immoral, compromising the honor of the group.

Today, women’s experiences of their familial, social, vocational, and ecclesial roles are often much more diverse than the depiction of women in these letters. Given women’s efforts, past and present, to overcome a history of patriarchy, it is difficult not to take offense at the patriarchal nature of what these letters have to say about women. While the author highlights the value of certain women with age, experience, modesty, and responsibility for others, his stance is one of a male authority figure—Paul—whose advice infers that he knows what is best for women. We hear nothing of what these women might have thought.

How different is this from modern times? There are still men, some in prominent positions, who think they know what is best for women (and other people with less influence than they have), and they enforce their ideas socially and legally. Reputation still matters to us. We make mental note of public figures and of businesses with questionable reputations. We gossip about families, often judging them by the behavior of the women and children (for example, who is commonly blamed for an unruly child in the grocery store or for an unkempt house?). Not unlike this author and his community, we also worry about what people think of us, about our “reputation.” Advertising and the self-help industry are insidious aspects of Western culture that promote, or even dictate, social norms for women (and men). They promote anxiety about reputation and social standing, with the hope of converting this anxiety into consumption.

But whose opinion really counts? The Apostle Paul is clear that it is God’s judgment that is most important (1 Corinthians 4:1-7). Although the fictive Paul is anxious about reputation and culturally specific moral behavior, he also commends individuals who cultivate reputable attributes such as steadfastness, integrity, and faithfulness. Such character, rooted in faith and tied into the responsibilities of each stage of the life course, promote behavior pleasing to God and fruitful for the community. Perhaps this view of reputation, whatever our age and gender, is worthwhile in our various roles in family, Church, and society.¹²

NOTES

1 Often called the “Pastoral Epistles,” I prefer to think of the letters to Timothy and Titus as separate, though related, letters.

2 See, for example, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1992).

3 See, for example, Mary Harlow and Ray Laurence, *Growing Up and Growing Old in Ancient Rome: A Life Course Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

4 For excellent explorations of women in early Christianity, see Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald with Janet H. Tulloch, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), and Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Early Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

5 John W. Marshall, "'I left you in Crete': Narrative Deception and Social Hierarchy in the Letter to Titus," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 127:4 (2008), 781-803.

6 Dietmar Neufeld and Richard E. DeMaris, eds., *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament* (New York: Routledge, 2010), provides a good introduction to cultural values in early Christian communities.

7 Karen Cokayne, *Experiencing Old Age in Ancient Rome* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

8 Virginia Kerns and Judith K. Brown, eds., *In Her Prime: New Views of Middle-Aged Women*, second edition (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

9 "Intercede for" is not the standard translation for the word *paraitou*, but my justification is explained below. My arguments for the interpretation of 1 Timothy 5:3-16 given here are presented in full in my doctoral dissertation, *Age Matters: Age, Aging and Intergenerational Relationships in Early Christian Communities, with a Focus on 1 Timothy 5* (University of Toronto, 2011).

10 I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 1999), 487.

11 The Greek adjective *pistos* means believing or faithful.

12 I thank Dr. Harold Remus and Susanna Suchak for helpful suggestions for this article.



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Deborah's Daughters

BY JOY A. SCHROEDER

As prophetess and judge, Deborah became a potent symbol of female authority and speech, an obvious exemplar for women aspiring to claim a public voice in the nineteenth century. These women—preachers, devotional writers, suffragists, and abolitionists—were Deborah's daughters.

Deborah's story in Judges 4-5 has disruptive potential. A female prophet sits beneath her palm tree, judges Israel, summons the war leader Barak, provides military and tactical instructions, and accompanies the commander to battle. She publically sings a lengthy victory song, relishing gory violence meted out to Canaanite enemies. In the biblical text, Deborah exhibits characteristics that many readers have felt should never be encouraged in women. Her assertive behavior seemed at odds with the apostolic instructions: "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence" (1 Timothy 2:11-12, KJV). Some felt that if Scripture commended Deborah, she *must* have conformed to the apostolic commands—even if these instructions had not yet been given!

However, at the pulpit and the speaker's podium, nineteenth-century women used Deborah's story to argue for their right to preach, lecture publicly, hold political office, vote in elections, and enter the political sphere as men's equals. Deborah was a potent example for nineteenth-century proponents of women's leadership in Church and society.

The nineteenth century experienced a virtual explosion of women's preaching. During the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening (c. 1790-1844), hundreds of American women felt called to preach the gospel and were "a prominent part of the evangelical landscape."¹ Many evangelical

Protestants, especially in Methodist and Baptist traditions, regarded women's preaching as a sign that they were living in "the latter days," when the Holy Spirit would be poured out upon male and female alike (Joel 2:28-29). Though numerous nineteenth-century clergymen *did* support women's right to speak publicly, women preachers and exhorters encountered considerable opposition from detractors.² They were regularly challenged and obligated to justify their ministry.

WOMEN PREACHERS AND THE PROPHETESS

Harriet Livermore (1788-1868), a white New England preacher licensed in the Baptist tradition, was the first woman to preach to Congress—delivering a fiery ninety-minute address in the chamber of the House of Representatives in 1827.³ (President John Quincy Adams had to sit on the steps because the gallery was filled!) Livermore's autobiography reports her struggles to be accepted as an itinerant preacher.⁴ Scriptural women were sources of personal comfort to Livermore as she took relish in female accomplishments: "How lovely, my dear sister, was female piety in...Deborah, as she marched by Barak's side, at the head of an army, prepared for battle against the idolatrous heathen; or returning home with a song of praise to the God of battles, for avenging his people, or seated in her dwelling amid the palm grove, as Israel's teacher, counselor and judge." After praising Miriam, Huldah, and Anna, she concludes: "I glory in Scripture's female worthies."⁵

In 1846, Zilpha Elaw (c. 1790-?), an African-American who preached in the Methodist tradition, wrote an autobiography describing her preaching journeys in North America and Great Britain. Elaw reports evangelistic successes among black and white listeners, but also recounts verbal opposition and threats. She defended herself with the example of Deborah. When an unnamed Methodist woman derisively told Elaw to join the Quakers, for there was no place for female preachers in Methodism, she responded: "The...Lord, who raised up Deborah to be a prophetess, and to judge His people, and inspired Hulda[h] to deliver the counsels of God, sent me forth not as a Quakeress but a Methodist..."⁶

Frances Willard (1839-1898), a white Methodist speaker and president of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union, used examples of biblical women like Deborah to challenge literalist readings of biblical texts that enjoined women's silence. In *Woman in the Pulpit*, Willard uses a homey cooking metaphor: "A pinch of commonsense forms an excellent ingredient in that complicated dish called Biblical interpretation..."⁷ She observed that most biblical commentators have been men: "We need women commentators to bring out the women's side of the book; we need the stereoscopic view of truth in general, which can only be had when woman's eye and man's together shall discern the perspective of the Bible's full-orbed revelation."⁸ To demonstrate that Scripture itself opposes universal literal application of commands concerning women's silence and subjection, she created a chart

in which each of seven Pauline hierarchical statements was rebutted by other words from Scripture supporting women's ministry. Willard placed Judges 4-5 into direct opposition to 1 Timothy 2:12.⁹

After listing many biblical examples, Willard concludes: "There are thirty or forty passages in favor of woman's public work for Christ, and only two against it [1 Timothy 2:11 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35], and these are not really so when rightly understood."¹⁰ Imitating the roll call of male heroes named in Hebrews 11:32-34, she writes stirringly: "Time would fail to tell of Miriam, the first prophetess, and Deborah, the first judge.... Suffice it to say that these all stand forth the equal stewards with their brethren of God's manifold grace."¹¹

In Judges 5:7 Deborah calls herself "a mother in Israel." Some female preachers mentioned Deborah's maternal role to insist that public positions were not inconsistent with motherhood and femininity. A woman speaking publicly could remain feminine. In 1859, prominent Methodist evangelist Phoebe Palmer (1807-1874) wrote a lengthy defense of women's speaking, insisting that women do not become "unfeminine" if God raises them up for extraordinary responsibilities in church or civil government. Using Deborah as example, Palmer asserted that "the God of Providence will enable [a woman] to meet the emergency with becoming dignity, wisdom, and womanly grace."¹² The situation called for the prophetess's courage and leadership, but this did not make her "unwomanly": "the holy zeal of this mother in Israel nerved her for the conflict, and, with...faith and courage... she led forth the armies of God to glorious conquest. Yet who talked of Deborah as overstepping the bounds of womanly propriety, in either judging Israel, or in leading forth the armies of the living God to victory?"¹³ Deborah's victory song curses the people of Meroz, who did not join the Israelites in rebelling against their oppressors (Judges 5:23). Palmer creatively exegeted this passage to reproach those who reject the leadership of a woman called by God. She conjectures that perhaps the Merozites contained "whisperers" who stirred up dissent against Deborah's female leadership. Palmer's words conveyed an ominous warning to women's detractors. The Merozites "brought down the curse of the God of battles" on themselves. Their "names are written in the dust, while the name of this ancient prophetess, who led Israel forth to victory, stands recorded in the Book of eternal remembrance."¹⁴ No doubt the same shall happen to small-minded enemies who malign Palmer and her sister exhorters!

Women preachers in the Salvation Army were popularly known as "Hallelujah Lasses." In 1859, Salvation Army co-founder Catherine Mumford Booth (1829-1890) published a pamphlet defending women's preaching. Against detractors who regard "the public exercises of women" as "unnatural and unfeminine," she responds that such opponents have mistaken custom for "nature." As proof of the "natural" ministerial abilities of women, Booth observes that Deborah's leadership was accepted without objection: "the

authority of Deborah as a prophetess...was acknowledged and submitted to as implicated in the cases of the male judges who succeeded her. Secondly, she is made the military head of ten thousand men, Barak refusing to go to battle without her.... In the light of such passages as these, who will dare to dispute the fact that God did...endow His handmaidens with the gifts and calling of prophets answering to our present idea of preachers."¹⁵

STIRRING THE IMAGINATION: DEVOTIONAL WRITINGS FOR WOMEN

Deborah was frequently treated in collections of short inspirational biographies of biblical women. The writers—some of whom were also novelists—imaginatively entered into Bible stories, providing their own details and conjectures. They encouraged female readers to appreciate their own gifts and recognize that they had a worthy heritage. Deborah shows that female virtue could be put into public service.

Grace Aguilar (1816-1847) was a British Jewish novelist whose widely-read biographical collection *Women of Israel* argued that ancient Israelite women held a higher status than women did in either the Judaism or British society of her day. Aguilar's treatment of Deborah supported her defense of Judaism as she countered prevailing claims that Christianity had elevated women's status. Likewise challenging the Jewish community, she called for expanded women's rights. Since Deborah is introduced in Judges 4 "so naturally," without any explanation about why a woman held the office of prophetess and judge, "we cannot possibly believe her

elevation to be an extraordinary occurrence, or that her position as a wife forbade her rising above mere conjugal and household duties."¹⁶ If women had been on a social par with slaves or heathens, Deborah could never have held such authority. Nor would Barak have refused to go to battle without her. Being wife or mother was perfectly compatible with being a public leader. Her husband Lappidoth (Judges 4:4) supported her. Aguilar continues:

Women devotional writers imaginatively entered into the stories of Deborah, providing their own details and conjectures. They encouraged female readers to appreciate their gifts and recognize that they had a worthy heritage in public service.

Yet the history of Deborah in no way infers that she was neglectful of her conjugal and domestic duties.... To a really great mind, domestic and public duties are so perfectly compatible, that the first need never be sacrificed for the last. And that Lapidoth in no manner interfered with the public offices of his wife, called as she was to

them by God Himself through His gifts, infers a noble confidence and respectful consideration towards her, evidently springing at once from the national equality and freedom tendered to Jewish women; and from a mind great enough to appreciate and value such talents even in a woman; a greatness not very often found in modern times.¹⁷

Social activist Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1895), best known for her abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, wrote a work entitled *Woman in Sacred History*, demonstrating that strong female leaders are consistent with biblical values. Stowe envisions Israelite society as respecting and encouraging the leadership of women like Deborah:

It is entirely in keeping with the whole character of the Mosaic institutions, and the customs of the Jewish people, that one of these inspired deliverers should be a woman. We are not surprised at the familiar manner in which it is announced, as a thing quite in the natural order, that the chief magistrate of the Jewish nation, for the time being, was a woman divinely ordained and gifted.¹⁸

Barak's refusal to go to war without Deborah (Judges 4:8) was a mark of his profound respect for Deborah and proof of the honor which Israelites showed to women leaders: "The warlike leader of the nation comes to her submissively, listens to her message as to a divine oracle, and obeys."¹⁹ Stowe observes that her husband Lappidoth's name is preserved only because of Deborah: "The prophetess is a wife, but her husband is known to posterity only through her."²⁰

Commenting on Deborah's song (Judges 5), Stowe assumes that Deborah must have written many other poems. With poignant wistfulness, she laments that no other poetry from this prophetess is extant. This poem, together with the songs of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10) and the Virgin Mary (Luke 1:46-55), are remnants of a flourishing women's culture that is all but forgotten. A vibrant tradition of women poet-prophets has passed away, most of their works lost to the ages:

And as this song dies away, so passes all mention of Deborah. No other fragment of poetry or song from her has come down from her age to us. This one song, like a rare fragment of some deep-sea flower, broken off by a storm of waters, has floated up to tell of her. We shall see, as we follow down the line of history, that women of this lofty poetic inspiration were the natural product of the Jewish laws and institutions. They grew out of them, as certain flowers grow out of certain soils.²¹

Deborah's poem in Judges 5 is a vestige of an elusive and irretrievable women's history, a heritage which must have been fuller and richer than the extant historical sources have preserved.

SUFFRAGISTS, ABOLITIONISTS, AND JUDGE DEBORAH

The most celebrated and vilified example of nineteenth-century female commentary was Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *Woman's Bible*, published in two parts in 1895 and 1898. Stanton asserts that "Lapidoth" was a place name rather than the prophetess's husband. Stanton's beliefs about Jewish patriarchy cause her to believe that Deborah must have been unmarried: "Indeed Deborah seems to have had too much independence of character, wisdom and self-reliance to have ever filled the role of the Jewish idea of a wife."²² Given Deborah's prominence, Stanton is indignant that Deborah had been omitted from the roll call of the great heroes in Hebrews 11:32: "Though she was one of the great judges of Israel for forty years, her name is not on the list, as it should have been, with Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah. Men have always been slow to confer on women the honors which they deserve."²³

Appointed to comment on Judges 5 in *The Woman's Bible*, Freethought activist Clara Neyman differed from Stanton regarding the patriarchy in the biblical world, offering a generally positive assessment of "ancient Judaism's" treatment of women:

The woman who most attracts our attention in the Book of Judges is Deborah, priestess, prophetess, poetess and judge. What woman is there in modern or in ancient history who equals in loftiness of position, in public esteem and honorable distinction this gifted and heroic Jewish creation? The writer who compiled the story of her gifts and deeds must have had women before him who inspired him with such a wonderful personality. How could Christianity teach and preach that women should be silent in the church when already among the Jews equal honor was shown to women?²⁴

Neyman posits that there were other women who carried out similar roles, for ancient Judaism cultivated women's leadership skills and honored their authority: "Deborah was, perhaps, only one of many women who held such high and honorable positions." Deborah is an example of what women of Neyman's own day might accomplish if their talents were respected and nurtured. "If Deborah, way back in ancient Judaism, was considered wise enough to advise her people in time of need and distress, why is it that at the end of the nineteenth century, woman has to contend for equal rights and fight to regain every inch of ground she has lost since then?" Neyman says that "by arousing woman to the dignity of her position we shall again have women like Deborah, honored openly and publicly for political wisdom, to whom men will come in time of need." Finally, the collaboration between Barak and Deborah exemplifies the united efforts of males and females to sweep away injustice: "Together [man and woman] will slay the enemies – ignorance, superstition and cruelty."²⁵

Maria W. Stewart (1803-1879), credited as the first African-American female political writer, frequently spoke on the topic of slavery, racism, and

women's rights. In an address delivered in Boston in 1833, she uses the example of biblical women to justify her own call to public oratory: "What if I am a woman; is not the God of ancient times the God of these modern days? Did he not raise up Deborah, to be a mother, and a judge in Israel?"²⁶

Angelina Grimké (1805-1879), a prominent Euro-American abolitionist writer and lecturer, made a similar point when urging southern women to work to end slavery. They should remember the host of biblical women who courageously stood up on behalf of liberty: "Who went up with Barak to Kadesh to fight against Jabin, King of Canaan...? It was a *woman!* Deborah the wife of Lapidoth...."²⁷ Grimké insists that the prophetesses did not confine themselves to the domestic sphere: "I read in the Bible, that Miriam, and Deborah, and Huldah, were called to fill *public stations* in Church and State."²⁸

In an 1894 address, Anna Howard Shaw (1847-1919), a Methodist Protestant clergywoman and president of the National Woman Suffrage Association, explicitly used Deborah to argue in favor of women's voting rights. She reflected a perspective, often expounded in suffragist circles, that corruption and graft are particularly male vices. A female leader who has a "mother's heart" will root out injustice, ensuring protection and well-being for all people under her charge. Judge Deborah is proof that a nation afflicted with injustice and corruption can benefit from "a little mothering."

There never was another country which had so many parents as we have had, but they have all been fathers — pilgrim fathers, Plymouth fathers, forefathers, revolutionary fathers, city fathers and church fathers, fathers of every description, but...we have never had a mother. In this lies the weakness of all republics. They have been fathered to death. The great need of our country today is a little mothering to undo the evils of too much fathering. Like Israel of old, when the people were reduced to their utmost extremity, in order to save the nation, there was needed a ruler who was at once a statesman, a commander-in-chief of the armies and a righteous judge, who would render justice and be impervious to bribes. God called a woman to rule, and Deborah tells us in her wonderful ode that the great need of the nation in this hour of its extremity was the motherhood applied to government, when she exclaims, "Behold the condition of Israel when I, Deborah, a mother in Israel, arose." Then was there peace in Israel and prosperity and success, as Deborah ruled the people in righteousness for forty years.²⁹

Most early feminists held romanticized views about the reforms that females could bring to government and politics. Deborah was not only as qualified as male leaders, but her maternal feelings made her a *better* leader than the men of her society. Women said that they, like their ancient fore-mother Deborah, possessed a maternal perspective which made them excellent candidates for political activity, where they could bring female values into a society which desperately needed their motherly expertise.

CONCLUSION: MOTHERS IN ISRAEL

As prophetess and judge, Deborah was a potent symbol of female authority and speech, an obvious exemplar for women aspiring to claim a public voice in the nineteenth century. Women wondered: if Deborah was permitted to prophesy and lead Israel in ancient times, why could women not vote or preach in their own time? As we have seen, Deborah stirred the imagination, providing evidence of the great things females could accomplish in politics, literature, law, and religion, if only women's innate abilities were recognized, cultivated and respected.³⁰

NOTES

- 1 Elizabeth Elkin Grammer, *Some Wild Visions: Autobiographies by Female Itinerant Evangelists in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 35.
- 2 Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 137.
- 3 Cynthia Jürisson, "Federalist, Feminist, Revivalist: Harriet Livermore (1788-1868) and the Limits of Democratization in the Early Republic" (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1994), 227-230.
- 4 Harriet Livermore, *A Narration of Religious Experience in Twelve Letters* (Concord, NH: Jacob B. Moore, 1826), 15-16.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 6 Zilpha Elaw, *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs Zilpha Elaw*, in William L. Andrew, ed., *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), 147.
- 7 Frances E. Willard, *Woman in the Pulpit* (Chicago, IL: Woman's Temperance Publication Association, 1889; reprinted Washington, DC: Zenger, 1978), 26.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 33-34.
- 12 Phoebe Palmer, *Promise of the Father; or, A Neglected Speciality [sic] of the Last Days* (Boston, MA: H. V. Degen, 1859; reprinted Salem, OH: Schmul Publishers, 1981), 2.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*, 2-3.
- 15 Catherine Booth, *Female Ministry; Or, Woman's Right to Preach the Gospel* (London, UK: Salvation Army Printing & Publishing Offices, 1891; reprinted New York: The Salvation Army Supplies Printing and Publishing Department, 1975), 3.
- 16 Grace Aguilar, *Women of Israel*, excerpted in *Grace Aguilar: Selected Writings*, edited by Michael Galchinsky (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2003), 298.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 298-299.
- 18 Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Woman in Sacred History: A Series of Sketches Drawn from Scriptural, Historical, and Legendary Sources* (New York: J. B. Ford and Company, 1873), 100.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 101.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*, 106.
- 22 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible, Part II* (New York: European Publishing Company, 1898; reprinted Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 18.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 18-19.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 21.

25 *Ibid.*, 22-23.

26 "Mrs. Stewart's Farewell Address to her Friends in the City of Boston," in *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, edited by Marilyn Richardson (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 68.

27 Angelina Emily Grimké, *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*, in *The Public Years of Sarah and Angelina Grimké: Selected Writings*, edited by Larry Ceplair (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 60.

28 *Ibid.*, 105.

29 Anna Howard Shaw, "The Fate of Republics," in Wil A. Linkugel and Martha Solomon, *Anna Howard Shaw: Suffrage orator and Social Reformer* (New York: Greenwood, 1991), 144-145.

30 I presented an earlier version of this essay at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting in New Orleans in November 2009.



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❖ Other Voices ❖

In spite of the patriarchal nature of the biblical texts, I myself have no intention of giving up the biblical basis of my theology. The Bible has authority in my life because it makes sense of my experience and speaks to me about the meaning and purpose of my humanity in Jesus Christ. In spite of its ancient and patriarchal worldviews, in spite of its inconsistencies and mixed messages, the story of God's love affair with the world leads me to a vision of new Creation that impels my life.

LETTY M. RUSSELL, "Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation," in Letty R. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (1985)

Yes, it is true that the biblical text allocates more space to men than it does to women. Yes, more men than women in the Bible hold prominent positions in society. But do these two facts mean that women are less important than men in family, in society, and before God? I decided to probe more deeply this question—and concern—by studying the women of the Bible.... My research points decisively to a negative answer to this central question! My research leads me to note that overwhelmingly when a woman (or girl) appears in the biblical text, this rarity *heralds* an upcoming event as important. Narrators may intentionally use a woman's or girl's entrance into the text to raise, as it were, a *red flag* that announces the significance of this part of the story.

ROBIN GALLAHER BRANCH, *Jereboam's Wife: The Enduring Contributions of the Old Testament's Least-Known Women* (2009)

The strong interest in biblical women's stories recognizes the important place of women in salvation history. The Bible plays a part in determining both how women see themselves and how others see women in church and society.

BARBARA J. ESSEX, *Women in the Bible* (2001)

In an androcentric society, where men created and enforced the laws, dominated religious and political life, and had the final say in matters pertaining to all facets of family life, one might logically wonder if a woman had any ability to determine her own destiny. Although the Bible seems to insinuate that all women were subordinate to men, there are many women stories that indicate the opposite. It is clear that many women thought for

themselves and acted on their own accord (or some might argue, under divine directive), without the advice, permission, or the blessings of a man. Hence the women stories present us with a bit of a paradox. On the one hand, the Bible is undeniably steeped in patriarchy – a cultural reality that is necessarily restrictive, subjugating, and even misogynistic. On the other hand, there are stories in the Bible that feature women taking matters into their own capable hands and making decisions independent of men.

What are we to do with such a paradox? At one end of a rather wide spectrum is a traditional, undeniably conservative interpretation of the women stories that would advocate contemporary adherence to the patriarchal norms found in the Bible. Many religious conservative groups, both Jewish and Christian, embrace these norms and women are required to strictly follow many of the patriarchal dictates found in the Bible. At the other end of this spectrum is the tendency by some to dismiss the Bible as archaic, outdated, and of little value to women's (and men's) contemporary roles within the family and community.

Perhaps the best way to address this paradox is with a more centralist view. That is, to read the women stories in the Bible for enjoyment, inspiration, and for the pearls of wisdom the biblical author or authors sought to impart.

T. J. WRAY, *Good Girls, Bad Girls: The Enduring Lessons of Twelve Women of the Old Testament* (2008)

The final motive of this book is probably pastoral, to suggest that with regard to women early Christianity was a movement of liberation, that the God of the New Testament revealed in Jesus Christ is the God of Hebrew scripture, a God of justice, a God with an ear especially turned toward the oppressed and disenfranchised. That cultures and societies presented or described God in male or patriarchal terms does not make God male or patriarchal. As I understand it, the New Testament is the literary record of God's most dramatic attempt to be better known by human beings. If the writers of the New Testament in some ways fell short of God's self-revelation, it is not God's fault. The Word, after all, became flesh, not book.

BONNIE B. THURSTON, *Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary* (1998)

For those exploring the New Testament, this reality must be factored into any description of discipleship: some women were capable of theological discussion and had the means to sponsor the group. We should expect that Jesus, Paul, and traveling missionaries (which included women) met educated women with strong business acumen and effective community influence.

Ironically, women's lack of participation in church politics and leadership hierarchy in later history has led some to argue that the way forward is to go back to the model of the first-century church. Communities negotiated the question of female participation based on local situations—for example, whether wealthy women were members of the church and whether the female followers of Jesus had much if any education. Some of their answers might appear sexist by our standards, assuming we have understood their injunctions correctly. Understanding the cultural and social world of these women (and men) allows us to critique that world, and perhaps to critique our own. As we do so, it offers us an opportunity to think more deeply about the subtle (and explicit) forms of sexism (to say nothing of racism) endemic to ancient culture and, sadly, to our own. But knowing history allows us to avoid repeating its mistakes and to build on its successes.

In short, as we dialogue today about the role of women in society and in the synagogue and church, about women in political leadership and the “glass ceiling,” about a woman's role in family and community, we would do well to have an accurate picture of those women who walked these paths before us. Women in the world of the earliest Christians offer us a portrait of possibilities.

LYNN H. COHICK, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (2009)

Upon closer inspection, I discovered many women in the Bible had trouble fitting into the wife-and-mother definition of what it means to be a woman. They clearly embraced traditional expectations and tried desperately to live within those parameters, but ultimately found it impossible. Naomi in the Old Testament and Anna in the New enjoyed ideal lives at one point, only to lose everything through the premature death of a husband. Sarah didn't become a mother until she was ninety, which was considerably worse than my experience of delayed motherhood and hardly any woman's dream. Hagar's and Esther's lives were hopelessly reconfigured—actually sacrificed—to serve someone else's agenda. Neither woman had a voice in events that trampled underfoot her private hopes and dreams.

It is not often noted, but many stories of women in the Bible make no mention of a husband or children. Although singleness was exceedingly rare in ancient Hebrew culture, no one knows if Miriam, Mary and Martha, or Mary Magdalene ever married. In a jarring break from the culture (and without diminishing the family), the New Testament anchors a woman's identity and purpose to her relationship with Jesus rather than to her parentage, her marital status, or her children.

CAROLYN CUSTIS JAMES, *Lost Women of the Bible: The Women We Thought We Knew* (2008)

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Bronzino captures the moment when Mary Magdalene recognizes the resurrected Christ and receives his instruction, “Do not touch me.”

The First Witness

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

In John's gospel, after Mary Magdalene discovers the stone has been removed from Jesus' tomb, she seeks out Peter and another disciple who investigate the empty tomb. After the men return home, she lingers in the garden. When two angels inside the tomb ask why she is crying, she says that someone has moved Jesus' body. As she turns from the angels, she sees Jesus standing near her, but mistaking him for a gardener, she pleads with him to return the body if he has taken it. Jesus then calls her by name and she recognizes him.

Bronzino depicts the next moment in John's narrative: "Jesus saith to her: Do not touch me, for I am not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brethren, and say to them: I ascend to my Father and to your Father, to my God and your God" (John 20:17, Douay-Rheims Version). The painting's title *Noli me tangere* is Latin for "Do not touch me." The story concludes with Mary seeking out the disciples to tell them, "I have seen the Lord" (20:18).

In the painting, Jesus looks like a gardener with a shovel in his right hand and freshly planted flowers and upturned soil at his feet. An angel stands beside the empty tomb in the right background; other women (mentioned in the Synoptic Gospels) are nearby. Mary's vibrantly colored attire – ultramarine gown, deep red cloak, and lush green undergown – elegantly coiffed hairstyle, and ornamented clasp at her neck are characteristic of Mannerism, an affected style of painting between the High Renaissance and Baroque periods in Italian art. The depiction of Jesus' body with elongated torso and disproportionately small head reflects the artist's careful study of anatomy, and draws on Michelangelo's Christ in the *Last Judgment* on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel as a source.¹

Despite Mary Magdalene's complicated (and confused) identity in church history and visual art, she is undeniably the first disciple – either alone, or with other women – to see the resurrected Christ.² Her message "I have seen the Lord" typifies the most important function of a disciple of Christ today.

NOTES

1 Deborah Parker, "Bronzino and the Diligence of Art," *Artibus et Historiae*, 25:49 (2004), 163.

2 See Mary Ann Beavis, "Who is Mary Magdalene?" on pp. 23-29 in this issue.

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Ghiberti's *Story of Jacob and Esau* traces Rebekah's important role in the rivalry between her twin sons to gain her husband Isaac's blessing.

Lorenzo Ghiberti (1370-1455), STORY OF JACOB AND ESAU FROM THE EAST DOORS OF THE BAPTISTERY, FLORENCE (1426-1452). Gilt bronze, 31 1/4". Museo dell' Opera del Duomo, Florence, Italy. Photo: © Scala/ Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

Rebekah's Scheme

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Rebekah, Sarah, Leah, and Rachel are the matriarchs of the people of Israel. Rebekah is the only matriarch who speaks directly with God—about the future of her twin sons, Esau and Jacob, and why she has such pain in bearing them. The twins are struggling in her womb, God explains, and eventually “the elder shall serve the younger” (Genesis 25:23). This gives Rebekah the information and confidence she needs to concoct a scheme with her younger son, Jacob, to gain the blessing that her husband Isaac intends for their firstborn, Esau.¹

Lorenzo Ghiberti sculpted two of the three sets of bronze doors on the Baptistery in Florence. The door titled *Story of Jacob and Esau* traces Rebekah's important role in her sons' rivalry. With precise linear perspective (based on the system devised by Leon Battista Alberti in 1435), Ghiberti employs many planes within the image to guide viewers through the complex events recorded in Genesis 25 and 27.

In the upper right corner, Rebecca is speaking to God (25:22-23). In the back left, she gives birth to her sons (25:24-25)—Esau, the firstborn and the favorite of his father Isaac, and Jacob, who Rebekah favors. In the center back panel, Jacob cooks a stew and trades it to his famished brother Esau for his birthright (25:29-34). In the front middle, Isaac, now elderly and poor sighted, asks Esau to hunt and prepare savory food for him (27:1-4). Esau is going off to hunt in the back panel on the right. Rebekah, overhearing Isaac's request of Esau, prepares a stew and convinces Jacob to pose as his brother Esau and take the food to Isaac (25:5-17); this part of the story is suggested in the right middle panel. Jacob receives Isaac's blessing in the right foreground with Rebekah looking on (27:18-29). God later blesses Jacob with the name “Israel,” which means the one who strives with God (32:27-28).

Rebekah employs clever means to subvert the intentions of her husband, who had greater authority over the family inheritance.² She gets what she wants for Jacob and fulfills God's mysterious plan even though she is not at the center of power. Rebekah was highly revered in the early church. Tradition holds that she is buried with Isaac in the Tombs of Patriarchs in Hebron, Israel.

NOTES

1 Cynthia Astle, “Women of the Torah Were Co-Founders of Israel,” *About.com Ancient/Classical History*, accessed March 17, 2013, <http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/Biblical-history-by-Astle/a/030511-CW-Women-of-the-Torah.htm>.

2 Ibid.

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Artemisia Gentileschi depicts Judith as a powerful heroine who slays Holofernes, and her young maidservant as more a co-conspirator than a mere attendant.

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1652), JUDITH BEHEADING HOLOFERNES (c. 1619-1620). Oil on canvas. 78 3/8" x 64". Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy. Photo: © Scala/Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

Judith's Co-conspirator

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The character of Judith is among the strongest heroines in the biblical tradition. Jewish interpreters see her as a great protector of her people during the period after the Exile; in the Christian tradition she represents various virtues, such as chastity in opposition to lust. Her story is told in the book of Judith, which was probably written in Hebrew (although the earliest known manuscripts are in Greek in the Septuagint) near the end of the second century B.C. in the aftermath of the Maccabean revolt. The text is considered canonical in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches; it is in the Apocrypha of Protestant bibles.

According to the story, Holofernes commands a vast Assyrian army laying siege to Bethulia, a Judean town. When the community leaders decide to surrender to him, Judith upbraids them for their lack of faith in God and hatches a daring plan to kill the general.

After praying for her people's deliverance,

[Judith] combed her hair, put on a tiara, and dressed herself in the festive attire that she used to wear while her husband Manasseh was living. She put sandals on her feet, and put on her anklets, bracelets, rings, earrings, and all other jewelry. Thus she made herself very beautiful, to entice the eyes of all the men who might see her. She gave her maid a skin of wine and a flask of oil, and filled a bag with roasted grain, dried fig cakes, and fine bread; then she wrapped up all her dishes and gave them to her to carry. (*Judith* 10:3-5)

Judith and her maid walk toward the enemy's camp. When they are captured by an Assyrian patrol, Judith captivates the guards and convinces them that she can tell Holofernes how to conquer the hill country without losing one of his men (10:13).

For three days the general enjoys Judith's company. His lust for her grows until, on the fourth day, he plans a banquet for his personal attendants only. When Holofernes urges Judith to "Have a drink and be merry with us!" she gladly accepts because "today is the greatest day of my whole life!" (12:17). The general drinks more than he has ever drunk. That night Judith seizes her opportunity when she is left alone in the tent with Holofernes, who is now unconscious and "stretched out on his bed, for he was dead drunk" (13:2).

Judith prays in her heart, "O Lord God of all might, look in this hour on the work of my hands for the exaltation of Jerusalem. Now indeed is the time to help your heritage and to carry out my design to destroy the enemies who have risen up against us" (13:4b-5). Taking down a sword that is hanging

from the bedpost, she cries, "Give me strength today, O Lord God of Israel!" and strikes Holofernes's neck twice to cut off his head. She rolls the corpse off the bed and gives its head to her maid, who places it in her food bag (13:4-10). After Judith returns to her people with the head of Holofernes, she instructs them to attack the Assyrian army at daybreak. The Israelites proceed to plunder their enemy's camp.

"Judith is conventional in upholding inheritance and purity rights, in prayer and fasting, in her ideas about God's providence," Toni Craven explains. "She is unconventional in upbraiding the male leaders of her own town for what they have said about God, though she does this in the privacy of her own home."¹

Artemisia painted Judith's famous deed numerous times, but the Uffizi version with the spurting blood makes it one of the most violent depictions of the biblical story ever painted. Over the years many scholars have interpreted the gory depiction as the artist's personal reaction to being raped by a man who was her father's associate. More recent scholars trace its violence to artistic rather than psychological influences: the painting may reflect the tastes of her patrons, probably Duke Cosimo II de' Medici of Florence.²

Artemisia borrows certain elements from Caravaggio's depiction of this event, painted ten years earlier: the intense violence pushed to the front of the picture plane and Judith's stiff parallel arms are directly from that source. But, unlike Caravaggio, Artemisia presents Judith as extremely large and powerful. She also adjusts the age, physique and activity of the maidservant: Abra (as she has come to be identified in the secondary literature) appears to be about the same age as Artemisia and is more a co-conspirator than a mere attendant waiting to be given the head. This younger, attractive maidservant holds Holofernes down and he reaches upward toward her, not Judith.³

NOTES

1 Toni Craven, "Judith 2," in Carol Meyers, ed., *Women in Scripture* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 106.

2 Keith Christiansen and Judith W. Mann, *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 347-348.

3 See Heidi J. Hornik, "Select Female Figures from the Old Testament in Italian Painting (1500-1650)," *The Bible and Women: Reformation and Counter-Reformation in South Europe*, volume in Irmtraud Fischer (German edition), Mercedes Nacarro (Spanish edition), Jorunn Okland (English edition), Adriana Valerio (Italian edition), eds., *The Bible and Women: An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History* (Naples, IT: Fondazione Pasquale Valerio per la storia delle donne, forthcoming 2013).



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Worship Service

BY JEANIE MILEY

Call to Worship (based on Psalm 95:1-7)¹

O come, let us sing to the Most High Creator of the Cosmos;
let us make a joyful song to the Beloved!
Let us come to the Radiant One with thanksgiving,
with gratitude let us offer our psalms of praise!
For the Beloved is Infinite, the Breathing Life of all.
The depths of the earth belong to Love;
the height of the mountains, as well.
The sea and all that is in it,
the dry land and air above were created by Love.
O come, let us bow down and give thanks,
let us be humble before the Blessed One!
For the Beloved is Supreme, and
we, blessed to be invited to friendship
as companions along the Way!

Chiming of the Hour and Silent Meditation

Human beings, we are told, carry within themselves a very great possibility, and corresponding to this possibility, a great obligation. We have the possibility of opening ourselves to a quality of life and consciousness that transcends anything we ordinarily experience as happiness or knowledge or meaning.

*Jacob Needleman*²

Invocation

Loving God, we do not so much invoke your presence
as we remind ourselves that we are always in your presence,
and that it is you who has called to us.
We do not presume to ask you to be with us,
for there is nowhere we can go where you are not.
You are Emmanuel, God-with us,
loving us toward you and toward each other.

So, we turn our hearts and minds toward you.

We attune our attention and our wills with yours, by your grace.

We come to you because you have come to us.

We love you because you have first loved us.

Hymn of Praise

“All Creatures of Our God and King”

All creatures of our God and King,
lift up your voice and with us sing
Alleluia, Alleluia!

O burning sun with golden beam,
and silver moon with softer gleam,
O praise him, O praise him,
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

O rushing wind that art so strong,
you clouds that sail in heaven along,
O praise him, Alleluia!
O rising morn in praise rejoice,
O lights of evening, find a voice,
O praise him, O praise him,
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

O flowing water, pure and clear,
make music for your Lord to hear,
Alleluia, Alleluia!
O fire so masterful and bright,
providing us with warmth and light,
O praise him, O praise him,
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

All you who are of tender heart,
forgiving others, take your part,
sing praises, Alleluia!
All you who pain and sorrow bear,
praise God and on him cast your care,
O praise him, O praise him,
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

Let all things their Creator bless,
and worship him in humbleness,
O praise him, Alleluia!
Praise, praise the Father, praise the Son
and praise the Spirit, Three in One,

*O praise him, O praise him,
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!*

*St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226); tr. William H. Draper (1855-1933), alt.
Tune: LASST UNS ERFREUEN*

Old Testament Reading: Genesis 1:26-27, 2:7

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

...[T]hen the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

A Reading from the Psalms (from Psalm 8:4-7)³

What is woman, that You rejoice in her,
And man, that You delight in him?
You have made us in your image,
You fill us with your Love;
You have made us co-creators of the earth!
guardians of the planet!

A Gospel Reading (Matthew 28:1-10)

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

A man speaks:

We may wonder why it was that Jesus chose Mary Magdalene to carry the good news of the resurrection to his disciples.

In her, perhaps Jesus saw the blending of strengths: the strengths of openness, receptivity, and the willingness to be a cooperative and pliable witness of the Mystery, and the strengths of courage, boldness, and action.

These very strengths are the hallmarks of discipleship, and all are qualities that reside in each of us – man, woman, boy or girl.

Blended, balanced, manifested in the appropriate measure, a man or a woman expresses more fully the image of God.

A Gospel Reading (John 20:18)

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

A woman speaks:

In Mary Magdalene’s declaration “I have seen the Lord” to Jesus’ disciples, she proclaimed a recognition of one whose life and work had the power to heal, transform, liberate and empower her – one worthy to be called Lord.

With him and with his teaching, Mary had seen Jesus’ greatness and an uncommon strength that was gentle enough to provide the safe container in which she could become all that she was created to become.

In his humanity then and in his lordship now, the Living Christ shows us power, strength, boldness, and forcefulness, and in him we see tenderness, openness, and warmth.

In the human Jesus, we see the perfect balance of both masculine and feminine strengths, strengths that call us to become more fully human, more completely creative and productive, and more loving as we learn how to balance all the qualities God inscribed within each person, made in his image.

In Jesus, we see the way to move creatively back and forth, using the masculine or feminine strength that is called for in the moment.

A Gospel Reading: John 15:9-18

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.”

The Written Word of God for the People of God

Thanks be to God for the written word.

Thanks be to God for the Living Word.

Hymn of Preparation

“Pilgrims on this Earthly Journey”

Pilgrims on this earthly journey,
gifted all with dignity,
in God’s image we are fashioned
to be joined in unity.

Blessed by gifts of one another,
man and woman, boy and girl,
we are made to help each other
grow toward wholeness in the world.

Every man, though each one different,
wears the sacred stamp of God;
every woman, each distinctive,
bears in her the life of God.

Celebrate each person’s purpose,
bringing forth God’s great design.
Praise the love that flows among us,
partners, colleagues, friends through time.

Brothers, sisters, in God’s image,
let us give each other grace;
let us learn from one another
in this holy worship space.

Jeanie Miley (2013)

Tune: WEBSTER (Bolin) (p. 67 in this volume)

Sermon

Confession

God of creation, we know that we are made in your image, male and female.
Yet, too often we have failed to honor the dignity of one another.

Lord, have mercy on us.

We have confined ourselves by holding one another to small roles and identities, based on gender.
We have disrespected one other; we have labeled and treated one another as stereotypes.

Lord, have mercy on us.

We have valued one gender over another, either by cultural conditioning, bias, or prejudice. We have sinned against each other by carelessness, ignorance, or willful intent.
We have turned blind eyes to the abuse, the slander, the flippant insult, or the blatant disdain of one gender by the other.

Lord, have mercy on us.

We have not honored the mystery of those who are different from us. We have closed our minds and our hearts to one another.
We have used one another for personal gain. We have punished one another for not fulfilling our expectations.
We have tried to change and control one another. Instead of loving one another, we have feared one another.

Lord, have mercy on us.

We acknowledge that where love is lacking, power and control rule; and where power and control rule, love dies.

Forgive us and help us, Lord, we pray.

Pastoral Absolution

May the God who created each of you
have mercy on you and forgive you of your sins.

May God heal the separations between you
and restore the fragmented, alienated parts of your lives.

May the God of love who made you in his image
grant you pardon and give you deep peace and love for each other.

Silent Reflection

The LORD your God is with you,
he is mighty to save.
He will take great delight in you,
he will quiet you with his love,
he will rejoice over you with singing.

*Zephaniah 3:17 (NIV 1984)*⁴

Songs of Grace

“Can You Hear It?” / “Holy, Holy, God of Power”⁵

Can you hear it? It’s a love song.
Can you hear it, God’s love song?
In the silence you will hear it,
in your heart you’ll know the song.
It’s a love song, God’s great love song.
It’s a love song, God’s great love.

Holy, holy, God of power,
full of mercy, full of grace;
God transcendent, present with us,
holy God.

Men and women, elders, children,
infants tender, people wise,
in the loving of each other,
God with us.

Brothers, sisters, sing together,
it’s a love song for all time.
Sweet and tender, fierce and sturdy,
God is love.

Can you hear it? It’s a love song.
Can you hear it, God’s love song?
In the silence you will hear it.
Won’t you come and sing along?
It’s a grace song, God’s great love song.
It’s a love song, God’s great love.

Jeanie Miley (2013)

Tunes: CAN YOU HEAR IT/HOLY, HOLY, GOD OF POWER
(pp. 68-69 in this volume)

Benediction

Go from this place, knowing that you are created in the image of God.

Go, looking into the eyes of each other, seeing each other for who you are: each one made in the image of God.

Go as precious people, beloved by God, giving grace and love to each other as instruments of God's peace and blessing in the world.

Go now, in the grace of God.

NOTES

1 Nan C. Merrill, *Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2007), 188-189. Used by permission.

2 Jacob Needleman, *A Little Book on Love* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 11. Quoted in Jeanie Miley, *Joining Forces: Balancing Masculine and Feminine* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 2008), 9.

3 Merrill, *Psalms for Praying*, 10. Used by permission.

4 Scripture from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 Biblica. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

5 I suggest that a solo voice or children's choir sing the first verse of "Can You Hear It?" Then for "Holy, Holy, God of Power," men and women sing the first verse, men alone sing the second verse, and women alone sing the third verse. Children and adults join together to sing the final verse of "Can You Hear It?"



JEANIE MILEY

is an author and retreat leader in Houston, Texas.

Pilgrims on this Earthly Journey

JEANIE MILEY

C. DAVID BOLIN

Pil - grims on this earth - ly jour - ney, gift - ed all with dig - ni - ty,
 Blessed by gifts of one an - oth - er, man and wo - man, boy and girl,
 Ev - ery man, though each one dif - ferent, wears the sa - cred stamp of God;
 Cel - e - brate each per - son's pur - pose, bring - ing forth God's great de - sign.
 Broth - ers, sis - ters, in God's im - age, let us give each oth - er grace;

in God's im - age we are fash - ioned to be joined in u - ni - ty.
 we are made to help each oth - er grow toward whole - ness in the world.
 ev - ery wo - man, each dis - tinc - tive, bears in her the life of God.
 Praise the love that flows a - mong us, part - ners, col - leagues, friends through time.
 let us learn from one an - oth - er in this ho - ly wor - ship space.

The musical score is written in a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature (C). It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The piano part consists of a right-hand melody and a left-hand bass line. The lyrics are placed below the vocal line, with some words underlined to indicate syllable placement. The score is divided into two systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment.

Text © 2013 and Music © 2001 The Center for Christian Ethics
 Baylor University, Waco, TX

Tune: WEBSTER
 8.7.8.7.

Can You Hear It?

JEANIE MILEY

JEANIE MILEY

ARRANGED BY KURT KAISER

1 Can you hear it? It's a love song. Can you hear it, God's love
 2 Can you hear it? It's a love song. Can you hear it, God's love

song? In the si - lence you will hear it,
 song? In the si - lence you will hear it,

in your heart you'll know the song, It's a love song, God's great
 won't you come and sing a - long? It's a grace song, God's great

love song. It's a love song, God's great love.
 love song. It's a love song, God's great love.

Holy, Holy, God of Power

JEANIE MILEY

JEANIE MILEY
ARRANGED BY KURT KAISER

1 Ho - ly, ho - ly, God of pow - er, full of mer - cy,
 2 Men and wo - men, el - ders, child - ren, in - fants ten - der,
 3 Bro - thers, sis - ters, sing to - ge - ther, it's a love song

full - of grace. God tran - scen - dent, pres - ent with us,
 peo - ple wise, in the lov - ing of each oth - er,
 for all time. Sweet and ten - der, fierce and stur - dy,

Ho - ly God.
 God with us.
 God is love.

Women with Icons

BY JOCELYN MATHEWES

In the Orthodox tradition, icons—like the saints and stories they portray—point to the power of the larger story of Scripture, and show how great a God is our God. The photographs in the *Women with Icons* project reveal how the icons of patron saints, and the women who hold them close, point to Christ.

My daughter's name is Ruth. She is five years old. Ruth is a biblical name, of course, and while I named her for that connection, I only named her for that in part. Ruth is also the name of my grandmother—a beautiful God-fearing woman whom I admire greatly. When Ruth hears stories about her great-grandmother, her ears perk up naturally. The novelty of hearing her own name and the knowledge of blood connection give these stories a greater power to her and to me. Likewise, hearing about her namesake in the stories of Scripture gives Ruth a greater connection to the book and its meanings.

Ruth is lucky to have the great-grandmother that she does, and even more fortunate to have a connection to a living, breathing woman of the Bible. The book of Ruth is only one of two in the Bible titled with a female name, and it is easily read in one sitting. Yet, I find myself using icons to tell my children the stories of our faith far more than I read them Bible stories. Having the icon of Ruth and Naomi present in my house means my daughter points to it and says, "Who's that?" and a moment of natural curiosity opens a whole world of Scripture, saints, and history.

The world the icons point to is larger than and contains many of the stories within the Bible. Jesus' ascension, his entrance into Jerusalem, his crucifixion and resurrection all play a liturgical, scriptural, and iconographic role in the Orthodox Church. An icon enables me to tell a story



RUTH MATHEWES WITH HER ICONS.

Photo: © Jocelyn Mathewes. Used by permission.

to my preliterate children by way of pointing and explaining. Since my children perceive icons as one of many believable visual media, having icons on the walls is another way I can make the reality of their faith more present in their lives.

An icon of the Nativity, for example, does not depend on a particular biblical text, and this simplifies matters a bit. I do not have to explain why each Gospel tells the story a little differently (yet). When my children have a question about the story, they can point to their question. It is very concrete and satisfying to be able to carry a squirming and restless child over to the Nativity icon in the middle of a church service, bringing their attention back into focus. Look! Jesus was born in a cave! And look! There are the angels in the sky that were there when he was born! And look! There are the shepherds!

As an adult convert to the Orthodox faith, I came to iconography with my adult mind and a background in visual arts. I was familiar with the historical use of art in religious settings, as well as the totemic effects that religious and art objects can achieve. Thus, the power of iconography was not terribly mysterious to me, but it was rather jarring to actually *use* it in my personal religious context. For years the iconoclastic bent of my evangelical Protestant background had kept the walls of my home free from explicitly religious imagery (though, as a visual artist, they were covered with all kinds of other beauty). Calligraphic scripture verses or illuminated Bibles were acceptable to me, but biblical stories filtered through the cartoon worlds of television or even children's Bibles seemed rather informal and incomplete.

The icons of the Orthodox Church filled this void and roused within me a desire to understand the vast history and narrative of the faith, to express its beauty in a visual way. Gradually I began to collect paper icons and to explore the church's history through books like Kallistos Ware's *The Orthodox Church* and bits of *The Way of a Pilgrim* and the *Philokalia*. At the same time, my art, design, and literature classes instructed me that *how* we choose to say or make something — the medium — often matters just as much as *what* we are saying — the content.

I found myself loving the *how* and *what* of Orthodoxy, especially icons. The time came to join the church through chrismation, and I needed to take on the name of a saint. Since my given name did not directly relate to that of any saint, it was up to me, with the guidance of those around me, to discover a saint I connected with or admired. At the time of my conversion, I was engaged to be married, so I longed for a saint's story that related to my personal path. I felt that a monastic saint's life might seem too distant and alien from my own experience, so I opened the pages of David and Mary Ford's *Marriage as a Path to Holiness: Lives of Married Saints*.

I found my inspiration while reading about Saint Sophia of Thrace, who is commemorated in the Orthodox Church on June 4th. Today I have an icon of her hanging on my wall, and to those who ask about my faith and how I live it, I can point to her and say, "She is everything I admire — selfless, humble, disciplined, and giving. She is everything I aspire to." Saint Sophia, who lived in the tenth or eleventh century, according to the *Prologue from Ochrid*, was a virtuous woman who lost her husband and six children in middle age, and then in turn became a mother to orphans, giving freely and generously to the poor out of her own resources until her death. I want my life to be like hers — one whose loss, sacrifice, love, and way of life points to the healing and redeeming power of Christ.

In my self-portrait I am standing in the backyard of our small second-floor apartment in Baltimore. My husband and I lived there for the first five years of our marriage alongside an eclectic set of neighbors. I was struck by how simple yet sufficient our surroundings were. Even though the row houses were a bit worn, they had their own community. I wanted to place



JOCELYN MATHEWES WITH SAINT SOPHIA OF THRACE.

© Jocelyn Mathewes. Used by permission.

that modern community as a literal backdrop to the ancient faith, and turn away from the camera so that the icon's face (and therefore life) would become more prominent than my own.

My photographing other women holding the icons of their patron saints happened rather by accident. After I had chosen my saint and undergone chrismation, I wondered what saints other Orthodox women choose to associate with. Are they from the Bible or church history? How many are handed to them by parents or godparents? Exploring these chosen saints by conversing with other women opened to me stories I had not grown up with, stories that provoked and inspired. I began by asking my fellow churchgoers about their saints and their stories, and then asked to photograph them. My ongoing photography project, *Women with Icons*, blossomed from there. It is now comprised of almost fifty images of women of all ages and different walks of life, and with quite a broad spectrum of saints too.



LIANA WITH EMPRESS THEODORA.
© Jocelyn Mathewes. Used by permission.

A dear friend of mine, also a convert to the faith, had chosen as her saint the Empress Theodora, who lived in the mid-800s and governed the Byzantine Empire after her husband's death (while her son was a minor). Saint Theodora, commemorated on February 11th according to *Prologue from Ochrid*, is best known for restoring the use of icons after the iconoclastic controversy. In Liana's photograph, I chose to mirror the regal status of the saint in Liana's elaborate garb and the fabric background. To show a bit of Liana's unique character (especially her beautiful hair), I photographed her from above as she lay on the fabric. The perspective is rather non-traditional in portraiture; choosing such an angle serves to illustrate again how ancient stories and the lives of the faithful departed are relevant in modern life.

Beginning in youth, there is the urge to mimic and emulate stories; this can be seen in these two young women, dressed in some of their finest and



KATIE WITH SAINT CATHERINE OF ALEXANDRIA.

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favorite clothing to have their picture taken. Young Katie's namesake, Saint Catherine of Alexandria, is known primarily through oral and non-scriptural sources. The daughter of the governor of Egypt during the reign of emperor Maximinus II in the early fourth century, she was renowned for her intellect and beauty. She was threatened with death by breaking on the wheel (which appears in her icon) if she did not renounce her faith and marry. Katie insisted on dressing as royalty herself, without my asking. She appears next to an antique spinning wheel, which makes the photograph feel almost as though it is an icon within an icon. Katie, a potential saint, cradles her namesake, a kind of recursive relationship.

Another young woman desired to make the image-making occasion special and important through dress – reflecting how she and Katie treat the stories of history and the Bible, and hopefully how they will continue to treat them. Little Hannah's demeanor is joyful, evoking the joy that the



HANNAH WITH HOLY PROPHETESS HANNAH.

© Jocelyn Mathewes. Used by permission.

biblical Hannah experienced when given the gift of her son Samuel (1 Samuel 2:1-21). When little Hannah hears the story about God's gift to her namesake, this icon makes the story all the more concrete and personal to her. And when the church commemorates the Holy Prophetess Hannah on December 9, its members sing and celebrate along with little Hannah. Through the saints' lives, icons, and the calendar, Hannah learns a personal rhythm of practicing her faith.



ANNA N. WITH SAINT ANNA.

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Much as the biblical Hannah prayed for a child, so also did the Holy, Righteous Ancestor of God Anna, who is commemorated on September 9. According to church tradition (and mentioned in the *Protoevangelion of James*), Joachim and Anna were a childless couple, much to their grief; the Virgin Mary was given to Anna in the same way Samuel was given to Hannah. In addition to the icons that feature Joachim and Anna embracing one another, there is in the Orthodox canon of icons an image of Saint Anna holding the infant Mary in her arms. In this way we can see how faith can be built up and transmitted from parent to child, and a reverence is given to parenthood, especially motherhood.

The Annas photographed for the *Women with Icons* project hail from the poles of human experience. A young Anna sheepishly holds her icon in front of her face, standing next to two strong men. She is sheltered by her father and friend on either side, and while her own identity is hidden,



ANNE K. WITH SAINT ANNA.
© Jocelyn Mathewes. Used by permission.

she will perhaps come out from behind the story of Saint Anna and use it as inspiration for her own life, whether that includes the gift of motherhood or not. She can, perhaps, come to understand Saint Anna as Jesus' grandmother (as I like to explain to my own children). An older Anne (a grandmother) holds the icon on the boardwalk of the place of her retirement, serenely looking out (or back) as she literally holds onto the story and moves forward in the autumn of her life.



SHEILA WITH SAINT BRIDGET OF KILDARE.

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Patron saints can become especially relevant as Christians face their ending. One of the most difficult portraits in the project was that of an acquaintance of mine, Sheila (Memory Eternal). I became connected to Sheila through a friend at my church. Approaching the end of her life, Sheila had expressed interest in being photographed with her saint, Saint Bridget of Kildare. We long to be surrounded by those we love, especially at the end of our life; keeping the icons of beloved saints nearby is much the same as spending time with our nearest and dearest friends, for they are our inspiration and our encouragement.

Saint Bridget was an intensely generous monastic who devoted her life to God and was always giving to the poor. Likewise, Sheila sought to be radical in her faith, even in death in a modern hospital. She was unable to sit up and “pose” for her portrait, which made the physical connection between the icon and sitter rather problematic. Though she was in pain at the time and could not eat very much, she brought out her greatest smile—a

reflection of the vibrancy and life she had brought to others in earlier years. I left quite a bit of this portrait to chance and surroundings, but chose to have the open door of her room included (rather than facing a closed wall of the hospital) to include a greater sense of depth and space (as much as could be made, with all the bustle of hospital equipment around).

Just as we look to one another for encouragement, prayer, and support in our discipleship, Orthodox Christians look to the saints. Watching my contemporary Christian friends struggle to live a Christlike life is not that different from reading about the struggles of the saints in the Bible and Christian history; it is all a matter of deepening *theosis*, or union with God. Through union with God, we become who we were meant to be—not just ourselves, but our *true* selves. The saints are unique selves that have been united with God in their distinctive circumstances, just as members of a family, though related to each other, still maintain their personality quirks.

Much as we are formed in early years by our biological families, through our incidental and adoptive church families we learn what is expected of us. Just as our families teach us norms of behavior and principles of life, so it is with the saints in history and Scripture. As we seek to embody the truths in Scripture, we also seek to emulate Christian saints we hear about in Church. The saints have figured out that delicate balance: how to serve Christ both *through* and *in opposition* to their cultures and expected roles. Like the saints, we must carefully negotiate our culture every day in our unique circumstances. We can draw strength from these exemplars and from each other, using our own stories and their stories to keep the fire of faith burning within.

In the Orthodox tradition the icons, like the saints and their stories, always point toward the power of the larger story of Scripture, and show how great a God is our God. In the Orthodox liturgy we read from a gilded Gospel book and kiss it out of reverence to the story (not the object). When we have a procession with an icon around the church, that icon—of feast or saint—is pointing to Christ and the power of his resurrection and victory over death.

Thus, in the *Women with Icons* project, each woman's patron saint points to Christ through a story that reveals the power and beauty of God. Each woman's personal story has the same opportunity—to be a Christian inspiration, encouragement, and example to others. I hope that in its small way the *Women with Icons* project will point to Christ, just as the icons and the women who hold them close do.



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Ripples of Freedom

BY KATHERINE CALLAHAN - HOWELL

God desires that the spiritual freedom that we receive in Christ Jesus should cascade into others' lives. Sometimes this happens in unpredictable ways. In Acts 16:16-34, an unnamed slave woman sets in motion a course of wonderful, freeing events that we remember and celebrate today.

Daily the slave woman of Acts 16:16-34 sits in the marketplace of Philippi and peddles her wares. Instead of the typical food or pots, she sells fortunes and makes a great profit for her owner. For the service she dispenses there is no expensive overhead; she needs no materials to spin her web of the future, enticing passersby to purchase knowledge of their fate. Her owners value her greatly. Slaves usually save labor for their owners, but this woman actually generates revenue! She is a first century cash cow.

Until the Apostle Paul comes along, that is.

The slave woman has some privileges. She at least has the freedom to wander around the marketplace to stir the curiosity of potential customers, promising information about their chances at love and fortune. She is accustomed to calling out to the passersby her offerings of fortunes told. She knows how to attract business.

Then Paul and Silas begin crossing her path as they go to the place of prayer beside the river established with the local Christians. The spirit that empowers her to tell fortunes also grasps the reality of the message proclaimed by Paul and his friends. Even though they are only passing through the market, she begins following them, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."

She is absolutely right about this, of course. Like the spirits who blurted out truths about Jesus' identity, the spirit inside the woman understands

that Paul and his companions are proclaiming the one true God. You might think that someone heralding the men's approach by announcing their business and clarifying their intention toward salvation to the masses would be seen as a benefit. Perhaps that is how Paul saw the situation at first, but not as the slave woman persisted for many days.

Does Paul disdain the source—not the woman, but the spirit within her? Does he not want to attract attention in this public venue, hoping to convert people without the authorities' notice? Or does he just tire of her shouting? He is finally "so annoyed" that he calls out the spirit from the woman, and the spirit obeys. The woman is now free—at least, from the spirit.

Her owners do not rejoice in her spiritual deliverance. Realizing their loss of income, they drag Paul and Silas to the authorities and make complaints worthy of their arrest. They do not say to the magistrates, "These men cast the spirit out of our slave that brought us a great income." Instead they accuse them of causing an uproar and advocating unlawful customs. In reality, their slave has caused more of a disturbance by shouting in the marketplace than Paul and Silas ever have by walking quietly through it on their way to the place of prayer.

The crowd joins with the owners in attacking Paul and Silas, leaving the authorities little choice but to act in response. They have Paul and Silas stripped, severely flogged, thrown into jail, and chained up for the night. In the marvelous scene that follows—it has become for us a beloved story of praise in the midst of hardship—Paul and Silas are singing hymns, praying, and teaching the other prisoners while bound in their chains, until they are all rescued by an earthquake. God literally shakes the prisoners free of their chains. To top off the miracle, the jailer and his family receive salvation.



"Overwhelmingly when a woman (or girl) appears in the biblical text, this rarity *heralds* an upcoming event as important," Robin Gallaher Branch has noted. "Narrators may intentionally use a woman's or girl's entrance into the text to raise, as it were, a *red flag* that announces the significance of this part of the story."[†] Branch's observation certainly holds true in this passage. The appearance of the nameless female slave alerts us to notable events—the admirable attitude of Paul and Silas through their suffering, their delivery from unjust imprisonment, and the salvation of an entire family. None of these events would have transpired if not for this spirit-possessed woman, whose healing landed the apostles in their predicament.

A few verses earlier in this chapter, we find another significant woman—Lydia. Paul and his companions can linger in Philippi only because of her

gracious hospitality (Acts 16:14-15). Lydia is a woman of influence, a business woman dealing in purple cloth. After her conversion and the baptism of her household, she insists that Paul and his compatriots stay in her home. She is very generous (like the women who funded Jesus' travels), creating a safe space for Paul to operate in Philippi. Because of Lydia's important role in this story, we name children after her and use her as a model for good business practices and hospitality. But what of this unnamed woman? She too *heralds* in the miraculous story of the earthquake and the prison-keeper's conversion.

We do not know what fate the slave woman suffers at the hands of her owners, angered at their loss of income. Their anger at Paul has resulted in his arrest; it's unimaginable that she would not suffer as well, being their property. Since she has lost so much value in their eyes, they have little reason to be kind to her.

Even Paul does not order her deliverance out of compassion; he does not look on her with pity and decide she deserves to be free. He commands the spirit to leave out of annoyance: he is tired of listening to her shouting, and the exorcism shuts her up. But even if Paul lacks the proper motive, she still receives deliverance. God still shows up in her life, even if for selfish reasons on Paul's part. She probably remains a slave, but is no longer exploited for her 'gift.'

Whatever horrors will come this slave woman's way, at least she is spiritually free to believe in the God who cast out the demon within her, to believe in the Christ who brings salvation as Paul proclaims. Like other women in the New Testament, she acquires privileges unusual for their gender, most importantly the freedom offered in salvation.

Her newfound spiritual freedom ripples through the story. When Paul and Silas are enchained for

daring to offer freedom to this embattled woman, they remain free to praise God despite their chains. Then God frees them from their bondage by shaking the very earth. Through the events of their physical deliverance, the jailer "and his whole household" — probably his wife and children and possibly his servants — received spiritual freedom as they are saved and baptized, and share a meal with Paul and Silas.

"Overwhelmingly when a woman (or girl) appears in the biblical text, this rarity heralds an upcoming event as important," Robin Gallaher Branch has noted. This certainly holds true in the case of the unnamed slave woman in this story.



Historically women have been subjugated in various ways. While some women have had the liberty to use their gifts for their own gain and to bless others, too many women have been exploited for what they have to offer—their natural skills, their learned abilities, and (sometimes) their very selves.

Still today, women are often enslaved, mistreated, and used against their will. Too often their champions respond, like Paul, more out of annoyance than compassion. But God wants women's freedom. God wants them to walk in wholeness, to be delivered from what controls them, to be able to live life in peace.

God desires that the spiritual freedom that we receive in Christ Jesus should cascade into their lives. Sometimes this happens in unpredictable ways. In this story, an unnamed slave woman sets in motion a course of wonderful, freeing events that we remember and celebrate today. We learn almost nothing about her past and we do not know the end of her story, but we know that God uses her deliverance to deliver others.

God's ways are sometimes bewildering—think of Paul and Silas's confusion when they were imprisoned for delivering this woman. But God works through all things for the good for those who love God, and I believe this often includes God using our freedom to free others. God is a God of deliverance, and we are invited to work alongside God in the freeing of our fellow humans. As we live our lives faithfully, may God use us to impact others in the name of Christ and to offer salvation to those in bondage.

NOTE

† Robin Gallaher Branch, *Jeroboam's Wife: The Enduring Contributions of the Old Testament's Least Known Women* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 8.

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Preaching about Women in (and on) the Bible

BY F. SCOTT SPENCER

Since women experience and interpret the world differently from men, it would be nice if the viewpoints of women scholars were seriously considered in preaching today—not least in dialogue with women's stories in the Bible.

Preaching about women in the Bible has never been a strong suit of Christian pulpits. Part of the problem stems from the fact that historically the preponderance of pulpit speakers mediating the voice of God have been men. While this trend has been shifting in recent decades, resistance to women preachers remains deeply entrenched in some denominations. Apart from the fact that male ministers do not naturally identify with biblical women, neglect of preaching about these women is also partly due to the Bible itself. By and large, the Bible is a collection of androcentric writings by male authors embedded in a patriarchal culture. Its heroes are Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, Peter, and Paul, to say nothing of God's primary representation in masculine language and images.

I will not take space here to argue for full acceptance and support of female preachers and ordained ministers of God's word.¹ I chiefly address my fellow male Christian preachers who continue to dominate Sunday sermons—to a majority of *women* congregants, many of whom form the backbone of their local churches. And herein lies the prime reason for us men to preach about women in the Bible: we are called as pastors and other ministers to represent and communicate "the whole purpose of God" with as much empathy as possible to "*all the flock*, of which the Holy Spirit has made [us] overseers, to shepherd the church of God" (Acts 20:27-28). Preaching, though it is an intensely personal experience, is not exclusively about preachers' identities and interests. Baldly put, preaching is not a men's forum. If not granted their own pulpit voices, women certainly merit a full and fair hearing in the sense

of hearing their concerns addressed *qua women*. Of course, many biblical-theological and -ethical issues concern the universal human condition, female and male. But whatever one's view of the vexed biological and philosophical questions surrounding gender similarities and differences, few would dispute the common-sense observation that women experience and interpret the world differently from men in some, if not many, respects. And it would be nice if these "women's viewpoints" were seriously considered in Christian preaching today – not least in dialogue with women's stories in the Bible.

But what's a poor male preacher to do in his masculine body, mind, and voice? How many times have we been told, "You just don't understand!"² I have lost count now in my almost forty years of marriage to a brilliant woman, with whom I helped raise two daughters. I never had a chance.

Well here is a radical idea: we can listen and learn and sharpen our empathetic skills. We can start with respectful attention to the women in our lives and congregations. And from there we can proceed to read with open minds about biblical women from the rich resources of feminist scholarship. Here contemporary women (and a few men) commenting *on* the Bible engage in critical and sympathetic dialogue with ancient women *in* the Bible. Such conversation is especially worthy of men's attention: let him who has ears to hear, hear – without trying to dominate the discussion.

It is way past time to get over narrow, knee-jerk reactions to the word "feminism." Feminist biblical interpretation is not a passing fad or eccentric fringe movement. Well into its fifth decade of professional practice, feminist approaches to biblical study offer a wealth of insight from a wide range of perspectives. Though bound together by core commitments to women's full equality and opportunity, feminist biblical scholars do not tow a single party line and are as apt to argue with one another as with non-feminist interpreters. The *Women's Bible Commentary*, just released in an expanded third edition, exemplifies the maturity, variety, and complexity of feminist biblical analysis by an impressive cadre of women scholars.³ To be fruitful listeners and learners, we men must give up on our arrogant claims to be purely "objective" or "fair and balanced" readers. If feminist scholars have taught us anything, it is that all of us bring ourselves – including our *gendered* selves – to the interpretive process and must of necessity interact with different people and alternative viewpoints in order to correct our blind spots. For my part, during the past two decades of my academic career I have been repeatedly blown away by the insights and inquiries of feminist biblical studies, often responding, "I would never have thought of that. I never considered Eve or Ruth or Jezebel or any of the several Mary's or Joanna or Martha – or God or Jesus or the Holy Spirit – that way before!" I do not always like or accept these new perspectives, but I never fail to be stimulated by them. They inspire me to try a little feminist preaching, teaching, and writing of my own about biblical women – out of solidarity and sympathy with the baseline feminist goal of affirming women's full equality and opportunity in Church and society.⁴

So how might we put this into practice? First and foremost, we should try to approach every sermon we preach with “raised consciousness” about women’s places (or absences!) within the focal biblical texts and how women in our congregations might respond to (or recoil from) these passages. That does not mean that every sermon should address “women’s issues” as such, about which we are hardly the most qualified spokespersons. But it does mean carefully thinking through – after considered listening to women congregants, ministers, and scholars – the implications for women’s lives concerning what we proclaim to be God’s authoritative word. This represents a banner case in the “ethics of biblical interpretation”⁵: when we say, “the Bible says,” we are inevitably making a loaded statement with immense power to affect people’s lives for good or ill, depending on how faithfully, humbly, and lovingly we interpret the text. To take an extreme example, advising battered women to hang in there with abusive husbands *because* Christ took an unjust beating on the cross (cf. 1 Peter 2:20-23) constitutes profoundly *unethical* preaching.⁶

Beyond incorporating women’s insights, feminist and otherwise, into our regular course of preaching, we might also consider occasional sermon series devoted to women characters in the Bible. While the pickings are slimmer for biblical heroines than heroes, they are not negligible. How about a series on “Women Prophets” such as Miriam (Exodus 15:20-21; Numbers 12), Deborah (Judges 4:4; 5:1-31), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20), Mary and Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-56), the four daughters of Philip the evangelist (Acts 21:8-14; cf. 2:17-18), and, on the more suspect side, the so-called “Jezebel” in the church at Thyatira (Revelation 2:19-23)? I have not tried that yet, but I have recently preached a series on “Women in Jesus’ Life” that seemed to be well-received by the women (and most men) in the congregation. I titled the sermons: “And So and So Begat So and So”: Women in Jesus’ Past (Matthew 1:1-6, 16-17); “It’s Not Fair”: A Woman’s Dogged Pursuit of Justice (Mark 7:24-30); “Don’t You See this Woman?”: Lavish Love in Action (Luke 7:36-50); “Don’t You Care?”: Sister Angst (Luke 10:38-42); “Grant Me Justice!”: The Widow’s Might (Luke 18:1-8); and “Go Call Your Husband”: Jesus Meets a Six-Timing Woman (John 4:5-12, 16-19, 27-30).

Perhaps most appreciated by women was the fourth message on the famous Martha and Mary story.⁷ This is one of those rare women’s texts that modern preachers *have* frequently preached about – but *not* in a way that pleases many devout women. I have been struck in my classes and in congregations that I visit by how many mature women who have heard plenty of sermons, when given half a chance, express their dislike (some say hatred) for this little passage in Luke. What they are really lamenting is how the text has often been misused by preachers to squelch vocal-active Martha-types who bemoan their situation, and to keep women in their proper silent-passive places at Jesus’ feet, with Mary. Martha gets much more sympathy from women in the pew than Jesus seems to offer – or rather, than preachers who interpret Jesus’ response seem to offer. In fact, Jesus “does care” about

alleviating the *stress* (not the value) of Martha's "much ministry" (*pollēn diakonian* [Luke 10:40]) by effectively inviting her to participate with sister Mary in his teaching seminar. Overall, this vignette supports Luke's wider emphasis on the merged *diakonia* (ministry, service) of table and word, of hospitality and proclamation, of action and contemplation. Both Martha and Mary play "good parts"⁸ ideally combined in all followers of Jesus – men as well as women. Jesus himself represents the consummate diaconal model of servant-teacher, provider-proclaimer, Martha-and-Mary.⁹ We preachers need to play a "better part" in balancing these roles.

NOTES

1 See the candid assessment of the "Current Status of Baptist Women in Ministry" in the special issue of *Review and Expositor*, 110 (forthcoming 2013), edited by Pamela R. Durso.

2 See Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990).

3 Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, eds., *Women's Bible Commentary: Twentieth Anniversary Edition*, third edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012).

4 See, for example, F. Scott Spencer, *Salty Wives, Spirited Mothers, and Savvy Widows: Capable Women of Purpose and Persistence in Luke's Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012); "Confessions of a Male Feminist Biblical Scholar," blog at <http://eerdword.wordpress.com/2012/12/18/confessions-of-a-male-feminist-biblical-scholar-by-f-scott-spencer/>, (accessed February 12, 2013); "Feminist Criticism," in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, second edition, edited by Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011), 289-325; and *Dancing Girls, "Loose" Ladies, and Women of "the Cloth": The Women in Jesus' Life* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

5 See, for example, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 107:1 (1988): 3-17; and Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

6 See Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "Every Two Minutes: Battered Women and Feminist Interpretation," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Letty M. Russell (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1985), 96-107.

7 See the extended treatment of this story in Spencer, *Salty Wives*, 145-189.

8 The Greek simply affirms that "Mary has chosen *the good part* (*tēn agathēn merida*)" (Luke 10:42) – not necessarily the "better part" as the NRSV renders.

9 See, for example, Luke 9:10-17; 22:24-27 ("But I am among you as one who serves (*diakonōn*)" [22:27]); cf. Acts 6:1-6.



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Feminist Scholarship on Women in the Bible

BY SHEILA KLOPPER

While acknowledging the difficult androcentrism of the Bible, the three books reviewed here also affirm its liberative and authoritative nature. They present a constructive way forward for modern interpreters who are committed to feminism and who maintain a high view of scriptural authority.

The roots of modern feminist biblical scholarship stretch back to the nineteenth century abolitionist movement and the struggle for women's suffrage, which is identified as the First Wave of Feminism. Most of the feminist interpreters in the nineteenth century were untrained lay people who were also active in social reforms. Christian abolitionists such as Lucretia Mott and Sarah and Angelina Grimké understood Scripture to be liberative. Their interpretations became the basis for actively opposing slavery and gender inequalities in America. Other nineteenth century feminists, such as the prominent suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, came to a different conclusion about Scripture. After a careful study of the Bible she concluded that it was largely responsible for the subjugation of women. She edited and helped author the *Woman's Bible*, which was a collection of commentaries designed to highlight biblical women and expose the patriarchalism of Scripture. The writers considered only the passages that dignified women as inspired divine truth. In this first phase of feminist biblical scholarship, feminists either naively regarded the Bible as affirming gender equality or pessimistically regarded it as patriarchal and thereby denied its authoritative nature.

The Second Wave of Feminism which emerged amidst the Civil Rights struggle of the 1960s spurred new work in feminist biblical scholarship that

was largely the labor of professional academics. Modern biblical scholarship utilizes historical criticism, which focuses on reading individual texts as ancient historical writings. The whole canonical nature of the Bible as God's word is overshadowed by a focus on Scripture as individual texts written primarily by men who lived in patriarchal cultures. Using historical criticism, feminists researched Scripture in an effort to highlight women and to reinterpret passages from a feminist perspective. Early on in the quest scholars such as Letty Russell, a theologian at Yale Divinity School, were optimistic that the real meaning of the text—one that affirmed gender equality—had been hidden by hundreds of years of androcentric and misogynist interpretations. Their task was to uncover the true meaning of those texts. To some extent this group of feminist biblical scholars was successful. From the Old Testament, they pointed to the female leadership of Deborah, who was a judge, warrior, and leader (Judges 4, 5). And they reclaimed the confident Shulammitte woman who overcame Eve's curse (Song of Solomon). From the New Testament they argued that Jesus affirmed a discipleship of equals, one in which Mary Magdalene was central. And they identified Paul's female co-workers, women such as the prominent apostle Junia (Romans 16:7) and the minister and leader Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2).

Nonetheless with every positive scriptural example that affirmed women, there seemed to be ten more patriarchal texts that countered those examples. In carefully scrutinizing Scripture as a historical and literary document, some feminist scholars were less optimistic of its egalitarian nature. It appeared that apart from doing interpretative gymnastics, the plain meaning of Scripture was still very androcentric and oppressive of women. There is the sickening silence of women such as Dinah (Genesis 34) and the Levite's concubine (Judges 19), both of whom were raped by men and presented by biblical narrators as merely male property. And in the New Testament there are passages such as Ephesians 5:22-24, which calls wives in the Church to be subject to their husbands and 1 Timothy 2:11-15, which forbids women to teach or to have authority over men. Feminist theologians such as Mary Daly ultimately concluded that patriarchy in the Christian tradition was not merely the fault of sexist interpreters of the Bible; Scripture itself was hopelessly oppressive of women, subjugating them repeatedly under male authority. It seemed clear that the Christian God was a male God who sent a male Son leaving little room for women in this salvation history except as the handmaiden of men. This group of revolutionary feminists rejected altogether Scripture as authoritative.

It is in this interpretative tug-o-war that the feminist authors of the three books in this review enter the conversation. The three books include Carol Meyers, ed., *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001, 608 pp., \$50.00); Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. Macdonald with Janet H. Tulloch, *A Woman's Place: House*

Churches in Earliest Christianity (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2006, 356 pp., \$21.00); and Andrew Sloane, ed., *Tamar's Tears: Evangelical Engagements with Feminist Old Testament Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012, 398 pp., \$44.00). Each share the task of identifying women in Scripture and viewing the ways that they have been presented, hidden, and treated by the Biblical authors. They are attentive to the female images of God and how that shapes modern understanding of the full humanity of women. The scholarship in each tries to imaginatively fill in the gaps where the narrator of Scripture leaves a woman silent or fails to view an event from the female's perspective. They accomplish this by utilizing such tools as historical, social, archaeological, and anthropological research. Where these scholars do their most constructive work is in interpreting individual texts in light of a theological or canonical perspective, a task that modern historical criticism resists. These books acknowledge the difficult androcentric nature of Scripture, but they also affirm Scripture's liberative and authoritative nature. As such they present a constructive way forward for modern interpreters who are committed to feminism and who maintain a high view of scriptural authority.

More than seventy experts contributed entries to the *Women in Scripture* dictionary. This volume aids feminist scholarship in four significant ways. First, it joins the monumental task of collecting, recognizing, and giving voice to over 800 named and unnamed women in Scripture (the largest group, not surprisingly, is unnamed women). Many of these women have gone unnoticed by feminists even after four decades of careful research. Second, it offers historical and social background information on the women's lives and experiences. Third, accompanying the historical concern is the careful attention to the Bible as literature. The biblical authors made decisions about how they did or did not portray women. Therefore

each entry considers the passages as literature in an effort to determine whether sexism is encoded in the text itself. For example Mark 14:3-9 records the story of a woman who anoints Jesus' head. He prophesies that wherever the good news is proclaimed, her deed will be remembered. Ironically in this text, the biblical author does not name the woman, something the dictionary points out. The fourth contribution is the effort to identify false traditional

With historical, social, archaeological, and anthropological tools these scholars imaginatively fill in the gaps where Scripture fails to give the female's point of view. They interpret individual texts in light of a theological or canonical perspective.

interpretations of Scripture that still remain popular. For example many might be surprised to learn that Mary Magdalene, the most famous of Jesus' female disciples, has been regarded as a former prostitute in traditional history. Yet there is little scriptural evidence to support this claim. Instead she was a 'tower of strength' and the only women mentioned in all four Gospels. She provided economic support to Jesus and was present at his cross and resurrection, two of the most important events of the Christian faith.

In *A Woman's Place*, Osiek, MacDonald, and Tulloch have produced a socio-historical study of women within the house churches of early Christianity. Rather than simply interpreting New Testament passages, the authors rely on the research into ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman society that has taken place in such disciplines as sociology, anthropology, and archaeology. In this way the authors are able to paint a portrait of what life might have been like in the early church.

Rather than taking sides on whether or not women in the early church served as ministers or were treated as equals in the modern sense of the word, the authors are honest about the patriarchal constraints as well as the freedoms early Christian women experienced. There is evidence of a movement toward greater social freedom for women throughout the Roman Empire in the first century. Women in the house churches, which met at the crossroad of the public and private spheres, benefited from these emerging freedoms. The authors found evidence that women served as hosts, patronesses, teachers, and leaders, participating in all levels of communal life. Most women in the early church were married or widowed, rather than ascetics as was the case in later church history. For example, Acts, Romans, and 1 Corinthians identify Paul's co-worker Prisc(ill)a who was a wife, artisan, missionary, and foreign immigrant. She was likely of higher status than her husband, Aquila. But the book does not present a utopian vision of gender equality or assume that all house churches were egalitarian in their practices. Women experienced more restricted roles. The household codes of Ephesians 5:22-24 call women to be dutiful wives, subjected to their husbands. And certainly female slaves suffered their own unique restrictions.

Overall the book's greatest contribution is its effort to focus on the ordinary lives of women in the early church. It addresses such topics as what it must have been like to be a child or a female slave. It offers a picture of the house church in terms of its ministry leadership patterns and formal worship services, but also reconstructs it in terms of the females' perspectives. These women worked in trades, managed households, gave birth, nursed babies, hired wet-nurses, experienced the death of their infants, were abused by their masters, served as hostesses, and worked alongside others in Christian ministry.

Tamar's Tears provides a unique and equally valuable contribution to feminist biblical interpretation. This collection of essays is intent on interpreting the Old Testament in a way that is both feminist and evangelical. As feminists, the contributors affirm and promote the full humanity of

women. They neither argue that the Bible affirms gender equality in the modern sense, nor do they believe it prescribes a hierarchical model of complementarian male-female relationships. As evangelicals they affirm the Bible's authority for Christian faith and practice. *Tamar's Tears* does all this while wrestling with some of the most challenging scriptures faced by feminist interpreters of the Old Testament (for example, Genesis 3:16, Judges 19, and 2 Samuel 13:1-22).

Like most feminists, the authors of the essays in *Tamar's Tears* employ a hermeneutic of suspicion. That is, they approach Scripture aware of its androcentrism, asking such questions as: Why did the narrator tell the story this way? What was left out of the story and why? Who has the most to gain or to lose by the way this story is told? They are keenly aware that Scripture was produced in a patriarchal culture and is shaped by the narrator's perspective. However as evangelicals who believe that the Bible is divinely inspired, these scholars refuse to prioritize suspicion above trust. To that end the interpretive work in these essays affirms a hermeneutic of faith and retrieval. In other words the authors read each scripture passage with an eye to the story of God's redeeming and liberating work, which is a theme that emerges across the entire canon of Scripture.

For example, using a hermeneutic of suspicion, the feminist interpreter reading the Old Testament law that commands a raped woman to marry her rapist (Deuteronomy 22:28-29) recognizes that deep patriarchal structures existed in that culture. The modern reader is honest in saying Deuteronomy is not a text of liberation for women (or slaves or foreigners for that matter!). But the author also applies a hermeneutic of faith which recognizes that from a canonical view, God's perspective is not exhausted by any one narrator's perspective. Deuteronomy does not have the last or only word to say on the topic of women and marriage, something Jesus reminded his audience in reference to laws on divorce (Mark 10:2-9). Employing both a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutic of trust enables these authors to honor the Bible's authority while affirming the full humanity of women.

While *Tamar's Tears* and *A Woman's Place* tend to use academic terminology that may make them less appealing to a lay reader, *Women in Scripture* would be very beneficial to any church library. All three provide a helpful way forward for feminist Christians.



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