

## Women in the Bible

### Women of the Hebrew Scriptures

Women are presented in the various strands and books of the Hebrew Bible in ways that are not typical for other cultures at the time of their composing. Women are presented as complicated human beings who are depicted as having many of the kinds of personal characteristics we expect in modern literature. While there are some stereotypes of women in fixed roles, stories where women are not named and where women are presented only in relationship to the men in their lives, we also have vivid portraits we recognize as fully realized depictions of real women; women who we would recognize sitting next to us in church, in a community meeting or on a picket line.

Significantly, key women in the Hebrew Bible have names! In ancient Hebrew culture, one's name was an important signifier of who you are. Moses asks God's name and is told what it is. For a woman to be named in the text, there is an important recognition of her identity as well as whatever role she had to play in the story.

Women, from Eve, through the matriarchs in Genesis, Miriam, Deborah, Queen Esther, Ruth, Hannah, Tamar and Jael, to name a few, leap from the pages of scripture with stories to tell that capture our attention and shape the details of the larger stories of the relationship between God and God's human Creation. Women count!

It is clear that there were cultural constraints that impacted women in their lives. Family life often defined roles and expectations for the women in the stories, but the texts repeatedly portray women who have roles and identities that indicate power and leadership far beyond those of wife and mother. In some cases, women are depicted as pushing against and exceeding the boundaries those cultural roles set. The ability and willingness of those women to step outside the expected often sets the stage for new understandings of the relationship God has with humanity.

There is also a strand of misogyny in some texts where women are presented as agents of sinister forces and are given outsized responsibility for evil. The men in their lives are portrayed as victims of their cunning or perfidy, though the men may be portrayed as holding powerful positions where they should be held fully responsible.

To complete the picture of women in the Old Testament, recent scholarship has presented intriguing new possibilities regarding the way women impacted the stories in the texts. Some of the texts may have been written by women. There are textual and cultural hints that this may be the case. And while there can be no final proof for these possibilities, there is a lot to learn about how women influenced the stories and legends that have given shape to Judaism and Christianity for more than three thousand years.

**Week 1 - Authors of Scripture** – Women are not outwardly listed as authors of scriptural texts in the way that Moses is identified for the Pentateuch or the various prophets are for their books. There is some evidence, however, of the hand of women in some of the texts that is worth considering.

In their translation of elements of the Pentateuch in their book, The Book of J, Harold Bloom and David Rosenberg have identified a number of characteristics that point to a possible woman author. “J” is the way Bible scholars refer to one of the four authors of the Pentateuch. The author is characterized by the use of Yahweh (or, Jahweh, from the original German scholars) as the name of God. The other authors of the Pentateuch are “E” who calls God Elohim, “D” the Deuteronomistic writer, and “P” the Priestly writer. Bloom and Rosenberg identify elements in J’s work that show a sensitive understanding of women and an approach to women’s experience that is lacking in the male writers of the time. Here are some examples.

In the beginning, no other account of Creation in any of the Near Eastern cultures pays attention to the creation of woman. In the J account in Genesis 2:20b-23, the creation of Eve has life and detail that is missing from the single, facts-only, verse on the creation of Adam (Genesis 2:7).

In the Genesis 1 account of Creation, the author echoes Babylonian epics of Creation involving conflict with forces of chaos that have to be overcome (**Genesis 1:1-2**). The **Genesis 2:1-25** account of Creation is, by contrast, a story grounded in a garden with a definite non-Babylonian point of view. The author of J did not write in relation to the texts and traditions circulating in the Near East at that time and was not trying to tell Hebrew versions of other cultures’ Creation stories. The author was not the product of the schooling of the male writers of the time.

The author treats the relationship between people and Yahweh in a manner uncharacteristic of writers of the time. It is heavy with a certain irony. When confronted by the sinfulness of Sodom, how can Abram haggle with Yahweh over the number of righteous in the cities? And the haggling has an almost comic touch as the numbers of expected faithful drops in the bargaining (**Genesis 18:22-33**). How is Jacob able to wrestle the nameless divine adversary to a standstill on his way to meet his fate with Esau (**Genesis 32:22-30**)? How was it that Esau could have bargained away his birthright, a critical personal identity for men, for a bowl of red lentil stew (**Genesis 25:29-34**)? Hagar’s confrontation with an angel in the wilderness is told with a keen eye toward the despair of a woman who has no control over her life (**Genesis 16:7-14**).

Yahweh, for J, is immediate (strolls in the garden), approachable (Hagar’s experience), lively (ready to wrestle) and ready to engage (bargains), while still being a dynamic Creator. This view has little in common with the distant architect God (Elohim) of **Genesis 1**.

Finally, J had no heroes, only heroines. Sarai and Rachel stand out, as does Tamar and her tragic story, where the family is front and center and is of extreme importance and value. Except for Joseph, none of the other male figures have such a strong family identity.

Miriam, the sister of Moses (**Exodus 2:4, 7-9; 15:1-21; Numbers 12:1, 4-5, 10, 12, 14-15**), likely had a significant role in the story of the crossing of the Sea during the Exodus. Following the destruction of the pursuing Egyptians, there is an account of “Moses and the Israelites” singing a song of triumph on the far shore (**Exodus 15:1-18**). Following that account, there is a brief passage where “the Prophet Miriam” and “all the women” dance and sing the opening passages of the previous song (**Exodus 15:20-21**).

What is interesting about this is that there is a long tradition of Israelite women singing at significant times in the community’s life, like when King David has returned from a military victory over the Philistines (**1 Samuel 18:7**). Did the author of the Exodus account of the celebration attribute the song

to “Moses and the Israelites” then include the brief account of Miriam and the women singing because Miriam and the women were the original singers?

Deborah, a “Prophetess” and a “Judge” in Israel had a significant role to play in the battle against Sisera’s army. There is a great deal of inside information in the account of the preparations for the fight that Deborah planned with her General Barak that only Deborah and Barak would have known. The upshot to the story of Sisera’s ultimate defeat is that, while fleeing from his lost battle, Sisera found refuge in the tent of a woman, Jael. She pretended to hide him, then “took a tent peg and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple until it went down into the ground,” (**Judges 4:21**). Only Jael survived to tell that tale, and who did she tell it to?

What follows in **Judges 5** is the song of Deborah (remember Miriam singing?). It details all that happened in the battle in Hebrew poetry, attributed to Deborah. Jael and her tent peg get heroic treatment (**Judges 5:24-27**). The song ends with Sisera’s mother looking vainly for his return from battle, assuming that, perhaps, he has been delayed by dividing the spoil he won and carrying off a woman or two for his pleasure. Such an image! Would the irony of the mother’s thoughts have even occurred to a male author?

In the non-Canonical Book of Judith, a similar story is told of the widow Judith approaching the Assyrian General Holofernes who is engaged in attacking Israel. She is invited into his tent, she plies him with drink, and when he passes out, Judith cuts off his head. Judith was the only one to survive that encounter to tell the tale.

Another account of a woman celebrating the return of a hero with singing and dancing turns tragically on a vow Jephthah makes to secure a victory against the Ammonites (**Judges 11:34-40**). He vows to sacrifice the first person who emerges from his house after he returns home victorious. That person is his dancing, singing daughter. His only child. Told of the vow, she accepts her fate and, after two months of wandering to bewail her virginity, courageously returns to her death. Again, only Jephthah and the unnamed daughter had the tragic conversation. Did Jephthah have the courage to tell that story?

Two books that are told from a perspective that shows a woman’s hand are Esther and Ruth. Ruth is told in such a personal way, especially in regard to the relationship between Ruth and her Mother-in-Law Naomi, including the personal exchange between them in **Ruth 1:15-17**, that is uncommon in male-produced literature of the day. More about Ruth will be presented in the class on Creators.

Esther presents such a strong image of a woman in perilous circumstances in which she heroically triumphs that it, too, stands outside the usual literature of the time. Men are depicted as male chauvinist pigs and a queen is shamed (**Esther 1**). More will be said about Esther in the class on Saviors.

## Week 2 – Creators

We noted the attention to detail in the story of the creation of Eve in Genesis 2 that was lacking in the creation of Adam. Eve goes on to have a significant role in the interplay between Yahweh and His Creation. In the story of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Eve plays a larger role than that usually attributed to her. The usual approach to the story is that Eve was tempted by the serpent, gave in, tempted Adam, and was the cause of their downfall and expulsion from the Garden. Later

theologians have gone so far as to locate Original Sin in that event (“...for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.” **1 Corinthians 15:22**). Some have gone so far as to blame Eve for the whole thing. “Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.” (**1 Timothy 2:11-15**)

The word “sin” never occurs in the account (**Genesis 3:1-7**). The serpent, later characterized as Satan, or the personification of evil, was commonly understood at the time of the writing as a symbol of wisdom, fertility and immortality, not evil. The serpent’s question to Eve led to her understanding that the fruit was not only good for food and a delight for the eyes, but was also able to make one wise. Eve can be understood as one disobeying for the higher good. She strove to be more than she was. She then shared the fruit with Adam. What comes next is a stark reminder of what sin is all about; being less than you are. When questioned by Yahweh about eating the fruit, Adam blames Eve rather than takes responsibility for his own actions.

Sarai, later Sarah, was the wife of Abram, later Abraham. Early in their marriage, Sarai was barren, so she arranged to have Abram impregnate her Egyptian slave, Hagar, to give him a son. This led to a real split between Hagar and Sarai and Sarai succeeded in driving Hagar away. While in the wilderness, Hagar encountered an angel who convinced Hagar to return to Sarai and give birth to Ishmael.

Thirteen years later, an angel appeared to Abram and told him that he’d be the father of uncountable offspring. Sarai, now named Sarah, was to be the mother. This was to be a Covenant between God and Abraham, as he was now named (**Genesis 17:1-8**). This was fulfilled as Abraham and Sarah were camped by the oaks of Mamre. They were visited by “the Lord” in the form of “three men.” Abraham greeted them with full Near Eastern honors and offered them food and hospitality. Finishing, they inquired about his wife who was in the tent cleaning up after the meal. When they told Abraham that Sarah would have a son in fulfillment of the covenantal promise, Sarah, listening behind the tent flap, laughed. “The Lord said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh?’” Sarah denied laughing, but the Lord, probably smiling, said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.” The son she bore was named Isaac, laughter in Hebrew, (**Genesis 18:1-15**)

Paul references this story in **Romans 4:19-19 and 9:9** in making a point about Abraham’s faith. Paul continues to reference this story in **Galatians 4:22-31**. Also the author of **Hebrews 11:11-12** used the story to address faith. The author of **1 Peter 3:6**, though, used it to put women “in their place.”

The story of Rebekah is told with a sensitivity to her, not only as a woman, but also as a real person in an encounter with a man in a culture that restricted such contact (**Genesis 24:15-67**). Rebekah marries Isaac and is barren for a period of time. When she finally conceives, she carries twins who struggle within her womb, a portent of things to come. When Esau and Jacob are born, the drama continues with the brothers in constant conflict. Complicating the story, while Isaac loves the hunter/he-man Esau, Rebekah loves the chef, Jacob (**Genesis 25:20-34**). Later in the story she conspires to gain the blessing of the firstborn for Jacob, though he was delivered after Esau clutching his heel (**Genesis 27:5-45**). This story is reflected by Paul in **Romans 9:10-15**).

Rachel was the second wife of Jacob. According to the compelling story, her father Laban had agreed to have Rachel marry Jacob, but tricked him into marrying the older daughter Leah instead. Extracting another seven years’ commitment to work for Laban was the price for permitting Jacob to marry Rachel. Following that marriage, the story notes that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah (**Genesis 29:30**). “The Lord” took this into account when He opened Leah’s womb but not Rachel’s. Leah bore sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah. Rachel, bereft at having no sons offered Jacob her maid, Bilhah, in a manner allowing her to take some account for the birth (**Genesis 30:3**). Bilhah conceived and bore Dan. Rachel continued with the proxy birth arrangement as Bilhah had another son, Naphtali. Rachel took the credit.

What follows is an attempt by Leah to re-insert herself in the childbearing drama, though barren. She gives her maid, Zilpah, to Jacob who bears Gad and Asher. Following a strange encounter between Leah and Rachel, Jacob again impregnates Leah, who bears Issachar and Zebulun – and, finally, Leah’s daughter, Dinah.

Rachel re-enters the drama giving birth to her own firstborn, Joseph. Later in the story, she has a difficult pregnancy and bears Benjamin, but dies in childbirth and is buried in a special tomb. The whole story spans **Genesis Chapters 29-35**.

Jacob’s twelve sons comprise what is later understood to be the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Rachel is remembered, the offspring of Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah notwithstanding, as the mother of Israel. Jeremiah uses Rachel as a metaphor for grief at the exile of the ten Northern Tribes of Israel having this understanding of her (**Jeremiah 31:15**). Matthew picks up this metaphor in his Gospel when he characterizes the grief over the Slaughter of the Innocents by Herod using Jeremiah’s lament (**Matthew 2:18**).

Dinah, Jacob’s daughter, enters the story when she is carried off and raped by the son of a foreign prince, a Hivite. When the brothers find out, they trick the Hivites into being circumcised in order for the prince to gain the hand of Dinah in marriage. While the Hivites are still disabled and recovering from their surgery, Simeon and Levi kill all the males in the city, take all their wealth, their wives and children as well (**Genesis 34**). But, was Dinah valued by the family for her own sake, or were the brothers avenging what they thought was a challenge to their dignity?

**The Book of Ruth** is a wonderful story told in beautiful prose. It presents a number of issues that combine to instruct and challenge readers to this very day. Ruth is widowed and living in Moab with her widowed Mother-in-Law Naomi, a native of Judah, during a famine. They hear that there is food in Judah, and Naomi chooses to go back. Rather than go back to her family in Moab, Ruth chooses to stay with Naomi and go to Judah, where she will be the foreigner and in some peril. The story of two destitute widows who have no cause to believe that their futures will be other than bleak, goes through a Hollywood-worthy series of events that lead to Ruth’s marriage to Boaz and a family. That family had a line of descent that went, “...and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David, and David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah... (**2 Samuel 12:24**)... and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.” (**Matthew 1: 5-16**). Some family!

Hannah should hold a special place in every believer’s heart. She was the second wife who was derided by the first wife because she bore their husband no children. She went to the Priest, Eli, in her anguish. Eli saw that anguish and thought she was drunk. He told her to go home and sleep it off. When Hannah persisted, Eli relented and blessed her request for a child. When she subsequently found herself pregnant, she burst out in song (**1 Samuel 2:1-10**). That song is echoed in another pregnant woman’s song. When Mary visited her cousin and found her pregnancy affirmed, she sang of the child who would be born in a voice straight from Hannah (**Luke 1:46-55**).

It is notable that in the above stories there is something of a theme: barrenness, the inability of a woman to conceive. Modern medicine tells us that is just as likely due to the father’s inability, but the stories carry an interesting message. Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah (for a time) and Hannah all are recorded as having been barren. Eventually they bore sons who had significant roles in the ongoing relationship between God and Creation. How does the theme of barrenness/significant birth strike you?

### **Week 3 – Saviors, Prophets, Victims and Adversaries**

#### **Saviors**

Judah, one of the sons of Leah and Jacob, dealt poorly with his widowed daughter-in-Law, Tamar. He promised her the right to marry a third son after her first two husbands died. He didn't follow through. Tamar carried out a clever plot to reinstate her role in the family (**Genesis 38:1-30**) that carried no small risk to herself. Made pregnant by Judah, she bore him two sons, one of whom appears in the following genealogy: "...Jacob, the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar... and Jesse the father of King David...and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah" (**Matthew 1:2-16**). There are four women in Jesus'

Matthew genealogy; Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba; four women who, in different ways, were marginalized, exploited and dehumanized, but are specifically mentioned by name. Think about that!

Miriam was Moses' sister and had a significant role to play in preserving Moses' life by setting him adrift in a basket in the Nile (**Exodus 2:1-10**). This was necessary because the Pharaoh had ordered the death of Hebrew males at birth to stem the possibility of the Hebrew people outnumbering the Egyptians. The heroic actions of two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah (**Exodus 1:15-22**) are notable because they are recorded as standing up to the Pharaoh himself, so their names are recorded in honor in Scripture.

After Moses encounters Yahweh at the burning bush and agrees to go back to Egypt to confront the Pharaoh, there is a brief account of a disturbing incident in which Moses is almost killed by Yahweh. Growing up in the household of the Pharaoh's daughter, Moses didn't get circumcised on the eighth day following his birth. Though it was no fault of his own, he was setting out on a divine-inspired mission without having fulfilled the requirements of **Genesis 17:9-14**. Zipporah, his wife, the daughter of a Priest in Midian where Moses had gone to escape the Pharaoh's justice, quickly circumcised their son and touched the bloody foreskin to Moses' genitals saving him (**Exodus 4:24-26**). The blood saved Moses as the blood of lambs would save the Israelites in the Passover.

Rahab plays a critical role in the conquest of the Promised Land. Joshua sends spies to gather information on the inhabitants and they go to Jericho to stay in the house of Rahab the prostitute. The King hears about their mission and tells Rahab to turn the spies over. Rahab hides them, supports them in their mission, and helps them escape. While the spies offer conditional amnesty to her when they take the city, her support of them is unconditional. Apart from Joshua, Rahab is the only person named in the account and she is named in a number of places in Scripture for her faithfulness. In **Matthew 1:5** she is counted among the ancestors of Jesus in the genealogy. In **Hebrews 11:31**, Rahab is remembered as having been faithful. In **James 2:25**, Rahab is cited in James' defense of works for her courageous support of the spies.

We've already met Jael, the tent-peg-and-hammer wielding woman who dispatched the enemy, General Sisera (**Judges 4:17-22**), and Deborah, the Judge who was responsible for Israel's victory. We met Ruth and Naomi (Book of Ruth) whose courage in the face of widowhood and alien identity created the genealogy of Jesus. No story of women saviors would be complete without the story of Esther (**the Book of Esther**).

Her Hebrew name was Hadassah, but she was an exile in the court of the Persian king Ahasuerus - Xerxes (486-465 BCE) - so she bore the Persian name Esther, derived from the name Ishtar, the Sumerian goddess of love and war. Her role in the story was as a replacement for a queen who defied the king. Ahasuerus was celebrating in the third year of his reign. After a full half-year of festivities, he threw a seven-day banquet in Susa and invited just about everybody (male). Queen Vashti gave a banquet for the women. But on the last day of the men's banquet, the king ordered Vashti to appear before them "wearing the royal crown in order to show the peoples and the officials her beauty" (**Esther 1:10-11**). Hinted at here is that she was to wear only the crown. At great risk to her position and personal safety, Vashti refused.

Vashti was deposed, and a search for a replacement found Esther. She and her uncle, Mordecai, were Jews and were maintaining their traditions. When the king elevated a tyrant to the position of first minister, he demanded that all bow to him. When Mordecai didn't bow, Haman plotted to have him and all Jews killed. What follows is a gripping tale of deceit and political perfidy that left the Jews in extreme danger. Haman even built a gallows on which to hang Mordecai.

To save her people, Esther chose to risk approaching the king without his invitation, risking death. She initiated a series of events that are filled with irony, farce and humor (if you aren't Haman) that led to Mordecai's elevation for a deed he had done that saved the king from assassination. Haman was exposed, hanged on his own gallows, and the Jews were saved. Esther established the holiday of Purim, the only woman to initiate a holiday in the entire Jewish tradition that is celebrated to this very day.

Additional Stories of women who were saviors:

- The Shunammite Woman whose son died (**2 Kings 4:1-37**).
- Jehosheba (**2 Kings 11:1-3**)/Jehoshabeath (**2 Chronicles 22:10-12**) saved the king's son.

## Prophets

When workers repairing the Temple came across a book of the Law, they took it to King Josiah who recognized that it represented a critical element in the relationship between God and the Hebrew people. The priests consulted Huldah the prophetess (**2 Kings 22:14-20**; **2 Chronicles 34:22-33**) who confirmed its centrality in that relationship and the role of the King in restoring the Law to its rightful place. Josiah's subsequent reform was the significant result of that discovery. Can you imagine workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century discovering an old copy of the Bible, not knowing what it was, and bringing it to the Bishop?

After the death of Samuel, King Saul expelled mediums and wizards from the city. When faced by the army of the Philistines, Saul was frightened and, receiving no word from the Lord, consulted the Witch of Endor (**1 Samuel 28:7-24**) who conjured the late Samuel, who announced disaster.

## Victims

Things were bad enough for Lot and his family in Sodom, a city already known as sinful. Yahweh had already shown an interest in judging it and planned to "go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know (**Genesis 18:21**). "Two angels" (Yahweh?) come to Sodom and are met by Abraham's brother Lot, who shows them hospitality (**Genesis 19:1-26**). During the visit, the men of Sodom come to rape the visitors. Lot offers the men his two virgin daughters to be dealt with "as you please." But when the men refuse, the angels strike them blind and tell Lot to flee the city. As they escape, there is one more tragedy. Lot's wife turns to see the conflagration being visited on Sodom and is turned into a pillar of salt – a second assault for her poor daughters!

In Week 1 we discussed the death of the daughter of the warrior Jephthah who was sacrificed due to Jephthah's unwise vow (**Judges 11:29-40**). Another outrage involves a traveling Levite and his concubine (**Judges 19:1-30**). She is not a full-fledged wife and has left the Levite to return to her parents' home after an argument. After traveling to recover the concubine, the Levite runs afoul of the men of Gibeah during an overnight stay in their town. In a scene reminiscent of the attack on Lot by the men of Sodom, the Gibeahites demand to rape the Levite. The host offers the men his virgin daughter and the concubine, which they refuse. The Levite shoves the concubine out the door and she is raped and abused all night long. In the morning she may be dead. The Levite takes her home and cuts her body into twelve pieces which he sends to all parts of Israel with a message of outrage at what happened. Are we sure she had died? In the following chapter (**Judges 20**) we see the results of the Levite's bloody message and the revenge on the Gibeahites. Nobody looks good in this story except the concubine who disagreed with the Levite.



Who doesn't have sympathy for Bathsheba (**2 Samuel 11:2-3; 12:24; 1 Kings 1:11-31; 2:13-19; 1 Chronicles 3:5**)? Not only is her husband killed due to the conniving of King David, he then raped her and got her pregnant. Her second child would become King Solomon.

Finally, let's acknowledge the courage of Queen Vashti (**Esther 1:9 - 2:4**). When she was ordered to attend the king's men's-only banquet dressed (only?) in her royal crown, she refused. She could have been put to death for that, but she had her standards.

### Adversaries

Joseph, an Israelite, would have had a hard enough time establishing himself in a foreign country like Egypt (**Genesis 39**). He'd been bought from Joseph's brothers by Potiphar, a high government official, as a slave and taken to his home. Joseph, "quite handsome and good-looking" prospered, but also attracted the attention of Potiphar's wife who persisted in wanting a dalliance with him. Joseph's refusal is an eloquent statement of a pious, honorable man. Potiphar's wife would have none of it. She trapped him by accusing him of approaching her and had him sent to prison.

While camped in Shittim, the men of Israel began having sexual relations with the Moabite women and worshipping their god, Baal of Peor (**Numbers 25:6-18**). This caused a plague to break out that killed 24,000 people. Moses took harsh measures against the leaders of those who worshipped Baal. One couple was accused; an Israelite man, Zimri, and a Midianite woman, Cozbi. The grandson of Aaron the Priest killed them with a spear, ending the plague.

Delilah has been a source of stories and legends since she seduced Samson the Hebrew hero and judge (**Judges 16**). She conspired with Samson's enemies, the Philistines, to find the secret of Samson's power. He had taken a vow as a Nazirite and his hair was uncut. Delilah made short work of that, and Samson was captured and reduced to slavery until he was placed between the main pillars of Dagon's temple and he destroyed three thousand Philistines and himself. There's no word about whether Delilah was in the crowd.

The name Jezebel echoes down to our time as a woman of guile, deceit and wanton wiles. She was a foreigner, the daughter of the King of the Sidonians, on Israel's North coast. She married Ahab, an evil king who, "...did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the Kings of Israel who were before him" (**1 Kings 16:31-34**). As the foreign queen of an evil king, she worshipped foreign gods openly and built shrines to Baal and Asherah over all the land. She openly killed prophets of the Lord (**1 Kings 18:4-19**). When the prophet Elijah proved the power of Yahweh over the foreign gods in the duel at the altars, and slew the 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah, Jezebel set her sights on him to kill him (**1 Kings 19:1-3**). She had Naboth killed so she could present Naboth's vineyard to Ahab as a gift, arousing the wrath of Elijah who prophesied her doom (**1 Kings 21:5-25**).

In **2 Kings 9**, the fall of the dynasty represented by Ahab is recounted. Ahab was killed earlier in battle (**1 Kings 22:34-38**) and it was reported that the dogs licked his blood and that prostitutes washed in it. Jezebel is discovered by King Jehu in Jezreel, standing in a second floor window adorned like a prostitute. The king demands that her eunuchs throw her down, which they do. As she lies dead in the street, the king goes in for lunch. On returning, he finds only bones. The king quotes Elijah the prophet, "In the territory of Jezreel the dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel; the corpse of Jezebel shall be like dung on the field in the territory of Jezreel, so that no one can say, 'This is Jezebel.'" (**2 Kings 9:30-37**).

Jezebel appears in **Revelation 2:20-23**. In his message to the church at Thyatira, John has the Son of God condemning a woman in the church he calls Jezebel who, "...calls herself a prophet and is teaching and

beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols.” The stain of Jezebel continued to infect the lives of followers of God.

Athaliah was the mother of the wicked King Ahaziah, and when he was killed by Jehu of Judah, she set about to destroy the rest of the royal family of the House of Judah (**2 Chronicles 22:10-12**). The heir to the royal family was saved by Jehosheba (**2 Kings 11:1-3**)/Jehoshabeath (**2 Chronicles 22:10-12**) who hid the king’s son from Athaliah.

### Final Thoughts

In the stories of the women of the Old Testament we have a unique record that has no parallels in the literature of the region from the 10<sup>th</sup> Century BCE to the First Century BCE. Other cultures have stories of goddesses and cosmic mother-figures, but there are no Hannahs weeping at the gate of the temple, or Ruths binding their futures in an act of love, or Deborahs and Jaels combining to defeat a military adversary. These women counted and left their stamp on the religious tradition we still have as our own. We honor them by raising their names and deeds.

## Women in the New Testament

### Week 4 - Women in the Gospels

There are four women from the Old Testament present in Jesus’ Matthew genealogy; Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba; four women who, in different ways, were marginalized, exploited and dehumanized, but are specifically remembered by name. Isn’t this an interesting way to begin the story of the Messiah?

A study of women in the New Testament must begin with the Gospel accounts of the relationships Jesus had with the various women in his circle. Beginning with his mother, Mary (**Matt 1:16, 18-25; 2:11, 13-14, 20-21; Matt 12:46-50; Matt 13:55; Mark 3: 31-35; Mark 6:3; Luke 1:26-56; 2:5-8, 16, 19, 22, 27, 34-35, 43-51; Luke 8: 19-20; John 2:1-5, 12; 6:42; John 19:25-27; Acts 1:14; Gal 4:4**), the relationship could be characterized as a fairly normal one between mother and son.

The account of the marriage feast in Cana in the Gospel of John presents a surprisingly familiar interaction (**John 2:1-12**). The marriage feast was running out of wine, and Mary remarked to Jesus, probably with a raised eyebrow, “They have no wine.” Jesus’ response, begun with him addressing her with formal respect, “Woman...” as opposed to a more familial, “Mom!!!” then recounted Jesus saying, “...what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” Getting the message, though, Jesus proceeded to turn water into wine – of an even better vintage. Look, Mom, better wine!

Later in his ministry, when Jesus is portrayed in **Matthew 12:46-50** at the end of an account of conflicts with Pharisees about Sabbath laws and with scribes who attempt to discredit him and his ministry, he was approached mid-conflict by Mary and his brothers who wanted to speak with him. We don't know what they wanted to say to Jesus, but from the context, it may be the case that they wanted him to cool down and stop getting the religious leaders mad at him. When he was told that his mother and brothers were there and wanted to speak to him, he replied, "'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' and pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'"

The Matthew account ended at that point, but Jesus was very clearly presented as stepping outside the normal family contexts of his time and establishing new definitions of family. While that encounter was probably a painful one for Mary and Jesus' brothers (and sisters?), Jesus' redefinitions of relationships established new norms for his followers that created new possibilities for women.

Jesus had women who accompanied him and his disciples in their ministry. Mary Magdalene (**Matthew 27:57, 61; 28:1-10; Mark 15: 40-41,47; 16: 1-8, 9-11; Luke 8:2-3; 24: 1-11, 22-24; John 19:25; 20: 1-3, 11-18**), was one woman who, according to the four canonical gospels, traveled with Jesus as one of his followers and was a witness to his crucifixion and the empty tomb. She is mentioned by name twelve times in the Gospels, more than most of the Apostles and more than any other woman in the Gospels, other than Jesus' family. Mary's epithet *Magdalene* may be a geographic reference, meaning that she came from the town of Magdala, a fishing town on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee in Roman Judea.

The portrayal of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute began in 591 AD, when Pope Gregory I conflated Mary Magdalene with the unnamed "sinful woman" who anointed Jesus's feet with her tears and dried them with her hair in **Luke 7:36–50**.

**Luke 8:2-3** lists Mary Magdalene, Susana and Joanna as some of the women who traveled with Jesus and helped support his ministry "out of their resources", indicating that they were probably wealthy. Joanna was the wife of Herod's steward, Chuza (**Luke 8:2-3; Luke 24: 1-11, 22-24**). Joanna was also at the empty tomb along with Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and unnamed other women. They were the first on the scene Easter morning (**Luke 24:1-11, 22-24**).

Contrary to the custom of the time, Jesus spoke directly to women in ways religious leaders would not have done. Remember Eli dismissing a weeping Hannah, forcing her to press the need she had that he was initially unwilling to hear? Jesus, in contrast, spoke directly to the grieving widow of Nain (**Luke 7:11-17**), to the woman who anointed his feet with her tears (**Luke 7:36-50**) forgiving her sins, the woman with the uncontrolled bleeding (**Matthew 9:22, Mark 5:34, Luke 8:48**), the woman who called from the crowd (**Luke 11:27-28**) and the woman crippled for 18 years (**Luke 13:12**).

By way of contrast, a Syrophenician woman, also called a Gentile and a Canaanite (**Matt 15:21-28, Mark 7:24-30**), shouted to Jesus for help because her daughter was tormented by a demon. At first, Jesus ignored her, but she knelt before him and asked again. Jesus' response was cold, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel....It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She persisted, referring to the crumbs that fall from the Master's table that feeds the dogs. Jesus relented, and her daughter was healed. Did this woman know of Jesus' parable of the beggar Lazarus who survived on the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table? (**Luke 16:20-25**). Why was this unflattering story included by Mark and Matthew? In any event, the story survived to be told even though it didn't show Jesus in one of his better moments.

Jesus did better when encountering a Samaritan, but non-Canaanite, woman at a well (**John 4:7-42**). In this instance, Jesus not only engaged a woman in a conversation, but she was also a despised alien, a heretic, to whom he, a Jew, should not speak. Even more startling was Jesus' interaction with the woman in an adulterous relationship (**John 8:1-11**) during which he not only spoke to her but spoke up for her against the law that called for her to be stoned.

In addressing Jewish women, Jesus used words like "daughter of Abraham" (**Luke 13:16**) which was a way of equating their spiritual status to being equal to men.

Jesus used the example of women to make important statements about the nature of the Kingdom of God. He noted the boundless generosity of the widow giving all she had (**Mark 12:41-44, Luke 21:1-4**). In Jesus' visit with Martha and Mary, he contrasted Martha's busy-ness with Mary's attention to the business-at-hand; Jesus' teaching (Martha {**Luke 10: 37-42; John 11: 1-6, 17-27, 34-45; 12:2**}) (Mary of Bethany {**Luke 10: 37-42; John 11: 1-5, 17-20, 28-34, 39-45; 12:3-9**})

Finally, in one of Jesus' last words on the cross, he told his mother and the disciple whom he loved to redefine their relationship to each other, giving each the support and comfort they needed at this extreme time and re-defining family for them (**John 19:25b-27**).

In an interesting note, the Gospels record, "Many women there looking on from a distance," watching the Crucifixion (**Matt 27:55-56; Luke 23:49, 55-56**). The account of them in Mark includes the name Salome, not only at the Crucifixion, but also among the women who went to anoint Jesus' body the next morning. (**Mark 15: 40-41; Mark 16:1-8**). The apocryphal Book of the Resurrection of Christ, pseudonymically attributed to the apostle Bartholomew, names a "Salome the temptress" as among the women who watched the Crucifixion and went to the empty tomb; perhaps reflecting an early tradition that Salome, the daughter of Herodias, became a follower of Jesus.

Below are accounts of other women in the Gospels who are remembered because of their faith or deeds.

- Peter's Mother-in-law (Matt 8:14-15; Mark 1:30-31; Luke 4:38-39)
- Daughter of Jarius (Matt 9: 18-19, 23-26; Mark 5: 22-24, 35-43; Luke 8:41, 49-56)
- Wife of Jarius (Mark 5:40-43; Luke 8:51-56)
- Woman with Issue of Blood (Matt 9: 20-22; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48)
- Jesus' Sisters (Matt 13:56; Mark 6:3)
- Herodias (Matt. 14:1-11; Mark 6:17-28; Luke 3:19-20)
- Herodias' daughter Salome (Matt 14:6-12; Mark: 6: 21-29; Luke 3:19-20)
- Women and children among the 5,000 (Matt 14:21)
- Women and children among the 4,000 (Matt 15:38)
- The Mother of Zebedee's Children (Matt 20:20-23; Matt 27:56)
- Woman who Anointed Jesus (Matt 26: 6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-8)
- Young woman to whom Peter denied Christ (Matt 26:69-71; Mark 14:66- 70; Luke 22:56-57; John 18:17)
- Wife of Pontius Pilate (Matt 27:19)
- Mary, the mother of James and Joses (also called "The other Mary") (Matt 27:56, 61; 28:1-10; Mark 15: 40-41,47; 16: 1-8; Luke 24: 1-11, 22-24)
- Elisabeth (Luke 1:5-80)
- Anna (Luke 2: 36-38)
- Certain women who had been healed (Luke 8:2-3)
- Certain woman of the company (Luke 11:27-28)

- Woman with a Spirit of Infirmity (Luke 13:11-16)
- Women who bewailed and lamented (Luke 23: 27-29)
- The mother of the Man Born Blind (John 9:2-3, 18-23)
- Mary, the wife of Cleophas (John 19:25)
- Jesus' aunt (John 19:25)

### **Week 5 - Women in the Epistles**

In this section I will be using the term “gathering” (ekklesia, in Greek) to refer to what are commonly called the early churches. At the time of Paul’s letters, followers of The Way (not yet called “Christians”) met in houses of members. There was as yet no formal structure with dioceses, conferences or Bishops. Paul served as the authority for gatherings that stretched from modern day Turkey to Greece. Later, structures would be established with the increasing likelihood that the roles of women would be reduced and eliminated. Those I will call churches.

**Paul on women:** It’s easy to criticize some of the things Paul had to say about women from the perspective of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. But Paul was a 1<sup>st</sup> Century man and an observant Jew steeped in Rabbinic learning to boot. Taking this into account at the outset, it is remarkable that Paul could be as open as he was in regard to the role of women in the emerging gatherings of The Way that Paul supported.

Remember, Paul was not a Christian, but a Messianic Jew. He experienced the risen Christ and carried the Good News to the Gentile world of his time; a mix of Greek and Roman theology/philosophy/politics. He nurtured the nascent gatherings in this complex culture with one eye on Christ, one eye on the allure of Greek culture and another eye (if possible) on the threats of Roman politics. He had to be sure that the gatherings remained focused on the development of their community and did not fall victim to the allures and threats around them. The roles women played in the gatherings were a sensitive issue in those complex circumstances.

With this in mind, look at the following Scripture passages and note the sources: 1 Corinthians with Paul as the author; 1 Timothy with Paul likely not the author.

**1 Corinthians 11:2–16:** “I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions just as I handed them on to you. But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of the woman, and God is the head of Christ. Any

man who prays or prophesies with something on his head shames his head, but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled shames her head—it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved. For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair, but if it is shameful for a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved, she should wear a veil.

“For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God, but woman is the reflection of man. Indeed, man was not made from woman but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman but woman for the sake of man. For this reason a woman ought to have authority over her head, because of the angels. <sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman, but all things come from God. Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled? Does not nature itself teach you that, if a man wears long hair, it is dishonoring to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. But if anyone is disposed to be contentious—we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.”

Paul had some definite thoughts on the conduct of women in the gatherings as seen in I Corinthians. One concern was that these new communities not be seen as strange or foreign to the larger Gentile community. An overriding consideration, however, may be that the gathering at Corinth was giving Paul fits with a constant pattern of internal strife, backbiting and conflict.

In his long, tortured treatment of head coverings he seems to be near his wits' end. At one point he says, “...Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of the woman... woman is the reflection of man. Indeed, man was not made from woman but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman but woman for the sake of man.” Score one for inequality. He goes on to say, however, “For this reason a woman ought to have authority over her head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman, but all things come from God.” Score one for equality and interdependence.

**1 Corinthians 14:34–35:** “As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.”

This passage about women speaking in the gathering seems very specific and may relate to one of the sources of strife that upsets the whole gathering. We can balance what we know of the Paul of Romans (below) for a fuller picture of his sense of the role of women. I can't imagine Paul having a problem with Junia (**Romans 16:7**) giving her testimony in the gathering about the time she spent in prison with Paul and Andronicus.

**1 Timothy 2:11-15:** Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.

**1 Timothy 5:3-16:** Honor widows who are really widows. If a widow has children or grandchildren, they should first learn their religious duty to their own family and make some repayment to their parents, for this is pleasing in God's sight. The real widow, left alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, but the widow who

lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives. Give these commands as well, so that they may be above reproach. And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Let a widow be put on the list if she is not less than sixty years old and has been married only once; she must be well attested for her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way.

But refuse to put younger widows on the list, for when their sensual desires alienate them from Christ, they want to marry, and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge. Besides that, they learn to be idle, gadding about from house to house, and they are not merely idle but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not say. So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, and manage their households, so as to give the adversary no occasion to revile us. For some have already turned away to follow Satan. If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her assist them; let the church not be burdened, so that it can assist those who are real widows.

The Pastoral Epistle **1 Timothy** was likely not written by Paul but was circulated after the beginning of the Second Century, AD when the church was being institutionalized in the face of significant opposition by heretical movements. It lacks the Pauline theological references like justification by faith or the church as the Body of Christ, and emphasizes adherence to tradition and the need to tighten social order. From this point on, restrictions on the roles of women will be the policy of the institutional church as it rapidly centralizes and codifies control. This process is fully in effect by the Fourth Century AD under the Roman Emperor Constantine. Please note: widows under the age of 60 are not to be put in the list at a time when the average life span was 48-54 for women who survived childbirth.

**But... Romans** was Paul's major theological work, a statement of who he was and what he believed, in preparation for his visit to Rome and a missionary journey to Spain. It was not written to address crises in the church, as was the case with the letters to the Corinthians. It was the last of all his letters and an unencumbered reflection on the true Paul. Here is what Paul thought about women in the gatherings:

Women had a place in the leadership and work of the gatherings (**Romans 16:1-15**). **Phoebe** was a deacon in the gathering at Cenchreae as well as a "saint" and a "benefactor" to Paul. Deacons were chosen to do the charitable work of the gathering, and one notable deacon was Stephen. **Prisca/ Priscilla** was cited as a worker who, along with her husband, "risked their necks for my life." Together, they are credited with instructing Apollos, a major evangelist of the first century who knew only the "baptism of John," about "the way of God more accurately" (**Acts 18:26**). So much for women not teaching men.

**Junia** is cited by Paul and is identified as one who was in prison with him and Andronicus. He says they are "...prominent among the Apostles" having been in Christ before Paul was. The Greek term means one who is sent, like the original Twelve. Identifying Junia as an Apostle is significant, in that the title is one that Paul applies to himself. She rates equivalency to Paul himself, by his own standard.

A woman who was a worker, cited by Paul, was more than someone who just brought a tuna casserole to the covered dish supper. There were too many of those to count. A worker was someone who had any of a number of key roles to play in the gathering that helped make it all work. **Mary of Rome** is cited as a worker along with **Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis** and the **mother of Rufus** (whom Paul called a "mother to me also"). Paul also lists two women as "saints," the **sister of Nerus**, and **Julia**. These may be women

who exhibited outstanding characteristics of importance to the gathering; piety, calm leadership, trustworthiness.

In **1 Corinthians 1:11**, Paul noted the role **Chloe and her people** (other women?) had in keeping him informed about what was going on in that troubled gathering. Paul's Corinthian letters were written based on his trust of that reporting.

**Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4: 2-3)** are women who "struggled beside" Paul "in the work of the Gospel" and had probably been quarreling. This wasn't about two women who had a disagreement. This was about a division in its leadership the gathering could ill afford.

**Nympha** is identified as a convenor of a gathering in her house (**Colossians 4:15**). Her specific role is not mentioned, but it is certain that she had a leadership position.

The **Elect Lady**, to whom **2 John** is written, may also have been convenor of a gathering in her house. The instructions in the letter assume leadership on her part.

### **Paul charts a separate course from Judaism for followers of the Way.**

**Galatians 3:28**; "There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Where did this come from? Paul was being challenged by opponents in Galatia who claimed that to follow The Way, people had to become Jews first and then adhere to Jewish laws like dietary restrictions and circumcision. In his letter he made the strongest case for the need to have a clean break from these Judaizers, going so far as to recount the quarrel he had with Peter in Antioch over Peter's bending to the dietary laws when a delegation came from Jerusalem.

"You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" Paul cried. He went into detail about the Law, from Abraham to Moses and recounted how Christ had freed all from the law-as-disciplinarian. To make the point as clear as possible that all things have become new, he wiped out those three distinctions of culture, bondage and gender. Now we might call these distinctions race, economics and gender. Why do we Christians still hold on to them?

**Peter on Women:** Scholars point to clues in the text of 1 Peter that indicate that it was not written by the Disciple of Jesus. The Greek is quite sophisticated for a Galilean fisherman and the writer identifies himself as an "elder" (**1 Peter 5:1**) not a Disciple or Apostle. Scholars date its writing during the last decade of the First Century. As such, it was written during a time of persecution of the church (**1 Peter 4:12-19**) and at a point in the church's history when the roles of women had changed from the time of Paul.

**1 Peter 3:1-7:** "Wives, in the same way, be subject to your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives' conduct, when they see the purity and respect of your conduct. Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing; rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God's sight. It was in this way long ago that the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves by being subject to their husbands. Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him lord. You have become her daughters as long as you do what is good and never let fears alarm you.



“Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honor to the woman—though the weaker vessel, they are joint heirs of the gracious gift of life—so that nothing may hinder your prayers.”

We know a little bit about Sarah, about how she recognized absurdity and was open enough to respond with a laugh. How would she have responded to the author of 1 Peter? Again, the circumstances in the church at the end of the First Century/beginning of the Second Century were such that the roles of women were coming under tighter control by the leadership.

### **Week 6 - Women in Acts and Revelation**

The **Gospel of Luke** and **The Acts of the Apostles** were written by the same author and both reflect significant examples of the role of women in the gatherings of The Way. Although Acts was written in the last decades of the First Century and Paul's letters, written in the '40's and '50's, were circulated by that time, with one exception, no women mentioned in Paul's letters appears in Acts.

That exception is **Priscilla/Prisca (Acts 18:2-3, 18-20, 24-26)**. In **Romans 16:1-15** Paul referred to the married couple Priscilla/Prisca and Aquila as his "fellow workers" saying they risked their lives for him. Paul worked and seemingly lived with them for a considerable time, and they followed him to Ephesus before he left on his next missionary journey. In **Acts 18:25,26** Luke wrote that Apollos, a "learned man", came to Ephesus and began speaking in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquilla heard him, they took him with them and "explained the way of God more accurately." No hint here that women were forbidden to teach men.

There are a number of references to women in the rest of Acts, mostly in praise of women who are part of the gatherings, but there is one notable exception. **Sapphira** and her husband Ananias sold property and lied about the proceeds to the Apostles, giving only part of the proceeds to the gathering (**Acts 5:1-11**). The gathering shared everything, and this was a violation of their community. When Peter confronted Ananias, he fell down and died. Sapphira came on the scene later, having consented to what Ananias had done and, when confronted, she too dropped dead. What is noteworthy here is the joint and equal responsibility Ananias and Sapphira had for shortchanging the gathering.

The early chapters of Acts were written about the gatherings before Saul's road-to-Damascus encounter with the risen Christ. In these chapters, Saul is "ravaging" and "breathing threats and murder" against followers of The Way harassing and imprisoning them (**Acts 8:2-3, 9:2, 22:4**). He attacked both men and women. Again, there was a quality to his actions that saw women as equals before his version of the law.

There are references to house gatherings that include women in the accounts (**Acts 12:12-15**), with one that includes **Mary the mother of Jesus (Acts 1:14)**. One gathering of women that met in Philippi outside by the river attracted **Lydia**, a professional woman, a merchant in exotic goods, who listened to Paul and joined with her husband. She then opened her house to Paul and provided hospitality.

Concern for the widows in the gatherings is mentioned with the naming of the original seven deacons to provide for their care (**Acts 6:1**). This is the office later held by Phoebe in Cenchreae, so it was not for men-only.

A woman in Joppa, referred to as a "disciple" named **Tabitha**, or **Dorcas** in Greek, died. She was a pillar of the gathering because of her good works and charity, and was a real loss to the community. Peter was known to be staying nearby and was summoned. When he arrived, he was confronted by other widows

who showed Peter the fruits of her labor, and he sent them outside, prayed, and saw her awake from the dead.

Paul was with Silas in Philippi when they were going to the gathering where he had met Lydia to pray. On the way they were accosted by a slave-girl who loudly proclaimed, on the strength of the spirit of divination that possessed her, “These men are the slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” She continued to do this for days. Annoyed, Paul finally turned to her and cast out the spirit that had possessed her. The good deed earned Paul and Silas prison on the charge that they were disturbing the city, but the owners were mad because Paul had cost them income. How do you think the slave-girl felt?

Finally, Acts has accounts of the growth of The Way and is careful to note that it includes men and women (**Acts 5:14, 8:12, 13:50, 17:4-12, 17:34**). All throughout the accounts by Paul in his letters and by Luke in Acts, the importance of women joining the Way is clear. This is in marked contrast to the Judaism of the day and the practices of the Greeks and Romans.

### **Women in Revelation**

At the time of the writing of the Revelation of John, toward the end of the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (81-96 AD), the seven churches referred to in the book were suffering persecution. While it was not yet the wholesale empire-wide persecution that would be suffered under Diocletian (303-311 AD), beginning with Nero (64-68 AD), Christians in Rome were in constant danger. There was also a shift in the roles of women from the earliest days of the church with the beginning of Paul’s ministry (@35 AD) to its end with Paul’s imprisonment (@ 57-59 AD). John reverts to stereotypes of women in his apocalypse with a woman being used either to personify ultimate goodness or abject evil.

Woman clothed with the sun (**Revelation 12**): This chapter builds on rich symbolism from mythological traditions drawn from Egypt, Babylonia, Greece and Rome. A Greek source involves a woman, Leto, who is pregnant with Apollo, being pursued by the dragon, Python who knows Apollo is destined to kill him. This Hebrew-based reinterpretation hints at expectations of the Messiah. The woman can be understood to represent the church as it is faced with challenges to its existence but is protected by God.

The Great Whore (**Revelation 17**): In this mythological account, the woman can be understood to represent Rome (see **17:18**), as Babylon is no longer a threat to the church. Rome is the source of repression and injustice as well as early forms of persecution. She is “drunk with the blood of the saints and the witnesses to Jesus.” Martyr means witness. Seven heads may represent the seven hills or Rome in **verses seven and nine**. The ten horns in **verses seven and twelve through fourteen** may represent minor or local rulers (as in **Daniel 7:7-8**) and the seven kings of **verse nine** may relate to the major emperors from Tiberius (14 – 37 AD) through Domitian (81-96 AD).

By the Third Century AD, women still had influential roles in the church despite limitations that had begun to appear. The philosopher Porphyry complained that Christianity suffered because of them. Other influential voices had also been added.

Origen of Alexandria (185-254 AD) stated that, “Even if it is granted to a woman to show the sign of prophecy, she is nevertheless not permitted to speak in an assembly. When Miriam the prophetess spoke, she was leading a choir of women ...” For [as Paul declares] ‘I do not permit a woman to teach,’ and even less ‘to tell a man what to do.’”

Tertullian, the Second-Century Latin father, wrote that, "It is not permitted to a woman to speak in church. Neither may she teach, baptize, offer, nor claim for herself any function proper to a man, least of all the sacerdotal office." (On the Veiling of Virgins).

By the close of the Patristic era and the Romanization of the church under Constantine in the Fourth Century AD, a male hierarchy had established itself over church affairs, with priests and bishops running the congregations. Women, so essential to the story of the relationship between God and God's Creation in Scripture, had been channeled into narrow confines that closed them off from any significant continuing involvement.