



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection
Center for Christian Ethics
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Study Guides for

Women in the Bible

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to explore the stories of women in Scripture. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

Redeeming Women in the Grand Narrative of Scripture 2

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? 4

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 6

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 8

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.

Women with Icons 10

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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Focus Article:

📖 Redeeming Women in the Grand Narrative of Scripture
(*Women in the Bible*, pp. 11-22)

Suggested Articles:

📖 Rebekah's Scheme
(*Women in the Bible*, pp. 54-55)

📖 Judith's Co-conspirator
(*Women in the Bible*, pp. 56-58)

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Redeeming Women in the Grand Narrative of Scripture

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 Scripture's so-called 'difficult passages' in the light of the grand narrative begins to dissolve and relativize the problems in these texts.

Responsive Prayer

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.

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.

We have not honored the mystery of those who are different from us. We have closed our minds and our hearts to one another.

Forgive us and help us, Lord, we pray. Amen.

Scripture Readings: Genesis 1:26-27 and 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Reflection

For some readers today the Bible has lost its authority, Junia Pokrifka admits, because it seems to them to be "written by men, about men, and for men." Women are only at the periphery of many of its stories, and sometimes are denigrated.

But these readers are missing something that is important – what feminist theologian Letty Russell once called the Bible's overarching "story of God's love affair with the world." They fail to see this proverbial forest of love as they study some of its trees in isolation. And that is why Pokrifka urges us to read the Bible the other way around, interpreting its parts in terms of the whole story. She believes "a grand narrative approach can help us to understand the Bible as authoritative and redemptive for both women and men."

The biblical narrative has *three stages* – a beginning (Genesis 1-11), middle (the rest of the Old Testament), and end or perhaps the beginning of the end (the New Testament). Each stage, Pokrifka continues, "is marked by *three parallel themes*: creation or inaugurated 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."

Let's see how Pokrifka employs this grand narrative to interpret a "difficult text" – the Apostle Paul's concern about women teaching without a head covering (1 Corinthians 11:2-16).

- ▶ *Paul uses creational details* to frame his instructions to both men (v. 7) and women (v. 10) teachers. Here's the 'difficulty': does verse 7b contradict Genesis 1:27 and promote male superiority, as many have insisted? Pokrifka notes that Paul appeals to "nature" rather than God's created order to affirm different hairstyles for men and



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women (vv. 14-15). Women, according to Genesis 1-2, are as much the image and glory of God as men; so, Paul's suppressing this fact must be rhetorical, a way of supporting his point that Christian men and women should embrace different, culturally acceptable hairstyles. His teaching that "woman is the glory of man" (v. 7c) is not a new revelation, but a rabbinic interpretation from Genesis 2:20-23 that points to the woman's exalted status as "the crown, or completion, of humankind."

- ▶ *Paul highlights the female teachers' authority* when he says "the woman ought to have authority over her head" (v. 10), that is, the "man" (v. 3). Pokrifka translates Paul's main biblical reason for women's authority this way: "neither was man created because of woman, but woman because of man" (v. 9). When the man was incomplete without a "helper," the woman was created with equal authority to serve and guard the Garden (Genesis 2). "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," Pokrifka suggests. Yet in order to avoid "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 (vv. 11-12)."

Through the Bible's grand narrative we can 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," Pokrifka concludes. "Those who are redeemed are ultimately not bound to live within the limits of any sinful social order, including patriarchy." Yet, as Paul's teaching here reminds us, our freedom "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."

Study Questions

1. How do the three *themes* – creation/inaugurated new creation, rebellion, and promise/hope of complete new creation – shape each stage of the biblical narrative?
2. How do the three *elements* – the image of God, procreation or fruitfulness, and dominion – particularly concern the identity and destiny of women in God's purposes?
3. Why does it make "hermeneutical good sense" to let the grand narrative and women's place within it limit and guide our interpretation of so-called "problem texts" (like 1 Corinthians 11:2-16) rather than the other way around?
4. Consider how Rebekah's story (as depicted by Ghiberti) and Judith's story (as depicted by Artemisia Gentileschi) reflect key themes and elements of the biblical narrative.

Departing Hymn: "Pilgrims on this Earthly Journey" (verses 1, 3, and 4)



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Focus Article:

📖 Who is Mary Magdalene?
(*Women in the Bible*,
pp. 23-29)

Suggested Article:

📖 The First Witness
(*Women in the Bible*,
pp. 52-53)

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Who is Mary Magdalene?

The traditional image of the Magdalene as a repentant prostitute, not to mention the 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 woman behind the legend.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: John 20:1-18

Responsive Reading

Why did Jesus choose 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.

With these strengths blended, balanced, and manifested in the appropriate measure, a man or a woman expresses more fully the image of God.

Reflection

On "To Tell the Truth," a popular TV game show from 1956 to 2002, a real central character (whom the audience really wanted to know) and two impostors tried to fool the viewers. Celebrity judges asked questions of the contestants, who won prizes by convincing them to vote for an imposter as the real person. At the end of the game the host would famously ask, "Will the real [person's name] please stand up?"

The search for the real Mary Magdalene can seem like an episode from the game show: the real person would be a wonderful model for discipleship, were it not for the misconceptions about her in church tradition and popular culture. Mary Ann Beavis helps us separate the biblical Mary from the legends and mistaken identities, noting 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." She uncovers the stories behind these "imposters." Is the real Mary Magdalene...

- ▶ *a repentant prostitute?* A Western church tradition conflates Magdalene with an unnamed "sinner" who anoints Jesus' feet at a Pharisee's banquet (Luke 7:36-50) and with Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus of Bethany, who anoints Jesus' feet during a meal in their home (John 12:1-8). The real Magdalene was cured of "seven demons" (Luke 8:2; Mark 16:9), but there is no reason to connect these to sexual sin.
- ▶ *a Gnostic disciple?* Some ancient documents (e.g., *The Gospel of Mary*, *The Gospel of Philip*, *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*, and *Pistis Sophia*) portray "Mary" with unusual insight into Jesus' teachings and especially loved by him. But, many of the references do not call her "Magdalene." Beavis concludes, "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 is commended by him (Luke 10:42; John 12:7-8)."



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- ▶ *the wife of Jesus?* This sensational claim in popular scholarship, novels, and films appeals to Gnostic sources (above) and doctrines attributed to the medieval sect of Cathars (“Pure Ones”) by their detractors. However, Beavis notes, since they preferred celibacy to marriage and believed Christ was a purely spiritual being who remained in heaven, “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.”
- ▶ *a pagan priestess or a female deity?* There is no biblical or historical evidence in Gnostic or Cathar sources for these extreme views, Beavis writes. However, we should honor feminine metaphors for God — e.g., as a woman in labor (Isaiah 42:14), a nursing mother (Isaiah 49:15), a midwife (Psalm 22:9-10), a mother hen (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34), or a bakerwoman (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21). Also, divine Wisdom is personified as a woman in the biblical Wisdom tradition.

Study Questions

1. Consider Mary Magdalene’s role earlier in Jesus’ ministry (Luke 8:2-3, John 19:25, and Luke 23:50-24:10). How do these stories ‘fit’ with the events in John 20:1-18?
2. What might explain the western church tradition of viewing Mary Magdalene as a repentant sinner? Why is this tradition unfair both to her and to Mary of Bethany?
3. Discuss Mary Ann Beavis’s view that “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.”
4. Compare how Mary Magdalene is depicted in C. Austin Miles’s hymn “I Come to the Garden Alone” and Bronzino’s painting *Christ Appears to Mary Magdalene (Noli me tangere)*.

Departing Hymn: “I Come to the Garden Alone”

I come to the garden alone,
while the dew is still on the roses,
and the voice I hear falling on my ear
the Son of God discloses.

*And he walks with me, and he talks with me,
and he tells me I am his own;
and the joy we share as we tarry there,
none other has ever known.*

He speaks, and the sound of his voice
is so sweet the birds hush their singing,
and the melody that he gave to me
within my heart is ringing.

Refrain

I’d stay in the garden with him,
though the night around me be falling,
but he bids me go; through the voice of woe
his voice to me is calling.

Refrain

C. Austin Miles (1913)

Tune: GARDEN



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Focus Article:

📖 Women's Roles in the Letters to Timothy and Titus
(*Women in the Bible*, pp. 30-39)

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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 those observations (and prescriptions) bear on the present?

Responsive Prayer

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.

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

We have tried to change and control one another. Instead of loving one another, we have feared one another.

Forgive us and help us, Lord, we pray. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Titus 2:3-5 and 1 Timothy 5:3-16

Reflection

"Women's roles in the letters to Timothy and Titus appear troubling at best," Mona LaFosse notes. Women are warned to avoid gossiping, drunkenness, sensual living, braiding their hair, and wearing jewelry. Some idly gad about; others welcome false teachers into their homes. Women are instructed to love their husbands, bear children, manage their households, and not teach or have authority over men. "It is difficult not to see these texts as promoting a patriarchal view of women's roles," she admits.

Yet some women – mothers and grandmothers, older women who instruct younger ones, "real" widows, old widows, a woman who "has widows," and women associated with the role of deacon – have special, honorable roles. How can we unravel this paradox? Two features of ancient Mediterranean culture guide LaFosse's reading of these texts about women's roles – the high value of honor or good reputation, and the system of patronage.

- ▶ *Older and younger women (Titus 2:3-5).* The "fitting" behavior commended here would promote the good reputation of the community (2:5, 8, 10), unlike some others' divergent teachings about the Jewish law on what is clean and unclean (1:10-16; 3:9-11). Gender, class, and age determine how individuals and communities live honorably. The age hierarchy among women reflects an ancient norm – "an older woman [was] 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," LaFosse explains. In many cultures, older women teach the younger women. Here they also may serve as patrons. "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."



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- ▶ *Widows and "proper" behavior (1 Timothy 5:3-16)*. Divergent teaching threatens the group's reputation. Thus, proper behavior would serve two ends: "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)." There are "real" widows who are alone and need the community's help (5:5, 16). Some people are not caring for their family members (5:8), either their widowed mothers or grandmothers (5:4) or for younger widows (5:11-15). The latter are idle and being led astray; Paul wants them to assume honorable roles in that culture. LaFosse thinks 5:16 refers to the older women who, as mother, kin, or patron, should be guiding those younger widows. "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,' she writes. "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."
- ▶ *Women and the deaconate (1 Timothy 3:11)*. "Women" here may refer to the wives of deacons or to female deacons. Recall that one of Paul's patrons, Phoebe, was an honorable woman who is called "deacon" (Romans 16:1). These women are to have traits associated with church leaders, including being "faithful." This word describes the believing (i.e., faithful) woman "who has widows" and should teach them wisely (5:16). LaFosse concludes, "Thus, there were important roles for women in the community, if they embraced and embodied characteristics and behavior consistent with their faith."

Study Questions

1. Why does Mona LaFosse believe that 1 Timothy 5:3-16 and Titus 2:3-5 are focused on good reputation and culturally specific moral behavior? Do you think these passages are too concerned about these things? Or do they commend character traits that are worthwhile for disciples in every age?
2. How have the teachings of the Letters to Timothy and Titus been used to limit women's roles in church life? Why does LaFosse think this an inaccurate application of these texts?
3. How was honor or good reputation important in the ancient Mediterranean world, according to LaFosse? Is it still important to us today? Discuss when a concern for good reputation is helpful in our discipleship, and when it interferes with our following Christ.

Departing Hymn: "Pilgrims on this Earthly Journey" (verses 1, 2, and 5)



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Focus Article:

- Deborah's Daughters
(*Women in the Bible*,
pp. 40-48)

Suggested Articles:

- Preaching About Women
in (and on) the Bible
(*Women in the Bible*,
pp. 85-88)
- Feminist Scholarship on
Women in the Bible
(*Women in the Bible*,
pp. 89-93)

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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 voice in the nineteenth century. Here are women—preachers, devotional writers, suffragists, and abolitionists—who were Deborah's daughters.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Judges 4:1-16

Responsive Reading from Deborah's Song (Judges 5:3, 5, 11b-12a, 13, 31a)

Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes; to the Lord I will sing,
I will make melody to the Lord, the God of Israel.

**The mountains quaked before the LORD, the One of Sinai,
before the Lord, the God of Israel.**

Then down to the gates marched the people of the LORD.

**Awake, awake, Deborah!
Awake, awake, utter a song!**

Then down marched the remnant of the noble; the people of the
LORD marched down for him against the mighty.

**So perish all your enemies, O LORD! But may your friends be
like the sun as it rises in its might.**

Reflection

The prophet Deborah "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." This story is filled with great "disruptive potential," Joy Schroeder explains, because "Deborah exhibits characteristics that many readers have felt should never be encouraged in women."

Deborah's remarkable leadership in ancient Israel had many facets. The ancient prophetess, poet, and judge provided nineteenth-century proponents of women's leadership with "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," Schroeder observes.

Here are some examples of the women Schroeder calls "Deborah's daughters," because they 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."

- ▶ *Prophetess Deborah heartened many women preachers.* Harriet Livermore, a New England Baptist who was the first woman to preach to Congress, and Zilpha Elaw, an African-American Methodist who preached in America and Great Britain, often used her story to defend their divine callings. Noting that Deborah calls herself "a mother in Israel" (Judges 5:7), Methodist evangelist Phoebe Palmer explained that women do not become "unfeminine" when God calls them to leadership: "the God of Providence will enable [a woman] to meet the emergency with becoming dignity, wisdom, and womanly grace." To charges that a woman's preaching was "unnatural and unfeminine,"



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Catherine Mumford Booth, the co-founder of the Salvation Army, replied, “the authority of Deborah as a prophetess...was acknowledged and submitted to as implicated in the cases of the male judges who succeeded her. ... [W]ho 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.”

- ▶ *The poet Deborah stirred the imagination of devotional writers.* The British Jewish novelist Grace Aguilar imagined that ancient Israel embraced the contributions of women more than the Judaism or British society of her day. Similarly, the American social activist and novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote, “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 [Deborah’s leadership] is announced.” She interpreted Deborah’s song (Judges 5) as a vestige of a once-flourishing women’s literary culture: “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.”
- ▶ *Judge Deborah inspired suffragists and abolitionists.* “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?” asked activist Clara Neyman. She took Deborah’s work with Barak to show how “Together [man and woman] will slay the enemies – ignorance, superstition and cruelty.” The suffragist Anna Howard Shaw believed women should emulate Deborah by seeking public office. America, she said, had “been fathered to death. The great need of our country today is a little mothering to undo the evils of too much fathering.” As Schroeder notes, “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.”

Study Questions

1. Which facets of Deborah’s story most encouraged the nineteenth-century women whom Joy Schroeder calls “Deborah’s daughters”?
2. Which facets of Deborah’s story might inspire the discipleship of both men and women today? Are there facets of her story that you find problematic?
3. Discuss Scott Spencer’s advice: “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.” How does this fit with the advice from “Deborah’s daughters”?
4. Sheila Klopfer notes that nineteenth-century “feminists either naively regarded the Bible as affirming gender equality or pessimistically regarded it as patriarchal and thereby denied its authoritative nature.” Do you see this among Deborah’s daughters? What alternative does Klopfer commend?

Departing Hymn: “Holy, Holy, God of Power”



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Focus Articles:

- 📖 Women with Icons
(*Women in the Bible*,
pp. 70-80)

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Women with Icons

In the Orthodox tradition, icons – like the saints and stories they portray – point to the power of the larger story of Scripture. In the *Women with Icons* project we see how the icons of patron saints, and the women who hold them close, point to Christ.

Responsive Prayer (from Colossians 1:9-14)

May we be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that we may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as we bear fruit in every good work and as we grow in the knowledge of God.

May we be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may we be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.

He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. **Amen.**

Reflection

Icons (from Greek *eikōn*, for image) are important in personal and corporate worship in the Orthodox Church. Paul calls Christ “the image (*eikōn*) of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15; cf. 2 Corinthians 4:4) because he makes God known to us. With this in mind, the original artists ‘wrote’ icons in symbols in order to articulate spiritual truths they had seen, not to be realistic or decorative. Usually painted in tempera on wood panels, icons may depict Christ or another biblical figure, a saint from the life of the Church, or a biblical event celebrated in the church year.

The photographer Jocelyn Mathewes recalls, “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).” She began using icons in worship when she joined the Orthodox Church as an adult through chrismation. Part of the process is taking the name of a saint. (Orthodox children are given one by their parents or godparents.) She chose a married saint, Sophia of Thrace, who lived in the tenth or eleventh century. Mathewes explains, “She 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.”

Mathewes photographs fellow church women with the icons of their patron saints as a way of getting to know these women better and to explore how their lives are becoming interwoven with their chosen saints. Each photograph tells a personal story.

- ▶ *Ruth Mathewes with Her Icons* shows how Mathewes's daughter is reminded at once of the biblical woman for whom she's named and a great-grandmother who bears her name. She loves to point to the images and ask, “Who's that?” which provides moments to explore Scripture, saints, and history.



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- ▶ *Liana with Empress Theodora* shows a dear friend with the icon of the saint who restored the use of icons after the iconoclastic controversy in the ninth century. Mathewes chose a non-traditional angle “to illustrate again how ancient stories and the lives of the faithful departed are relevant in modern life.”
- ▶ In *Katie with Saint Catherine of Alexandria* and *Hannah with Holy Prophetess Hannah*, two young women dress in favorite clothing to make the image-making occasion special. Katie emulates the royalty and martyrdom of her saint from history. Hannah evokes the joy of her biblical model. “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.”
- ▶ According to a church tradition the childless couple Joachim and Anna were blessed to give birth to the Virgin Mary. Thus, Anna is described as Jesus’ grandmother. The women who embrace her in *Anna N. with Saint Anna* and *Anne K. with Saint Anna* “hail from the poles of human experience.” Young Anna “will perhaps come out from behind the story of St. Anna and use it as inspiration for her own life, whether that includes the gift of motherhood or not,” Mathewes writes. “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* shows saints are “relevant as Christians face their ending,” Mathewes says. “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.”

Study Questions

1. For Jocelyn Mathewes and her fellow church members, how have icons proved valuable in personal devotion at each stage of discipleship, from childhood to old age?
2. Discuss Mathewes’s observation: “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.”

Departing Hymn: “O Splendor of God’s Glory Bright”

O Splendor of God’s glory bright,
from light eternal bringing light,
into our inward hearts convey
the Holy Spirit’s cloudless ray.

O Christ, with each returning morn
your image to our hearts is borne;
O may we ever see anew
our Savior and our God in you!

Ambrose of Milan (c. 340-397), translation composite
Suggested Tunes: PUER NOBIS or WINCHESTER NEW

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

Redeeming Women in the Grand Narrative of Scripture

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> | <i>Dual Session (#1)</i> | <i>Dual Session (#2)</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer | Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Readings | Scripture Readings | | Scripture Readings |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) | Survey the grand narrative of Scripture | Explore texts in Scripture and art |
| Question 3 | Questions 2 and 3 | Questions 1 and 2 | Questions 3 and 4 |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To sketch the grand narrative of Scripture, emphasizing women's place within it.
2. To employ the grand narrative to interpret so-called "problem texts" related to women.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Women in the Bible (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Pilgrims on this Earthly Journey" either use the tune WEBSTER (Bolin) on p. 67 of *Women in the Bible* or locate the familiar tune STUTTGART in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Comment

A leading scholar in the Second Wave of Feminism spurred by the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s was Letty Russell (1929-2007), a theologian at Yale Divinity School. She read Scripture with the techniques of historical criticism, which tend to isolate specific passages from their contexts within the biblical canon and its literary units. Nevertheless, the larger message of Scripture – what she called "the story of God's love affair with the world" – was essential to her research. "In spite of the patriarchal nature of the biblical texts, I myself have no intention of giving up the biblical basis of my theology," she explained. "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 M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* [Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1985], 138)

Responsive Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer responsively. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Readings

Ask two group members to read Genesis 1:26-27 and 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In this study Junia Pokrifka outlines a method of canonical interpretation. This permits Scripture's overarching story to guide our reading of the individual texts. She briefly employs this hermeneutical approach on two Pauline passages – 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15 – that appear to ground role-restrictions for women in God's original intentions for creation. This study guide focuses on her interpretation of the first of these "problem texts."

If your group would like to extend their study, you might explore the role of women in the grand narrative of Scripture in the first session and then employ that narrative to interpret selected biblical texts – for instance, the two Pauline passages or the stories of Rebekah and Judith as depicted in the artwork in this issue.

Study Questions

1. Form three study groups and ask each group to trace one of the themes through the three stages of the biblical grand narrative. Junia Pokrifka emphasizes that these are “parallel” themes. Explore how the treatment of the theme changes a bit in each stage of the narrative.
2. The three elements are intertwined. So, in the beginning of the narrative, male and female equally are created in the divine image and receive the mandate to multiply and have dominion over the earth (Genesis 1:26-28). Similarly, the woman is created an equal “helper” to the man (2:18) to care for the Garden. Their rebellion leads to frustrated procreation and frustrated dominion over the unyielding ground (3:17-19), with the latter finding a “distorted outlet in human-to-human domination” (3:16b). Pokrifka views these frustrations not as “inalterable divine mandates or prescriptions,” but as “descriptions of a corrupted state of affairs that should and will be overcome.” This frames how she interprets the stories of barrenness and fecundity in the middle part of the biblical narrative. In the third part, the themes have a new twist: “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 sometimes breaks patriarchal customs, and through “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.”
3. Pokrifka outlines a method of using Scripture to interpret Scripture. She assumes that there is a unifying narrative running through the Christian biblical canon about God’s creation of the world and victorious, loving response to its rebellion, and she puts interpretive weight on this overarching story rather than specific passages, books, or sections of the Bible. Presumably what holds Scripture together in this way is the unifying action of God, inspiring writers, redactors, compilers of the canon, and readers through the Holy Spirit. This does not mean each of these persons knows the whole story, or has it in mind when they contribute to the writing, dissemination, and interpretation of Scripture; the articulation of the grand narrative and its application to interpret particular passages or sections of Scripture is an ongoing process of discernment.
4. Heidi Hornik summarizes the stories of Rebekah’s scheming to ensure Jacob’s birthright (Genesis 25 and 27) and Judith’s saving her town by killing Holofernes (Judith 8:1-13:9).

Rebekah’s actions help fulfill God’s promise to create the people of Israel in order to bless all nations. The struggle of the twins in her womb, their deception of one another, and her deception of her husband exemplify the consequences of rebellion against God. The story features themes of (frustrated) procreation and (distorted) dominion.

On the one hand, Judith might be seen as an agent of divine protection because her clever and heroic actions help preserve the life of God’s people. However, her disturbing violence is framed by the (distorted) dominion expressed in international greed and warfare, so it too must be judged as part of human rebellion against God’s good intentions. The themes of distorted procreation and dominion are expressed in Holofernes’s plan to control and ravish Judith; because she resists his domination, “in the Christian tradition she represents various virtues, such as chastity in opposition to lust,” Hornik writes.

Departing Hymn

“Pilgrims on this Earthly Journey” is on p. 67 of *Women in the Bible*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Who is Mary Magdalene?

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Responsive Reading | Responsive Reading |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 1 and 2 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To recover the biblical and historical Mary Magdalene as a model for discipleship.
2. To consider how she has been depicted in popular scholarship and art.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Women in the Bible (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “I Come to the Garden Alone” locate the familiar tune GARDEN in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

There is a faithful, but subtle, allusion to Mary Magdalene in the final scene of *Places in the Heart* (1984), Robert Benton’s haunting film about his hometown Waxahachie, TX, during the Great Depression. Throughout the story the characters’ lives are being pulled apart by the failing climate, tragic misunderstandings, and cruel violence. In the opening scene Royce and Edna Spalding are trying to gather their family for the Sunday meal when gunshots ring out and Royce, the young sheriff, must leave the table to investigate. He is accidentally killed by Wylie, a young black boy who is firing his pistol in a drunken rage. Edna is more distraught when Klu Klux Klan members display Wylie’s dragged corpse as a trophy at her front door. She barely manages to keep the farm going with motley helpers – Moze, a black drifter, and Mr. Will, a blinded veteran whom the banker forces her to take as a border. Klan members return one night to kill Moze, Mr. Will manages to prevent his murder, but Moze must leave town forever for his safety.

The final scene is another meal. A pretty sparse group attends the local church service. When the Lord’s Supper is served, the camera follows the tray of plastic cups as each member sips the holy drink and with a glance of blessing passes it to the next. We are amazed to see the pews are filled now with characters that were torn asunder – unfaithful spouses, Klan members and their victims, the greedy banker and farmers he ruined. In the Spalding’s pew, Moze is sitting next to Mr. Will, and next to Edna and her children sit Royce and his killer Wylie. The last words of the film belong to Wylie, who turns to Royce, smiles, and says, “Peace of God.”

Where is the Magdalene in this powerful scene? She is in the music. The choir sings Austin Miles’s gospel hymn “I Come to the Garden Alone” as the pastor reads the words of institution, “On the night Jesus was betrayed, he took the cup....” Miles’s lyric about Mary’s encounter with Jesus signals no maudlin religious individualism here; rather it recalls the risen Christ’s love that can gather friends and enemies, dead and alive, into his own Body. Mary was the first witness of this love, and she passed the news to the disciples.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to engender in members the trust and courage of Mary Magdalene, the first witness to the risen Christ.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read John 20:1-18 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Mary Ann Beavis notes how Mary Magdalene's discipleship has been distorted in two venues – western church tradition and popular culture. Through more careful readings of Scripture, feminist biblical scholars recently have clarified the important role she actually played in Jesus' ministry. Reflecting on the errors uncovered in the reception history of Mary Magdalene's story should remind us to turn a more critical eye on how we read the stories of women in the Bible.

Study Questions

1. Form study groups to look for clues in the scripture passages about the Magdalene's role. She followed Jesus and supported his group with her personal wealth; she was exorcised of demons by Jesus; she was present at the foot of the cross with Jesus' mother; and she witnessed the burial of Jesus. Do these stories suggest Mary would have the means and opportunity to attend to Jesus' body on Sunday morning, that Jesus would speak tenderly to her in the Garden, that he would entrust to her the news of his resurrection, that he could expect the other disciples to receive her witness, and so on?
2. Mary Ann Beavis explains how the unnamed sinful woman who anoints Jesus' feet in Luke 7:36-50, Mary of Bethany, and Mary Magdalene gradually became identified. This was the teaching of Pope Gregory the Great in the late sixth century. The idea that (the conflated) Mary's chief sin was sexual and that she was a prostitute is a later elaboration. The traditional view seems to be an attempt to tidy up the story of Jesus – to harmonize similar Gospel stories (Mary of Bethany=the sinful woman, because each one anoints Jesus' feet) and connect passages into a continuous story (Mary Magdalene=the sinful woman, because Luke mentions the Magdalene's exorcism in the section after the woman anoints Jesus' feet). The connections are implausible, and they minimize the leadership of both Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany in the early Christian community.
3. Beavis worries that once again a biblical woman's story has been ignored or misunderstood in the western church tradition. She writes, "Not only was [Mary of Bethany] 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 'the 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)." [For more about the importance of Mary of Bethany, see Beavis's article "Reconsidering Mary of Bethany," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74:2 (2012), 281-297.]
4. The risen Christ's special attention to Mary Magdalene is highlighted in Bronzino (in Christ's glance) and Miles (in their extended conversation). Bronzino depicts other women disciples in the Garden (as in the Synoptic Gospels), but Miles focuses on Mary alone (as in John's Gospel). Mary's desire to linger with or hold onto Christ, and his resistance to this effort are clear in each work; Miles alludes to Christ's instruction to Mary to be witness to his resurrection ("but he bids me go"). How do you interpret the last line of Miles's lyric, especially the word "through"? Do we hear Christ's comforting words during our woe? Or do we hear Christ's call to ministry via the voice of woe? Either would be consistent with and an extension of Mary's experience in the Garden.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Women's Roles in the Letters to Timothy and Titus

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Responsive Prayer | Responsive Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 1 and 3 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To interpret the roles for women in the Letters to Timothy and Titus in the context of the ancient Mediterranean world.
2. To outline the ancient practice of patronage and the concern for honor.
3. To discuss the appropriate role for honor or good reputation in our discipleship.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Women in the Bible (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Pilgrims on this Earthly Journey" either use the tune WEBSTER (Bolin) on p. 67 of *Women in the Bible* or locate the familiar tune STUTTGART in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Background Story

Imagine the life-course of a woman of the non-elite classes in the ancient Mediterranean world. We know that she would be "educated primarily in household duties by her mother and other female kin" and "expected to marry a man of her parents' choosing in her late teen years," Mona LaFosse explains. "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" and the couple's property "legally belonged to her first family rather than the family into which she married."

Life expectancy was so dismal that probably half of her children would die before age ten and her parents would die sometime in her twenties or thirties. When her husband died, if she was still of childbearing age, she was expected to remarry; otherwise she would remain alone and hope to support herself or receive support from her adult children.

Suppose she was blessed to see her children live to adulthood and start families. "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," LaFosse notes. "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."

Responsive Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer responsively. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read Titus 2:3-5 and 1 Timothy 5:3-16 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In the first study guide, "Redeeming Women in the Grand Narrative of Scripture," we saw the value of canonical criticism in interpreting biblical texts about women's roles. In this study Mona LaFosse illustrates a different

method, though it is consistent with the canonical perspective. She gives a close reading of key passages in the Letters to Timothy and Titus in light of two social-cultural practices of the ancient Mediterranean world – the practice of patronage and the concern for honor or good reputation. Encourage members to use this socio-cultural critical method not to shove the instructions on women’s roles “back into history,” but to explore a more accurate application of these teachings to our cultural context.

Study Questions

1. Mona LaFosse calls attention to several passages in each letter that explicitly refer to preserving the honor or good reputation of the community: 1 Timothy 3:7 and 5:14; and Titus 2:5, 8, 10. The proper behaviors listed for older men (Titus 2:2), older women and younger women (2:3-5), younger men (2:6), and slaves (2:9-10) contain many instances of culturally specific moral behaviors.

LaFosse concludes, “Although [the writer of these letters] 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.”

2. Some interpreters think these letters restrict all women to certain household roles (cf. 1 Timothy 5:14; Titus 2:4-5) and prohibit them from teaching generally or in the church (1 Timothy 2:12). Some think 1 Timothy 3:11 refers only to deacon’s wives, and thus prevents women from serving as deacons.

LaFosse suggests that in light of Paul’s practice, 1 Timothy 3:11 probably refers to women deacons. Women are given other important leadership roles in these letters. She writes, “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.”

The passages that seem more restrictive of women’s roles, LaFosse argues, are not teachings for all women. Either they refer to specific problems in these communities – e.g., the older women who are being misled by divergent teachings and (therefore?) are shirking their duties to mentor younger widows – or they echo first-century cultural norms that were to be respected at the time in order to preserve the good reputation of the community.

3. “Honor was a pivotal cultural value in the ancient Mediterranean,” LaFosse writes. “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.”

Though the standards of honor have changed over the years, we are still concerned with reputation. She writes, “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?).... 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.”

Invite members to give some examples of a healthy concern for reputation, because it allows us to care for our neighbors and make a winsome presentation of the gospel to them. Then consider some examples of our being too concerned about our reputation in ways that deflect us from being faithful followers of Christ.

Departing Hymn

“Pilgrims on this Earthly Journey” is on p. 67 of *Women in the Bible*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Deborah's Daughters

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Responsive Reading | Responsive Reading |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 1 and 2 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To review how nineteenth-century proponents of women's leadership were inspired by the biblical story of Deborah.
2. To survey Deborah's story in Judges 4-5 to inspire our discipleship today.
3. To reflect on the contributions of feminist biblical scholarship in guiding our reading of Scripture.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of Women in the Bible (Christian Reflection) and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Joy Schroeder recounts how Frances Willard (1839-1898), a popular Methodist speaker and president of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union, called for more women biblical commentators in her book *Woman in the Pulpit* (1889). "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," she wrote. Women could add a "pinch of commonsense" that would be "an excellent ingredient in that complicated dish called Biblical interpretation."

Willard appealed to the biblical stories about Deborah and other women leaders to challenge interpretations of Scripture that limited women's roles in church and society. In a stirring roll call of the Bible's heroines Willard wrote, "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."

In this study Joy Schroeder explores how the many facets of Deborah inspired women preachers, political activists, and writers in the nineteenth century. How does her story inspire our discipleship?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to inspire your discipleship in his way through the life of Deborah.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Judges 4:1-16 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading from Deborah's Song

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Joy Schroeder introduces a range of nineteenth-century women abolitionists, suffragists, and novelists who drew upon the story of Deborah in order to articulate and defend an expanded role for women in leadership. She calls them "Deborah's daughters." Though most of these women were not professionally trained in biblical

studies, they pioneered feminist biblical scholarship. Sheila Klopfer calls their era the “First Wave of Feminism.” Invite members to reflect not only on the contributions these women make to our appreciation of Deborah’s story, but also on the role feminist biblical scholarship should play in our discipleship today.

Study Questions

1. Joy Schroeder distinguishes three major facets of Deborah’s leadership: she was a prophetess, political leader (“judge”), and poet. While all of the facets were recognized by each of the nineteenth-century women Schroeder calls “Deborah’s daughters,” they tended to be emphasized, in turn, by the women preachers, social activists, and novelists. Reading between the lines in Deborah’s story, these interpreters suggested she was not unique in ancient Israel in these facets of leadership.
2. The same three facets of Deborah’s leadership might inspire our discipleship. Christian women and men are called to speaking and teaching ministries, political leadership, and literary pursuits. Because the story of Deborah (indeed, the entire biblical book of Judges) is absent from lectionaries, it is rarely used in sermons or lessons in churches today. Perhaps this is due to the violence in the story, on both a grand scale – the “army of Sisera fell by the sword; no one was left” (Judges 4:16b) – and a personal scale – when Sisera is murdered by Jael (Judges 4:17-22). While the song of Deborah in Judges 5 celebrates these events for their divine protection of the people of Israel, it concludes by emphasizing the enduring peace brought by Deborah’s rule: “And the land had rest forty years” (5:31b).
3. Consider Scott Spencer’s reasons for advising us to (1) incorporate women’s insights into all preaching and teaching, and (2) study women characters in the Bible. Both recommendations are prominent in the writings of Deborah’s daughters.

Consider practical steps your congregation might take toward these ends. Do lay men and women meet regularly with the pastors and teachers to help plan sermons and lessons? Are women invited to preach sermons or teach discipleship classes? Are there opportunities for sermon or study series about women characters in the Bible?

4. Sheila Klopfer cites these examples of the extremes: “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...considered only the passages that dignified women as inspired divine truth.”

Klopfer commends contemporary Christian feminist scholars, men and women, who balance the “hermeneutic of suspicion” with a “hermeneutic of trust.” She notes, “They are keenly aware that Scripture was produced in a patriarchal culture and is shaped by the narrator’s perspective. However...[they] 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.” The articles by Junia Pokrifka and Mona LaFosse in this issue are good examples of the approach Klopfer is describing.

Departing Hymn

“Holy, Holy, God of Power” is on p. 69 of *Women in the Bible*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Women with Icons

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Responsive Prayer | Responsive Prayer |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Question 1 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To discuss the roles that icons can play in personal devotion through each stage of discipleship, from childhood to old age.
2. To consider how our lives become images reflecting the love of God in the world.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11. Distribute copies of *Women in the Bible (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “O Splendor of God’s Glory Bright” locate one of the familiar tunes PUER NOBIS or WINCHESTER NEW in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

Jocelyn Mathewes writes, “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.”

Responsive Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer responsively. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

The *Women with Icons* project by photographer Jocelyn Mathewes introduces us to another way that women in the Bible continue to inspire the discipleship of women today. She gives examples of the biblical women Ruth and Hannah. Icons can also depict saints identified in church tradition; the examples here are Anna, Sophia of Thrace, the Empress Theodora, and Bridget of Kildare. These women also point to the overarching story of Scripture as it is read and interpreted in church on their feast days.

Icons always have had nested meaning. The original icons (which may be centuries old) were ‘written’ in symbols to articulate the spiritual insights that their artists had gained from observing the life of a biblical or historical saint; today the artists who prayerfully copy the icons today re-appropriate those spiritual insights. Something like pattern is evident in Mathewes’s photographs. In them we see further images of God’s love reflected through the lives of these contemporary Orthodox women as they hold close the icons of their patron saints.

The Orthodox Church in America has a searchable database of the icons of saints (and their stories and feast days) and icons of biblical events commemorated through the church year at “Feasts & Saints,” www.oca.org/fs (accessed April 22, 2013). Mathewes refers to *The Prologue from Ochrid*, a twentieth-century compilation of the lives of the saints arranged by their feast days. It can be searched online at www.westsrbdio.org/prolog/my.html (accessed April 22, 2013).

Study Questions

1. Assign individuals or small groups to study one of Jocelyn Mathewes’s photographs and descriptions for a few minutes, and then come back together to share their findings. Members may notice recurring themes such as these.
 - The icons are points of inquiry about *biblical* stories concerning biblical saints, of course, but also related to historical saints and church festivals. This makes icons useful in teaching biblical stories to children and sharing them with one another.
 - The icons share spiritual insight through imagery. This allows them to encourage children who cannot yet read, and the elderly or infirmed who can no longer read.
 - The icons seem to enhance the relevance of the discipleship of the saints, biblical and historical, to modern life. Mathewes mentions this in her discussion of the photographs of herself and of her friend Lianna, and it is exemplified in several of the others.
 - The life of a saint has multiple points of contact with modern life. The same facet may take on different meaning as we progress through our discipleship; this is clear in the images of young Anna and of Anne holding the icon of Saint Anna.
 - The embrace of these saints is not only personal, but also communal. As a patron saint is honored on her feast day, individuals who share her name are inspired and encouraged by the gathered congregation.
2. Mathewes suggests each disciple’s life can become an image of God’s love that inspires and encourages others. Within the Orthodox tradition, a woman’s life might well become intertwined with the story of her patron saint – either because she chose that saint (as Jocelyn Mathewes did), or was given that saint’s name by her parents and godparents who admired the saint.

However, Mathewes emphasizes that this is not a process of mimicry, but of inspiration and emulation. She writes, “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.”

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.