

Miss. Judged.

Five Sessions Exploring Stories of Marginalised Women of the Bible

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Session One
Introduction
The Levite's Concubine and the Right Not To Be Named

Introduction

"A good name," says Proverbs, "is to be chosen rather than great riches" (22:1-2, ESV). But many women in the Hebrew Bible have **no** name. Many are named only in relation to men - "the daughter of Jephthah," "Lot's wife," "Job's wife," and so on.

Several of these women have significant roles in the narratives; and yet, the narrator doesn't seem to think them worth naming. At times, this omission can feel demeaning, like adding insult to injury.

This is just one of the issues that can arise when we take an honest look at the depiction of women in the Bible, especially from a 21st century western context where women's rights are at the forefront, and where more women are reporting sexual abuse and exploitation. These are serious and valid concerns.

However, the writers of the Bible didn't live in the same world we do. And even today, people in different cultures can come away with wildly different conclusions from the same narrative. Reading with people from different cultures can be especially helpful when we approach the stories that present us with the most difficulties for interpretation.

The Book of Judges

Within the story of the Old Testament, the book of Judges invites us to consider questions about the formation of collective identity, and our human tendency to rely on idols of all kinds—economic, military, institutional, and of course, religious. It shows us the various ways that the human soul or body may be sacrificed to these idols by people of power, and by collective choice. The stories we've looked at focus specifically on the women of the book and how they suffer and respond to violence and how their narratives come to be remembered and used by the community later on. Within the Christian canon, these women also set the stage for the emergence of the story of Ruth and Naomi, where the downward spiral of violence arguably begins to finally take a turn.

"The Levite's Concubine"

Take the woman of Judges 19, for instance, named only as "the Levite's concubine." At the end of a lengthy narrative about a domestic dispute, she is thrown out by her husband as a sacrificial victim to a mob of men who at first wanted to rape him.

Read: Judges 19: 25b - 29

The Levite seems to care only for himself. And, by naming his concubine only in relation to him, it may look like the narrator doesn't care much about her either.

Over the centuries, many interpreters have also disregarded this woman. Some have exonerated the men in the story, or minimized their crimes by blaming the woman herself.¹

Many feminist interpreters have responded by critiquing the narrator. Pamela Tamarkin Reis sums up feminist readings as follows:

The Levite, the concubine, and every other actor who appear in Judges 19 are unnamed. J. Cheryl Exum believes that the concubine's anonymity is a "textual strategy for distancing the reader from the character." Exum and Mieke Bal, feminist critics, supply the concubine with an invented name...Phyllis Trible does not name the woman but sees her objectified by the man's "taking" of her...²

Many interpreters seem to take for granted the more horrific interpretations of the story. "The narrator condemns this woman", they seem to say. "So we condemn the narrator!"

As we open our series on the women of the Bible, I would like to call attention to the ways in which our interpretations may reflect less on the text than on our context. This comes into focus when we read difficult texts from different cultural standpoints.

Read through the lens of an individualistic culture, which is highly concerned with personal expression, it's natural to feel that the narrator is not giving the Levite's concubine a fair shake. As one commentator puts it, 'The woman's story is profoundly sad. She was "given" and "taken" regardless of her wishes. She had no voice, until finally her body parts were allowed to "speak" about her death. Even then, they told the Levite's story, not hers.'³

For westerners, victims should get the chance to tell their own story, on their own terms. And the crimes against them should be directly condemned. When reading from the perspective of the land of my birth (the United States), I understand the angst this story raises. Failing to name the woman or give her a speaking role **does** seem to distance her from us. We don't want to hear a narrator (likely a man) speak for her, since this seems to compromise her individuality and agency – for us, amongst the most precious things she has.

But when I read this story from the lens of the culture I grew up in (Thailand), I respond differently.

Cultural Issues of Honor & Shame

Honor

All cultures are deeply concerned with "honor and shame." However, some are better at talking about it than others. As several sociologists have noted, in western culture shame is everywhere, and yet mostly unacknowledged.

By contrast, Thai culture is highly conscious of shame. One must be concerned with saving one's own face, **and** the face of others. Often, this means withholding emotion to a point Americans find cruel and absurd.

My mom once had a student tell her that he needed to ask her forgiveness. He would miss class that week, due to the sudden death of his mother. In Thailand, the appropriate response is to simply say, "It's no trouble," and to say it **with a smile**.

Such a response feels insensitive to Americans. We want to reassure others that we are sympathetic, often with expressions of shock and grief. But in Thailand, we want to reassure others that we are okay, and that things will be okay. The worst thing would be to call further attention to an already awful personal crisis.

If death is handled with this degree of discretion, how much more so for sexual violence and abuse? If a good name is to be chosen above riches, it would be unthinkable in many cultures to subject a woman's name to the infamy of such cruelty as the Levite's concubine endured. Westerners might say the woman has a right to be named and heard, other cultures would say she has a right **not to**.

From a Thai point of view, the narrator's careful choice of what to omit shows deep sympathy, and a desire to protect the woman. No dishonor comes to her name. Instead, the infamy belongs to the Levites, Gibeah, Benjamin, and ultimately **all the men of Israel**.

In words often quoted by my grandmother, "The story you are about to see is true. The names have been changed to protect the innocent."

What did you know of this story already ?

How do you react to what we have heard so far ?

Direct and Indirect Language

Of course, even with a cultural priority for honor, difficult things must sometimes be communicated. In many cultures, indirect communication methods are employed to save face, while still getting important messages across. In fact, much doesn't have to

be said at all. Anthropologists call these cultures "high context," meaning that a high degree of understanding has to be shared by communicators to "fill in the gaps." In these cultures, the responsibility for communication lies more with the hearer's ability to carefully listen and derive meaning than with the speaker's ability to clearly state it.

When we first moved to Thailand, my dad went to buy a television. The store said they had the model he wanted but tried to show him other options. After about 45 minutes of my dad continuing to insist that he wanted the first one, the worker finally hung his head and admitted that it was out of stock. If my dad had been more culturally attuned, he would have quickly read between the lines, and saved them both a loss of face.

When I look at many biblical stories, I see high context communication, which is often ambiguous in ways that frustrate western readers. In Judges 19, we are not given God's direct assessment or the narrator's "big takeaway." Western cultures, which tend to be low context, place more responsibility on the **speaker** to communicate clearly. If the message is not clear, we become frustrated with the messenger.

The Pressures of Difficult Texts

The elevation of personal expression, plus discomfort with ambiguity, can also mean we feel pressure to have strong opinions on things. This is doubly true for faith leaders, and those who teach. We're supposed to tell the people, "Thus saith the LORD" and give the correct assessment—perhaps especially in narratives where the LORD hath not, in fact, said anything, and where his opinion is at first elusive.

There is no shame in being a westerner and feeling one way about a story, or being an easterner and feeling another. All of these perspectives bring value to our pursuit of God's truth in his Word.

But, if you resonate with the pressures and frustration I've described, then the scriptures may invite you to sit with discomfort, ambiguity, and mystery. Perhaps we can challenge ourselves to withhold judgment for longer and be okay with not knowing. Perhaps we can cultivate ourselves as listeners to hear what is unsaid, to wrestle for longer, and to avoid hasty characterizations.

I think God wants to meet us in the uncertainty, and even in the shame and pain these stories can raise for us. He wants to give us a deeper encounter with Scripture, and with ourselves – but especially with him. If we can trust him with the ambiguity, discomfort, and shame, I am confident that he will pull us through to the other side. There, we will behold his goodness, and become more beautiful as he is beautiful.

For Reflection & Discussion

1. Have you had any experiences of reading Scripture with people of other cultures or backgrounds? If so, what did you learn from the experience?
2. Do you think the narrator of Judges 19 is more sympathetic to the Levite's concubine or the men in the story? Why?
3. Do you resonate with the pressure to have the "right" interpretation of Scripture?
4. Can you think of other Biblical stories where issues of honor and shame come to the forefront?
5. Are there places in your own society where you see issues of honor and shame impacting how stories are told?

In Conclusion Looking Ahead

The next three sessions will use fiction in order to help us to get inside their character. What we are doing here is sometimes called "imaginative empathy", which is something many of us have experienced through reading fiction, where our eyes and hearts are opened to the lives and experiences of people very different to ourselves. There will be an opportunity to reflect and discuss this approach further in Session Five.

Further Reading

Blog Post

<https://catechesia.com/2023/11/29/fearless-ones-and-fallen-sparrows-a-meditation-on-judges-19/>

Session Two Jephthah's Daughter

In the Old Testament

Read and reflect on the story of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11:29-40, noting especially the portrayals of both Jephthah's daughter and her father.

The book of Judges is a story of ongoing, unrelenting disaster. The spiritual calibre of the people of God seems lacking, to say the least, and the last two judges in particular, Jephthah and Samson, are particularly problematic, selfish and apparently lacking little devotion to God. Jephthah is an illegitimate son who is rejected by his father's family, and leaves and forms a mercenary band (Judges 11:1-3). This military leverage is then needed by his clan when they are attacked by the Ammonites, and so they agree to make Jephthah their leader (11:11).

It is also necessary to understand this story to say something about vows. While nearly all humans have a value of keeping their word and honouring their commitments, most modern Western Christians I have encountered have little sense of or experience with the making of vows to God (except, perhaps, in heated moment of panicked bargaining, i.e.: "if you get me out of this, I'll become a missionary!"). But vowing to provide a god with a tangible gift upon the favourable outcome of the petitioners request is known throughout the ancient world.⁴ Jephthah's vowing a gift to the Lord in return for victory in battle is completely appropriate. It is less clear why he would vow "whatever comes out from my house," when that leaves open the possibility of a human.

In the Tradition

It seems that there has been discomfort among both Jewish and Christian readers of this text, with evidence that largely it has been ignored, or read very simplistically. There are only two references in the Talmud to the story of Jephthah's daughter. One reference simply observes that it was an inappropriate sacrifice.⁵ The other makes reference to the women "visiting Jephthah's daughter" in the yearly custom described in Judges 11:40.⁶ While we cannot be certain that this is an accurate interpretation of the the practice of these ancient women, it is nonetheless a lovely perspective, that this holiday was not a passive observance, but an active commemoration, a sort of solidarity.

The early church does not reflect extensively on the death of Jephthah's daughter. St Ambrose sees her actions as noble,⁷ and Origen even implies that God accepts the vow and allows Jephthah victory because of it.⁸ Thomas Aquinas says that since

Jephthah is included among the saints in Hebrews 11, God accepts vows to commit an unlawful act.⁹ There appears to be no writings of the early church that see this narrative as a story of evil and power abuse. While they sometimes lament Jephthah's loss of a daughter, there seems little concern for Jephthah's daughter's loss of a life.

There is much about Jephthah's daughter that we just do not know. Anything beyond what those few short verses in Judges 11 reports about her is, in the end, speculation. But it is important that we acknowledge the roots of our speculation, and our reasons for making claims about her. So what might Jephthah's daughter say about herself ?

What did you know of this story already ?

How do you react to what we have heard so far ?

In Her Own Words

It was my fault. Somehow, it always was. I don't know if he was always like that, a person who always deflected the blame. Or if his grief in losing my mother as she bore me simply needed an outlet, and he stopped knowing any other way to be. I was never quite good enough, never quite quick enough, never quite useful enough. Always a burden, a daughter who would need to be dowered, who would not inherit. Though somehow, even once I reached marriageable age, he sought no young man for me. I asked once, why that was so, though he was not a man of whom I dared to ask many questions. But he neither struck me nor answered, but only looked at me, until I knelt and excused myself from his presence. My feet carried me quickly to work in the far edges of our fields with the servants, for reasons that my heart could not quite articulate.

A Levite once came to Mizpah, saying it was his work to teach any who would listen. Few did. Much of what he said of Yahweh seemed strange. Why should we worship only one god? Why would Yahweh not want to be worshipped at our many shrines? And is there really at Shiloh a record of all these rules? Perhaps the Levite was not in his right mind. But one thing he said was that no humans should be sacrificed, and no child should be punished for a parent's failings. That seemed like nonsense, too—beautiful nonsense. The sort that might have saved me.

It was no surprise to see my father seek Yahweh's help before battle with the Ammonites. Every soldier would do so for his own sake, every commander for the sake of his army. He offered one of our lambs, on behalf of himself and his men, the smoke burning and acrid but the ritual itself soothing. This is how to please Yahweh. We show our devotion with sacrificial lambs. We always have. As he left, my father looked around our house and fields, taking in everything with an inexplicable intensity. His gaze fell

on me, out tending the sheep, and once again I wished that perhaps there was reason to be elsewhere, at a different task.

It was a long campaign. Not only did they rout the Ammonites, but they pillaged several cities. Word reached us of their victory, that they were returning slowly, bringing many pack animals, building supplies, food for our people, and sacrifices for Yahweh. I had gathered my friends to bring instruments, arranged to lead our women in celebration as my father had led our people in victory. As they neared the house, I led the procession out, dancing and singing of my father's might, our soldiers' might. We danced in a circle, feeding off the cheers of the men at first, but they faded quickly, and we stopped. My father had dropped his spear and helmet on the ground. He walked towards me, unsteady. "This is your fault," he whispered, then louder, "You have brought me very low, you TROUBLER!" Faster than I could react, he backhanded me, with a blow that sent me to the ground. Turning in a circle, he raised his arms, "I have sworn to Yahweh that when I returned in peace from the Ammonites, I would send up as an offering to him whatever came first out of my house."

What was I to say? My father was not a man to be disagreed with. And so, in the sight of his stunned but silent soldiers and hundreds of bleating lambs, I told him to do what he would. I begged for some time with my friends to prepare myself, to mourn my life cut short. I was surprised he agreed.

Maybe you're surprised that I returned. Maybe you find it foolish. Maybe you'll wonder if I was some sort of brainwashed victim of the patriarchy, full of internalized misogyny. But maybe you can understand when I tell you: honour is everything. Even for a girl condemned by her father as no better than a sacrificial lamb. He could have saved me, to his shame. He could have acknowledged an unfulfillable vow and paid out a fine. Maybe I was worth less than the silver. Maybe I was worth less than his shame. It doesn't matter. My actions, for the sake of my honour, could not be dependent on his.¹⁰

So I returned. I stood silently as he prepared the altar he had built in my absence. I stood silently as he removed my clothing. I stood silent as he bound me with rope and laid me on his altar. I laid silently as he loomed over me with a slaughtering knife. And as I watched his hand come down on me one last time, I wondered if there will ever be an end to sacrificial lambs like me.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. How have you thought about Jephthah's daughter in the past? How have either of the characters been presented to you by preachers and bible teachers?
2. How does this re-telling of and expansion on the story affect you? How is it

helpful? How is it unhelpful? What questions does it raise?

3. What do you make of the fact that Jephthah's daughter is not named in the narrative?
4. How do you understand Jephthah's daughter's willingness to let her father sacrifice her?
5. Read Hebrews 11:32-34. How should we understand Jephthah's inclusion in this list?
6. Orthodox Christian teaching has always affirmed that in his passion and death, Jesus suffers in our place. How does Jesus suffer for Jephthah's daughter?

In Conclusion For Further Reflection

No human is innocent, but there are innocent sufferers. The fact that all humans have wrongful and sinful inclinations and actions does not excuse their mistreatment. Innocent sufferers are so numerous because inflicting suffering on another is never about who the victim is—despite what abusers say!—but rather about the lust for power and need to control that is such a desperately diseased expression of the worst of our humanity.

It is possible that some things you have read and discussed today have disturbed you. There are many reasons for being disturbed by a text and a study such as this. One of those might be that you are not safe. If you are in a situation where you find yourself unsafe, especially at the hands of those who by care and covenant should be your fiercest protectors, please reach out to someone.

Further Reading

Blog Post

<https://www.csbvbristol.org.uk/2021/04/27/jonathan-and-jephthahs-daughter/>

Peter F Lockwood, "Jephthah's Daughter: Awake to Her Wicked Father." *Word & World* 40: 3 (2020): 210-218

[https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/40-3_Sola_Structura:_Essays_Honoring_Mark_Thronveit/Jephthah's%20Daughter;%20Awake%20to%20Her%20Wicked%20Father%20\(Judges%2011;29-40\).pdf](https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/40-3_Sola_Structura:_Essays_Honoring_Mark_Thronveit/Jephthah's%20Daughter;%20Awake%20to%20Her%20Wicked%20Father%20(Judges%2011;29-40).pdf)

Session Three Bathsheba

In the Old Testament

Of all the women we are looking at in this series, Bathsheba is probably the one who gets the most mentions in the Bible, and we can piece together bits of her family history from other bits of the narrative if we make some assumptions about names. This is significant as Bathsheba's name is rarely used in the main story associated with her in 2 Samuel, she is more commonly referred to as 'the woman' or 'the wife of Uriah the Hittite'. But I've already assumed you know her story, let's read it now before I give you more context.

Read: 2 Samuel 11:1-17, 26-27

After David marries Bathsheba, he receives a message of judgment from God through the prophet Nathan, and their first son dies. We are told in 2 Samuel 12:24 that David 'consoles' or 'comforts' Bathsheba and she becomes pregnant again and gives birth to another son, called Solomon, who she would later assist to take the throne after David. In 1 Kings 1 David is approaching death, and his son Adonijah, who was next in line for the throne, attempts to have himself crowned. Nathan (the prophet) and Bathsheba remind David of a promise he made that Solomon would be king after him, and he gives instructions for Solomon to be crowned instead. While there is no other mention of this promise, it is possible that David made it because of the way he had treated Bathsheba, or she may have become a favourite wife - she had three more sons with him.

Or it may be that Bathsheba was familiar with palace intrigue and plotted with Nathan to protect herself and her sons when she knew David was dying. This is where the rest of her family come in - Bathsheba had likely grown up in David's wider entourage. David is told in 2 Samuel 11 that Bathsheba is the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Uriah is listed in 2 Samuel 23 among David's mighty men, and we know he was a faithful soldier. Another of the soldiers listed is 'Eliam son of Ahithopel the Gilonite'. It is very possible that this is the same Eliam, as it would make sense for one of David's close soldiers to marry his daughter to a fellow soldier. If this is the case, they we also know who Bathsheba's grandfather was - Ahithopel of Gilon, who was one of David's counsellors (2 Samuel 15:12).

Bathsheba's family were closely tied into palace life, so David's betrayal of Uriah would have had ripples through the court. Whether or not Bathsheba came willingly into

David's harem (which we'll look at more in a moment) she would have had to learn quickly how to keep her own in the machinations of court.

Bathsheba is also mentioned in the New Testament - she is one of five women included in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1, although she is the only one who is not named. She is referred to as 'the wife of Uriah'. For most of her story, Bathsheba is defined by the men in her life - her father, her husbands, her sons.

In Tradition

Views of Bathsheba have started to shift in recent years. Scholar Sara Koenig has traced the history of how Bathsheba's character has been interpreted over the centuries, in history, art and literature. She comments: "She has not only been characterized on the spectrum from helpless victim to unscrupulous seductress; but also, she has filled that spectrum".¹¹ Some older commentaries clearly paint Bathsheba as a seductress, lying in wait for the king who was known to have a weakness for beautiful women, following many medieval and renaissance images where Bathsheba is portrayed bathing naked in public. The likelihood is that Bathsheba was actually bathing in the privacy of her home, in the courtyard or garden. Some assume she is on the roof of her house, but we are only told that David is on his roof (it's Leonard Cohen that gives most of us that location for Bathsheba).

Feminist theologian April Westbrook suggests that a seduction plot is ridiculous: 'the idea that this woman knew that David would decide to get out of bed one evening and walk on his roof, or that she went outside the presumed privacy of her own home and washed every night until he actually did, is nothing short of ludicrous. If she is that conniving, then she is too intelligent to depend on such an unreliable scheme to achieve her objective'.¹²

Even if they don't accept the seduction narrative, many authors consider Bathsheba complicit in adultery, such as Ruth Tucker: 'Is she aware that David will see her while she is bathing? It's hard to imagine that she is completely innocent. Furthermore, when he calls for her, she could have sent back word that she is a married woman and thus cannot spend the night with him. David's guilt is clearly evident. Hers is not. But we cannot let her entirely off the hook'.¹³ Three of the novelists I am studying for my PhD assume that Bathsheba didn't know why she was being summoned, but willingly consented to an affair with him on arriving at the palace.

We are not told if Bathsheba knew the purpose of David's summons, or if she went willingly or unwillingly. The language of the text does not use the same word as it does in clearly defined rape narratives. But we have to consider the power dynamic of the situation - would Bathsheba have felt able to refuse the demands of the king? Author

Angela Hunt suggests: 'the king held the power of life and death over his subjects, so I do not think any woman assaulted by the king would endanger her life by screaming. His power and authority were a metaphorical gun at her head, and his use of force was a threat not only to her life but to her reputation'.¹⁴ Further, we know what happened to Bathsheba's husband when he refused to do as the king asked.

It is hard for us to consider David in a negative light, as we have grown so used to hearing of his qualities, his victories, his close relationship with God. He is held up as the model king of Israel and a foreshadowing of the Messiah. All this may be true of him, but we have to acknowledge the darker side of his character in this story. In the words of my college Old Testament lecturer: 'he may have been a great king, but you wouldn't want him as a neighbour'.

Maybe we need to adjust our view of some of these famous Bible characters. Maybe it's time to hear this story from Bathsheba's perspective.

What did you know of this story already ?

How do you react to what we have heard so far ?

In Her Own Words

All that you really know about me is that I was beautiful. I'm one of the famous women of history whose beauty caused good men to fall, go to war, do stupid things - like my fellow femme fatales, Helen of Troy, Cleopatra, Delilah. But can you really say I chose any of this? All I wanted was a peaceful soak in the tub, to be cleansed of impurity and able to reconnect to God.

My first husband was chosen for me by my family, a soldier friend of my father's. A respectable man, honest and honourable. As one of the King's trusted Mighty Men, we had a position in society, and a beautiful house near the palace so my husband could fulfil his duties. Like many in arranged marriages, I followed my parents' choice and hoped love would grow between us. Maybe it would have done, in peace time. As it was, Uriah was often called away to war. But I was content. I had a good husband, even if he was often absent. I had family nearby, and friends, and a community. I had everything I could want.

Then one night, my life changed forever. I could dwell on the what ifs and if onlys forever if I wanted to. How could I know that a house so close to the palace meant our privacy could be invaded? Should I have realised that the King had not gone to war with his men? Maybe then I would have chosen to bathe inside the house rather than in the garden, where I could enjoy God's creation. Should I have worked out sooner

why the guards had come to the door. Could I have made a scene if I had? Would I have been dragged there anyway, kicking and screaming? Would it have made a difference when it was the King asking? Have you ever tried to say no to someone who has power over you and your family?

So I learned to survive. My first husband murdered by my second. Living in a harem with many other women, all with their own agendas and political motivations. Sons who I loved, even if I couldn't love their father. The daily struggle to overcome my trauma and find some form of peace or happiness in a life I never wanted. And I took it all in. I acted when I needed to, to protect my sons. I saw my Grandfather become twisted and broken by court machinations. I did what I had to do to survive.

I tried to teach my sons the best way to live, to follow God's laws, with the help of the prophet Nathan. I watched Solomon grow and supported him in his first years as King. I was so hopeful that he would be a better man, a better King, than his father, but maybe his father's nature in him was stronger than mine.

So this is how I am remembered. The woman who led Israel's best king astray, whose son started out wise but destroyed his father's legacy. And I am blamed for the actions of the men around me.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What understanding did you have of Bathsheba's encounter with David in the past? How has the story been presented to you previously?
2. Has this retelling changed your view of the story? Why or why not?
3. What do you make of the way Bathsheba's name is and isn't used in the biblical narrative?
4. Why do you think Bathsheba is included in the genealogy of Jesus, although not by name? What do you know about the other women mentioned there?
5. Womanist scholar Wilda Gafney has said: 'We have been so conditioned to read with David and to read against women'.¹⁵ Would you agree with that statement? Why or why not?
6. Can you think of any parallels to Bathsheba's story in our modern world?

In Conclusion For Further Reflection

I've been researching into the story of Bathsheba for several years now, and I still find it hard to get a sense of her as a person. I'm studying several novels that imaginatively recreate her life but they are all love stories, and I just don't buy that. In trying to imagine what she might say for herself it really struck me how brave she was, to keep going through all the pain and loss that she endured, and to keep fighting for herself and her sons' futures. Maybe we need to rethink who our biblical role models are.

Further Reading

Blog Post - King David's toxic masculinity:

<https://www.csbvbristol.org.uk/2021/07/19/king-davids-toxic-masculinity/>

Blog Post - Why Michal Rightly Despised David:

<https://www.wilgafney.com/2018/07/12/why-michal-rightly-despised-david/>

Book - *Bathsheba Survives* by Sara Koenig

Session Four Mary Magdalene

In the New Testament

Read and reflect on the following passages from the Gospels, noting both what is said, and what is not said, about Mary Magdalene.

Mark 15: 40 – 41, 47; 16: 9 - 10

Matthew 27: 55 – 56; 28: 1 - 10

Luke 8: 2 – 3; 23:50 – 24:10

John 20:1 - 18

Reading through the Gospels, Mary Magdalene is only actually named at the end of Jesus' ministry where she, together with some of his other women followers, appear at the cross and then at the tomb. John relates how she was the first to see the Risen Christ and to tell the Twelve the Good News, and because of this she is sometimes referred to as the "apostle to the apostles".

In The Tradition

It was Pope Gregory the Great who first identified Mary Magdalene with "the woman who lived a sinful life" of Luke 7: 36 – 5 and Mary of Bethany (sister of Martha), who bathed Jesus feet with expensive ointment. Furthermore, according to Gregory, the "seven demons" of which she had been exorcised (Mark 16, Luke 8) represented the "universality of all vices", for "she was full of all vices" and the ointment that was used to anoint Jesus's feet had previously been used "to give her flesh a pleasant odour" for she had been "formerly addicted to forbidden deeds". So it is clear that, for Gregory and those who followed his lead, Mary Magdalene represented the archetypal fallen woman.¹⁶ And that label has stayed with her.

Another tradition, retold in Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code*, holds that Mary Magdalene was actually Jesus' wife, and / or the "Beloved Disciple" referred to in John's Gospel. In a number of non-canonical Gospels, Mary is certainly portrayed as Jesus' closest disciple and the only one who truly understood his teachings. And in the Gospel of Philip, it is said that Jesus would often kiss her on the mouth (although the word usually translated "mouth" is missing in the original ms, so the object of Jesus' kiss is actually conjecture!).¹⁷ But the idea that Mary was Jesus' wife has never gained the popular support that the idea of her as the archetypal sinner has.

Scholars talk about the two Marys, Mary the Mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, as the Madonna and the Whore, the two extremes of femininity or womanhood, and this

too has in a significant way determined our understanding of Mary Magdalen. Before her encounter with Jesus, she is the Virgin's mirror-image, the archetypal Eve, luring men into her debased ways.

However, it appears that the tide is turning in attitudes towards Mary. In 2016 Pope Francis elevated Mary Magdalen's day in the Roman Catholic Church calendar to that of a Feast, the same as those for the Apostles & Evangelists. Already in the 1960s, the then Pope Paul 6 had reversed his predecessor's identification of her with Mary of Bethany and the "sinful woman". Even more, some scholars today believe that Mary Magdalene was a significant figure in the circle around Jesus and that the reason for our sexualisation of her is simply that 'it's easier to speak of a repentant prostitute than a woman who was a leading disciple financially supporting the early Christian community', so "'Just as the apostles didn't believe her testimony (about) the resurrection, we continue to doubt her leadership role in the church by sexualizing her.'" ' 18 There are clear implications here for the church today, and you might like to reflect on these in your context.

That being said, there is much about Mary that we just do not know. Anything beyond what the Gospels report about her is, in the end, speculation. But it is important that we acknowledge the roots of our speculation, and our reasons for making claims about her. So what might Mary say about herself ?

What did you know of this story already ?

How do you react to what we have heard so far ?

In Her Own Words

In the end it's all down to sex, isn't it ? Two thousand years of the Christian era, and it seems all they can say about me is that I was a whore or a wife. Either I was a fallen woman or a married woman, married to Him.

What is their problem with acknowledging that I was simply one of His followers ? There were not many women in the crowds gathered around Him. Not surprising, considering most of them would have been at home. No time to be around itinerant preachers, hanging on their every word, like the men were.

But there I was. A woman of some means, but looking for more in my life. When I first heard Him that sunny afternoon, quite by chance I came across Him, speaking to the crowds as ever, it was as if He was speaking just to me. So I joined the movement, and I was called The Tower, or Magdalene, because of my height. See, I was tall and they told me I was of quite striking appearance too. But that was years ago now.

The first time I came face to face with Him, He looked me straight in the eye and all became new. They said that He had cast seven demons out of me, but I'm not sure I would quite put it like that. Yet I knew I was accepted, and could leave all the mistakes of the past behind. It's hard being a single woman in that world, and I had made mistakes – but so does everyone !

I sometimes wonder why I wasn't named as one of the Twelve, but I know how much the movement meant to me, and how much He did too. No, not in that way. Why is it always assumed that women would only follow Him for one reason ? No, I wasn't the "Beloved Disciple" though I, too, loved Him. No, I wasn't His wife, or His lover, though He meant the world to me. We were simply friends.

It was a man's world, yet He seemed to transcend maleness or femaleness. That's why it feels so wrong to think of Him as husband or lover.

And then those awful events of the Passover weekend. The Twelve were too scared to stand by his cross for long as he hung there. They knew only too well that the authorities knew their faces and would be on the lookout for them. But I was there with some of the other women who loved Him. After all, what threat did we women pose to the Roman Empire ?

On the Sunday morning we returned to the tomb, and found it empty. It was then I met Him for the last time, although at first I didn't realise it was Him. The Twelve were angry and offended that He had appeared to me first. After all, they were the ones whose lives were on the line. But for some reason He chose me. Despite the fact that, in our world, a woman's testimony meant nothing He chose to give the Good News first to me.

But the Twelve were not happy, and I sometimes wonder whether this is when – and why - my story began to be retold. Why I became a whore or a wife, and my connection with Him became all about sex. Either He delivered me from it, or in me He found it.

Looking back, those three years of His ministry were the most fulfilling – and exciting - of my entire life. I have never forgotten Him, though I don't always recognise Him in what they say and sing about Him now ! How can you capture someone so unique, so special ?

For Reflection & Discussion

1. Who is Mary Magdalene to you ? Has what you have read above changed in any way your understanding of her and her role in the Christian story ?

2. What are the implications of the fact that Mary Magdalene is described by John as the first to encounter the risen Christ and as the messenger of his resurrection to the Twelve ?
3. Can you think of other women, both in the Bible and beyond, who seem to be defined by their sexuality ?
4. Figueroa is not alone in suggesting that 'we continue to doubt [Mary's] leadership role in the church by sexualizing her.' Can you think of examples of this from your own experience ?
5. If you were to write an imaginative piece about Mary, like the above, what aspects of her life and experience would you choose to include ?
6. How might Mary Magdalene be a role model for Christian women today ?

In Conclusion For Further Reflection

As I spent time with Mary Magdalene, I found myself seeking out modern-day Mary Magdalenes — the people silenced by our church, the government, and the news when they are just trying to share the good news, announce the change needed in our world to be an authentic disciple, or dare to claim their role in the Resurrection. I found myself paying attention not only to these people, but also to the people to whom they are calling attention.

Eilis McCulloh

<https://www.globalsistersreport.org/columns/who-are-modern-day-mary-magdalenes>

Session Five An Act of Love

*They were nobody special. So now they are the invisible, the forgotten, the historically negligible, the 'dead multitudes', the minor figures, the chorus. They were not the Great Men or kings or occasional queen that pepper History's grand narrative. They were ordinary women – the illiterate, the poor, the marginalised and the enslaved ...*¹⁹

As we come to the end of this short course, this final session will be an opportunity to look back over the ground you have covered so far and to share together what you have learned from your reading, reflection and discussions together. It's also a time to share questions and reflect on what you will take away with you from the course and how it might impact your future reading of the Bible.

As you look back on the four women we have covered in this course: the Levite's Concubine; Bathsheba; Jephthah's (unnamed) Daughter; & Mary Magdalene, have you found it helpful to explore their hidden lives in the way that we have? If so, how would you respond to someone asking you why you thought it was a worthwhile thing to do? If not, reflect on why you think this, and why others might find it a helpful thing to do.

In her essay 'How Can We Recover the Lost Lives of Women?', historian Suzannah Lipscomb cites a brief note by the explorer Captain Cook referring to the overheard beating of a black woman ten years before. As Lipscomb writes:

*Our only knowledge of this unnamed women is of her torture – and that only because it happened to be overheard. All that we know of her is all these passing white men knew of her: her suffering.*²⁰

But, as Lipscomb and others remind us, this woman and many others like her throughout history:

... did exist beyond these words.

And

*Ultimately it is this that drives us – it is an act of love to do this recuperative work, even while we know we cannot fully retrieve them.'*²¹

This essay, and Lipscomb's appearance on a T.V. book programme,²² were significant inspirations behind this Study Guide. And it seems appropriate to join her in referring to our own work here, limited as it is, as an act of love.

It is an act of love because in recovering something of these hidden lives we are sharing in God's work of remembering, and celebrating the fact that these women, too, however little we know about them, are loved by God. But we also benefit from the process because in entering into the lives and experiences of women far removed from us in time, culture and context, our minds and experiences are expanded, and we grow in our understanding and appreciation of the other.

Imaginative Empathy

*Imaginative empathy is one of the great gifts that humans have, and it means that we can live more than one life. We can picture what it would be like from another perspective.*²³

What we are doing here is sometimes called "imaginative empathy", which is something many of us have experienced through reading fiction, where our eyes and hearts are opened to the lives and experiences of people very different to ourselves. This is why we have used fiction as part of this Study Guide.

But these acts of love can move from the page into the world as we seek to enter imaginatively into the lives and experiences of other women and men in our own time, and ask ourselves what it is like to be them and what the world looks like through their eyes.

As you prepare for the session, ask yourself if there are other women in the Bible whose lives you would like to explore further. If you were to choose to do what we have done here with the Levite's Concubine; Jephthah; Bathsheba; and Mary Magdalene, who would you choose and why? Come to your group session with some thoughts to share on this. But come also with some thoughts on fiction that has helped you to empathise with someone very different from yourselves and perhaps any ideas of people or groups of people whose lives might be opened up for you through imaginative empathy.

For Reflection & Discussion

1. Share together what you have learned from the course so far, together with any questions which have arisen for you as a result of your reading and reflection.
2. How important is it to you that we speculate about the "hidden lives" of those who are little more than named (if that) in the Bible? Would you commend this exercise to others? Why (not)?
3. Do you agree with the suggestion above, that such work as this might be described as "an act of love"? Do you find this a helpful statement? Why (not)?

4. Share together your thoughts on other hidden women or marginalised people of the Bible whose lives you would like to explore further. Why have you chosen this particular person? What might you say about them?
5. Share together your experiences of “imaginative empathy”, and any novels or stories which have given you particular insights into the lives of others. Which group of people do you feel most in need of coming to a greater understanding of through imaginative empathy?
6. As you come to the end of the course, and of the session, spend some time reading again the biblical passages relating to each of the women we have covered and give thanks to God for their lives and for our own.

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Centre for the Study of Bible & Violence

<https://www.csbvbristol.org.uk/>

The **Centre for the Study of Bible & Violence** exists to offer both study opportunities and scholarly resources and also materials for local church use, engaging with the Bible & Violence. We have produced this resource because we believe that the women whose lives we explore here are victims of violence, manifested as it is in a variety of ways, but with the result that their voices are not heard in the Biblical story. We hope you find Miss. Judged of interest and will revisit our website to look for other resources in the future.

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Session Two – Jephthah's Daughter

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Session Three - Bathsheba

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Session Four – Mary Magdalene

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²⁰ Lipscomb, p.159

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²² The Big Scottish Book Club, BBC Scotland, 09/11/2021 A clip can be viewed here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0b36tmh>

²³ Dan Chaon <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ie/blog/one-true-thing/201202/qa-author-dan-chaon>