

Women and the World of the New Testament

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The New Testament is a rich resource for learning about the women who walked beside Jesus during his ministry, who served as patrons and key actors within the early church, and who spread the good news of salvation after Christ's death and resurrection. Thinking critically about women's roles in the Roman world of the New Testament is a task taken up by multiple academic disciplines and within the complexities of Christianity.¹ Thoughtful, faithful, analytical readers look to female exemplars in scripture and material culture to help both women *and* men utilize the narratives of women in their own devotional practices. New Testament women are presented in distinct scriptural accounts that underscore profoundly symbolic and archetypal meanings. Our understanding of these meanings is enhanced through the practice of careful reading, scriptural exegesis, and hermeneutics. These rigorous practices expand the way we see and understand women in ever-growing and capacious ways.

Women in scripture are presented to us by their writers through a variety of lenses. We read their stories and narratives and often wish that our limited view of them was more informed or that we could see further than the distance offered by the text. Paying attention to the language and imagery of archetypes is important in studying scripture precisely because they speak directly to our understanding in both individual and communal ways.² This chapter focuses on a few specific archetypes of New Testament women that signify their position and power, while also considering the *realia* of lived religious experience for women. It is also important to examine the models for women who were not in traditional positions of power

or who were marginalized. This kind of close reading and thinking requires a courageous and self-critical willingness to revisit the texts that we know so well. We must imagine, consider, and investigate these narratives so that they may open our hearts and minds.

While much has been written about the many women, both named and unnamed, who appear in pages of the New Testament, this study will uniquely contribute by underscoring their roles, their voices, and their archetypal examples. From patronizing familial networks to the propertied women of Paul's letters, women played pivotal roles in scripture and the successes of earliest Christianity. One of the best ways to understand the scriptural context of New Testament women is through the material culture that belongs to the age. This chapter will combine text and, at times, images from the earliest Christian sources.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section presents two case studies in which the narratives of two women in the New Testament, Mary (the mother of Jesus) and Tabitha, are presented within the context of early Christian art. The purpose of this section is to demonstrate how well-known and lesser-known scriptural stories were received by early Christians in ways that may surprise our modern reading of those same stories. The second section gives an illustrative sampling of named but lesser-known women in the New Testament whose stories present compelling questions and spark interest in further investigation. Finally, the third section focuses on unnamed women in the New Testament whose archetypal symbolism helps the reader understand them in sophisticated ways beyond their narratives. While this chapter can in no way provide a comprehensive look at all New Testament women, it will explore some ways in which gender is ordered, represented, and patterned within the scriptural and historical narrative.

Contextual Case Studies

As a primary case study, we should begin by illuminating the account of Mary as she is introduced to us in the moment of Annunciation.³ Canonical sources for the Annunciation are found in Luke and Matthew. The account in Luke details the angel Gabriel's assignment by God to appear to Mary in the city of Nazareth in Galilee to proclaim her as favored and blessed and to deliver a message. After his initial salutation, Gabriel presents a succinct and powerful message: "Behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David; and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end" (Luke 1:31–33). Gabriel answers Mary's concerns and generally describes the holy event that will occur. He gives her a witness sign in the pregnancy of her cousin Elizabeth, who was called barren. Mary's incredulity and fears are allayed in the infinite possibilities of God, and she submits to the will of the Lord. This glorious dialogue is secondary to the nucleus of the message: Christ is the Son of God, who will be born in the flesh to his mother, Mary, through the royal bloodlines of Judah, and who is the King of kings, reigning over the household of celestial and terrestrial inheritance forever and without end. The message of Gabriel has been celebrated and

analyzed over centuries; however, the iconography of the Annunciation has not been considered in association with the reception of the most important part of the announcement, that the household of kings, royal and divine, would receive its heir apparent on earth through Mary's flesh and would be favored within the household construct of the *materfamilias* ("mother of the family").

As early as the second century, there was both curiosity and confusion regarding the role of Mary. We have good reason to suspect that the apocryphal texts that detail the extracanonical details of Mary's life were formulated as popular tales in the early church and became well enough known to be written down by the second century (see chapter 19 herein).⁴ The degree to which the stories and tales that became Christian apocrypha are evidence of the earliest Marian cult cannot be overemphasized. The iconography of the Virgin Annunciate engaged in the domestic task of spinning naturally developed out of ancient iconographies that already celebrated motherhood and the pious Matron.

Apocryphal writings on the Annunciation "display great literary and theological imagination, . . . and, of course, it was these stories that not only reproduced the folk traditions about Mary and developing Mariology, but in themselves also fueled that theology."⁵ The infancy narrative found in the Protevangelium of James, originally composed in the second century, is the only known surviving textual source available to readers of the fifth century that incorporates spinning as a dominant symbol in the Annunciation story. A fifth-century sarcophagus named for the Pignatta family, today in Ravenna, Italy, features the Virgin Mary in the guise of the spinning Roman matron. She is seated on a low stool, drawing woolen roves vertically to her distaff from a large woven basket (fig. 1).⁶ Her pose is characteristically classical as she sits in profile facing the angel Gabriel.⁷ The Virgin wears a simple stola with her palla wrapped around her shoulders and draped over her head, demonstrating her traditional piety and modesty. Mary's gaze is directed simultaneously toward her handiwork and Gabriel.⁸

The Protevangelium of James provides the noncanonical sequence of events that surrounds the birth of Mary to Joachim and Anna as well as the early life of the Virgin. In these earliest Annunciation motifs, text and image intersect in both formal and intimate ways, informing and legitimizing each other. These narratives become typical examples of divine



Figure 1. Annunciation, Pignatta Sarcophagus, Ravenna, Italy, 5th century AD. Author's photograph.

intervention, but amid the seemingly impossible miracles that surround the Virgin as she is prepared for her role, it is also possible to find suggestions of the common and ordinary. For example, it is Mary's lot to spin the purple and the scarlet for the temple veil, combining the mundane act of spinning with sacred material. Mary's task does not fall to her by accident. She is the sole legal heir to her father's inheritance, he being a rich man and a direct descendant of the royal line of David. She is specifically taken before the chief priests at her birth and receives "a supreme blessing which cannot be superseded,"⁹ the undefiled daughters of the Hebrews serve her, and her parents take her at the age of three to the temple for the priest to bless her, saying, "The Lord has magnified your name among all generations."¹⁰ Her genealogy was known, and the whole house of Israel revered her; she was to the second-century Christians of the Roman world *the* archetypal *materfamilias*, the mother as a rightful sovereign and legally powerful figure within the household.

Mary as the spinning Annunciate was the Christian archetype of exemplary womanhood, marriageability, motherhood, and fertility well before she was given the exclusive title *Theotokos*, or "God-bearer," by the church in AD 431 at Ephesus and later described as "Mother of God" (*mētēr theou*) in ecclesiastical texts.¹¹ Averil Cameron has pointed out that Christology was the center point around which the figure of Mary developed and attracted interest, popular devotion, and early images.¹² Though references to Mary in Gospel accounts were limited to events like the Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, Adoration of the Magi, and the Flight into Egypt, other ideas about Mary and her role grew out of nonexplicit and apocryphal traditions, many of which were developing before the fifth century.¹³

As a second case study in scriptural reception, we can also look to the less familiar account of Tabitha from Acts 9, who was raised from the dead by Peter in similitude of Christ's raising the daughter of Jairus.¹⁴ The story of Peter in Tabitha's house has traditionally been used to highlight the widow's experience in the early church or to illustrate charitable love within early Christian communities. Tabitha gives us insight into the archetypal complexity of the philanthropic rescuer in her own community and the capacity of widows who also acted as mothers and providers to those in need. Again, little attention has been given to the reception of early Christian images that address the iconography of Peter and the household of Tabitha. Peter's interaction with Tabitha is found at an interdisciplinary crossroads, where Acts 9 meets the earliest visual representations of Peter in Tabitha's house.

Luke introduces us to the woman called Tabitha, whose Aramaic name, translated into Greek, is "Dorcas," with both names meaning "gazelle." Tabitha's character has been associated with the gazelle as a symbol of a nurturer or life giver. It is easy to see how Peter's attentions to Tabitha accentuated her acts as symbols of love, compassion, service, and graciousness, and as a type of proselyte for the new community of Christians. This narrative was useful in expanding Christianity's borders beyond Jewish believers to gentile converts. It is important for us to examine how the image of Peter raising Tabitha was depicted in the earliest years of the church and its specific historicity for the fourth century.

A fourth-century Roman style sarcophagus gives us an excellent example today at the Church of Ste. Madeleine in Saint Maximin, France (fig. 2). On the left end, we find the

scene with Peter raising Tabitha in a well-appointed room complete with draperies, a luxurious bed, an architectural column, and a pipe organ. Figures of the poor are diminutively small and kneel or sit near the side of the bed. Two women, widows, are standing behind Tabitha with their gaze and gestures directed toward her. Tabitha is proportionately large and fills the picture plane. Her dress is a simple stola and her head remains uncovered, though her hair is neatly coiffed and prepared for burial. Tabitha is depicted here as a type of crossroads figure as demonstrated in the varied figures she is shown helping. Besides the two widows standing behind Tabitha's bed, we find three smaller figures representing the poor



Figure 2. Raising of Tabitha, Sarcophagus, Church of Ste. Madeleine, Saint Maximin, France, 4th century AD. Giuseppe Wilpert. Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1929. Plate CXLV, no.7.

in the foreground next to Tabitha's bed. Indeed, they are small, according to the standards of hierarchy of scale, precisely because they are poor and are of a distinctively different social class in comparison to Tabitha and the stately, matronly widows. Tabitha's left hand rests on the head of the small female figure at her left who supports a seated, naked figure with her hands and right knee. The third kneeling figure is set apart from these and reaches out to touch the hem of Peter's garment, an act in similitude of the woman with an issue of blood touching Christ's garment. This third figure wears a peculiar head covering, akin to the Phrygian cap of foreign magi, often shown wearing similar hats in artistic representations of the Adoration of the Magi. The widows and the woman with the naked boy are easy to situate into the Levitical laws regarding the care of the widows and the fatherless. However, the inclusion of the Phrygian-capped figure indicates that Tabitha's generosity was considered, within the fourth century, to include the foreign poor as well, a notion that coincides with the nature of diverse port cities like Joppa and the conversion of Gentiles.

While we typically focus on Peter's raising Tabitha from the dead as a miracle with the convenient effect of conversion, we have long hesitated in defining the role Tabitha occupied in performing acts of charity, specifically by bestowing goods and clothing on the widows and less fortunate of Joppa. There is some discussion that Tabitha was likely a widow herself, but one who had means to maintain her household and expand her philanthropic reach to her community. That Peter goes to Tabitha's house to raise her is not just to demonstrate her ability as a non-Jewish proselyte to expand the cause of Christianity but also to normalize a new type of patron within the early church, that of the *Matrona*.

Choosing Christ Jesus: Named Women in the New Testament

When we talk about women in scripture, we often think first of named women who offer significant examples or embodiments of traits and characteristics, some of which resonate with us. In many ways, women in scripture provide personified archetypes or depictions of our own reality that, in addition to what we learn by historical and theological analysis, can be read as valuable and insightful to our own practice and devotion. We rarely talk about what it means to view women in the New Testament through the lens of archetypal models or how that perspective might shape our own practical and devotional lives. As Latter-day Saints, it is imperative that we increase our grasp of iconographic types for women in scripture so that we can recognize the competence and influence of women within the full scope of their power, holiness, and humanity. Particularly for Latter-day Saint women, how we understand scriptural accounts involving women helps shape the way we reflect the text into our own personal narrative. If we are serious in our consideration of these women, if they matter to us, we must do the work it takes to know them.

Named women within the New Testament embody multifaceted roles including that of matron, businesswoman, head of household, wise woman, prophetess, and philanthropist. These positions are often ignored in favor of the traditional roles of virginal maid, wife, and mother. If we confine ourselves to archetypes that embrace only the roles or symbolism that we find comfortable, or that have been promoted as culturally normative, we will find ourselves not only limited but also incomplete.

There are a number of named women in the New Testament who are not well known, or who fall too easily into the shadow of more illustrious actors. However, there is a synergistic familiarity that comes with careful attention to women like Anna, Joanna, Lydia, Phoebe, Prisca, and Rhoda alongside women who are more often discussed, like the Marys, Martha, and Elizabeth. Even someone as well known as Mary, the mother of Jesus, may find herself featured in significant accounts like the wedding at Cana that are often unremembered in favor of her role in the Nativity. Without attempting to provide an encyclopedic accounting, commentary, and biography for all of the named women in the New Testament, I will consider only an illustrative sample of women who are not often highlighted or studied with much care.

Anna

Many of us can clearly imagine the prophetess Anna as a matronly, exemplary, wise woman abiding in God's temple. The Gospel of Luke pays careful attention to widows and women generally, perhaps revealing his benevolent concern for the poor and oppressed.¹⁵ As a widow, Anna may have been part of an order of consecrated elderly women who enjoyed social respectability within the Jewish world,¹⁶ even if they were also very poor and reliant on the welfare of those who made offerings in the temple or gave alms. As a prophetess, she reflects the "tradition of Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah, and she foreshadows the honorable Christian calling held by, among others, the daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9)."¹⁷ Anna's experience in Luke 2:36–38 closely parallels that of Simeon's from Luke 2:25–35. Simeon

recognizes Jesus as the Christ and praises God. Simeon's words are included in the story, but even though Anna is recognized as a prophetess, devoted to temple worship and prayer, her voice is only mentioned; her words are absent. Luke pairs Anna with Simeon in a way typical to his practice of using both male and female characters, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, in his narrative.¹⁸ Simeon speaks words of praise and consolation to Mary and Joseph, but Anna's audience is different; her audience is *all* who seek the Savior. She, like Elizabeth, initiates a new messianic pronouncement as she "began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38 NRSV).

Joanna

As an attestation for active, female disciples of Jesus, Luke 8:3 is remarkable. The verse names three women who, by presumably independent will and means, joined Jesus and presumably used their resources to provide for the community of believers. We are introduced to Joanna by reference to her husband, Chuza, whose title *epitropos* may indicate that he managed property for Herod.¹⁹ Joanna's husband is mentioned without indicating if he is a believer, thereby giving us pause to consider that perhaps Chuza is very lenient about his wife's movements and beliefs, or like other "rebel" women from the noncanonical Acts of Apostles, Joanna has taken her dowry or her independent means and left her home to follow Jesus.²⁰ Joanna takes on the archetype of a rather unorthodox truth seeker. Her consecrated piety, which perhaps lay outside traditional social structures, demonstrated Joanna's humility and her utter devotion to act in favor of spiritual discipleship.

Joanna is also second in the list of women in Luke 24:10 who witness the empty tomb. Whereas Mark 16:1–8 indicates an angelic commission for the women witnesses to tell the apostles, Luke 24 adds subtlety to the story by placing the initiative with the women themselves to go and tell.²¹ Matthew 28:9 nuances the account even further when Jesus suddenly meets the women on their way. The women take hold of Jesus's feet and worship him before also receiving the commission to go and tell. In all cases, Joanna, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Salome, and "other women" are given the role of first messengers, envoys, even *apostoloi* or apostles,²² commissioned to tell the good news.

Lydia

Lydia is a woman living in Philippi, a Roman province in Macedonia, whom Paul meets and baptizes near the beginning of his ministry, along with her entire *oikos*, during his first journey. The late antique Roman household, the Latin *domus* or the Greek *oikos*, extended beyond the nuclear family and often included "several generations, a large number of slaves, other dependents and even unrelated clients."²³ The household was the essential locus for the spread of early Christianity, and the first churches were associated with the organized house church and the assembly of the Christian community. One of the most powerful examples of this phenomenon in the apostolic period is found within the household of Lydia, mentioned in Acts 16. Lydia is first encountered among other women who gathered at "a place

of prayer” (16:13–15 NRSV), a location in which it was proper and appropriate for women to hear Paul preach.

Lydia’s name has caused some scholars to question her historicity. The region of Lydia in Asia Minor was where the city called Thyatira, Lydia’s hometown, was located. This connection caused some to think that she was a fictitious figure with her name adopted by Luke as a personification of this place.²⁴ However, it is at Philippi where Paul and Lydia meet. Philippi is home to the Dionysian cult and polytheistic goddess worship. Many women gather there for worship purposes. Placing Lydia and her conversion at Philippi makes a theological statement,²⁵ especially when that statement is directed toward converting women who are possibly participating in these mystery cults. Shelly Matthews has further studied the historicity of women like Lydia—identifying real women and finding them in scripture between the lines of narrative. Rather than conceding that Lydia’s narrative is fictional, she points to Paul’s letters that reveal women as primary hosts for house churches.²⁶ Matthews finds the pattern of fiscally independent women who support Paul to be an attestation of Lydia’s reality. Furthermore, what she finds most suspect in the narrative is that such a woman as Lydia is presented only as a “convert accommodating Paul and his mission, and not as a missionary/leader in her own right.”²⁷ Archetypally, Lydia demonstrates how religious piety *and* independent work were not mutually exclusive.

Phoebe

At the end of Paul’s epistle to the Romans (16:1–2), we are introduced to a woman called Phoebe. She is commended by Paul, as a *diakonos*, or deacon, from a regional church at Cenchreae, to the hospitality of the saints in Rome.²⁸ Phoebe’s title, *deacon*, is sometimes translated as “servant” (KJV, NIV), but Paul clearly uses the term in Greek, without gendered distinctions, to also refer to his own ministry of preaching and teaching within the church.²⁹ Paul asks that the Roman believers welcome and aid Phoebe in part because he is under obligation to her as his patron or benefactor. Phoebe was probably the person who carried the letter, which would arguably become one of the most important books in the New Testament.³⁰ As a patron, Phoebe provides funds for the church and may also publicly represent believers within the church. Significantly, Phoebe is also described as *prostatis*, the feminine form of a noun that means “one who stands before” and can be interpreted as leader, or in this context is likely emphasizing her role as patron.³¹ Both designations are evidenced in association with women during late antiquity. For example, a stele from Jerusalem with an epigraph dating to the second half of the fourth century reads, “Sophia, a deacon, a second Phoebe.”³²

Paul clearly identifies women like Phoebe as part of his circle of coworkers. She has work to do in Rome and is independent enough to accomplish it of her own accord. Some scholars have suggested that she may have been traveling “to or through Rome as a missionary or Church worker.”³³ Paul acknowledges Phoebe’s role as a patron and as a teacher, but he also describes her as an archetypal networker, someone who enhances the unity of the church by

sharing information. She is a mentor and advocate with Paul and carries words and wisdom to the nascent church.

Prisca

Among Paul's coworkers in Christ Jesus, Priscilla is mentioned six times in the New Testament as *Prisca*, the diminutive name form of *Priscilla* (Acts 18:2–3, 18–19, 24–26; Romans 16:3–5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19). Acts contextualizes the circumstances of Paul's meeting with Prisca and her husband Aquila by establishing that they, and other Jews, have left Rome under the orders of Claudius.³⁴ Paul finds both work and hospitality in the household of Prisca and Aquila in part because they too dealt in the textile trade. After a considerable time, Paul, Prisca, and Aquila travel to Ephesus, where they part ways but are not forgotten by Paul. He further addresses their efforts and the church that met in their house. We come to know Prisca as she traveled with her husband, spreading the gospel to Rome, Ephesus, and Corinth. One encounter that demonstrates Prisca's perceptive and authoritative wisdom is found in connection with the preaching of another believer, Apollos the Alexandrian.³⁵ After moving on from their ministry in Corinth, Prisca and Aquila seem to be functioning like Barnabas, Timothy, Silas, and other Pauline missionaries.³⁶ Their teaching roles naturally take them to the synagogue at Ephesus, where they cross paths with Apollos, a well-educated and effective orator. He had "been instructed in the way of the Lord and spoke as one stirred up by the Spirit" (Acts 18:25 CEB). Prisca and Aquila hear him and bring him into their circle of friends, and Prisca takes the authoritative initiative to instruct him privately and "more accurately" in God's way (Acts 18:26 NRSV).

Questions had arisen in Ephesus and Corinth among believers concerning baptism, ways of staying in the path, and gifts of the Spirit (see Acts 19:1–10 NRSV). Prisca, as an educated businesswoman, uses her benevolent influence, wisdom, and authority to protect and teach others. She is loyal in her relationships and faithful in her pioneering enterprises that sustain the spread of the good news to many people. Although the account of Prisca and Aquila in Acts has been approached with some caution because some scholars believe it may include highly idealized narratives,³⁷ further attestations in Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 2 Timothy underscore the fact that Prisca's name and her work were known and respected, even highly esteemed, by communities of Christian believers. For Prisca and Aquila to be able to perform as itinerant preachers and welcome congregants into their house church may speak to the success of their business enterprises as well as to their capacity to sustain a prominent and well-funded missionary effort.

Prisca is a missionary, but she is also a wife. Naming Prisca first in the pair is significant and may point to her status as a propertied *materfamilias* and to the status of her family according to Roman social constructs.³⁸ The vision of household dynamics glimpsed in these few verses reflects a sense that, at least in some early Christian communities, egalitarian attitudes toward women existed within marriage.³⁹ These structures also held up under the scrutiny of Roman law, whereby women of property or family were designated as the *materfamilias* and

head of household.⁴⁰ Prisca's devotion and dedication to her vocational work are matched by external supports in many facets of her life. Her husband partners with her in devotion, she enjoys the friendship and contemplative notice of the apostle Paul, and she finds herself as an organizational and economic life force in relationship with her community.

Without diminishing their contribution as a secondary force, we must also acknowledge the wave of named women who were also known as "workers in Christ Jesus." Prisca and Aquila join a number of named New Testament women who are faithful evangelists, workers in the Lord, and devotees: the many Marys—not including Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene ([Mary 1] John 11:1–33; 12:1–8; [Mary 2] John 19:25; 20:1–18; [Mary 3] Matthew 27:56; [Mary 4] John 19:25; [Mary 5] Acts 12:12; [Mary 6] Romans 16:6)—Tryphaena and Tryphosa (Romans 16:12), Lois (2 Timothy 1:5), Eunice (2 Timothy 1:15), Persis (Romans 16:12), and Junia (Romans 16:7). Paul also admonishes two other women called Euodia and Syntyche in Philippians 4:2–3 to be of "the same mind in the Lord" because they have also "struggled beside me in the work of the gospel." This critical mass of named women takes up a significant role in the building up of the church. They are visionary seekers, they challenge social systems in favor of spiritual communion, they are empathetic with their fellow believers, and they displayed an uncanny openness to the powerful life force of the Spirit. Examining the textual and historical context for these women helps us to reconstruct the stories of those who have been consistently overlooked in our study of the Bible and the earliest Christian church.

Sustained in Christ Jesus: Unnamed Women of the New Testament

Unnamed women in the New Testament are easily recognizable within archetypal constructs, partly because they are explicitly known according to their symbolic modalities. Unnamed women fall into patterned categories that describe their familial relationships, their social position, their sexual status, their bodily state of being, and their actions or behaviors. Nearly all unnamed women are categorized according to their physicality, their essential bodies, and the external manifestations of their internal selves. Rarely are we privy to their thoughts or words. Unnamed men in the New Testament may also fall into these same categories, but they often have the capacity to act with social independence. For example, the rich man from Mark 10:25, the good Samaritan from Luke 10:36, and even the crippled beggar at the temple gate in Acts 3:1–10 act or speak in ways independent of customary gendered restrictions. Unnamed men also speak for themselves or others when they interact with Jesus, like the centurion and his servant from Matthew 8:5, 9 or the father of the boy with a spirit from Mark 9:14–29. As unnamed women speak less often than men, it is imperative that we examine and enumerate the ways that they are archetypally present in the New Testament and then consider the ways their stories illuminate and complicate the way we understand them. We must never lose sight of the fact that their narratives were connected to communities and that the way we read them can reflect our own receptive biases.

Unnamed women and familial relationships

Unnamed women are often described in relation to men as mother, daughter, wife, widows, mother-in-law, daughter-in-law, and so forth. Although many women are only noted by their familial affiliations, they still exerted influence without words. One example that leads us to consider these connections is the mother-in-law of Simon Peter, whom Jesus heals from a fever in Mark 1:30. She, as proof of her cure, immediately begins serving the men gathered in the tradition of hospitality. We must also acknowledge the woman absent from the narrative, Peter's wife, who is caring for her mother within her marital household, most likely because she is widowed.⁴¹ Widows, virgins, and celibates are often noted for their extraordinary circumstances within the early church. Widows, wise women, and virgins are sometimes archetypally associated with visionaries and prophetesses, like Philip's four daughters, who in Acts 21:9 reflect the prophecy in Joel 3. Even in their silence, Philip's daughters are still noted for their devotional relationship to the believers.⁴² Unfortunately, these women and other women in Acts, even those with considerable familial affiliations, for the most part, do not speak.⁴³ Even if his exclusion is not deliberate, Luke has left us without a record of their prophetic words. We must concede that, without language, women may lack public credibility. Even in the case of the household slave, Rhoda, who speaks the truth and brings news of Peter's liberation from prison, she is not believed (see Acts 12:12–15 NRSV). Beverly Roberts Gaventa has underscored the fact that mothers, daughters, wives, and widows in the Acts of the Apostles may not have words or may be absent altogether, but some do, especially in the case of virgins and widows, manage to act independently and in alignment with God's relentless fulfillment of his promises.⁴⁴

Marital status and familial relationships define women in the ancient Greco-Roman world. The lived constructs of marriage in the first-century Mediterranean world are surprisingly diverse because they depend on the social and religious laws and customs held by many different groups of people. Marriage under Augustan Roman law reforms applies to Roman citizens.⁴⁵ These laws formalize the rights of women, based on their fertility, to maintain their own property independent of their husbands, allowing women under certain circumstances to divorce.⁴⁶ Gender parity is an issue that Paul addresses, particularly for unmarried women in 1 Corinthians 7:32–33, who are anxiously concerned with the Lord's work in contrast to married women who necessarily have other kinds of material responsibilities.⁴⁷

Unnamed women defined by their sexual status

Some unnamed women are defined by their sexual status in the New Testament. They include the woman who is looked at lustfully (Matthew 5:28), the adulterous woman (John 8:3–11), divorced women (Matthew 5:31–32; 19:3–9; Mark 10:2–12; Luke 16:18), prostitutes (Matthew 21:31–32; Luke 15:30; 1 Corinthians 6:15–16), those who had been married multiple times (Matthew 22:23–30; Mark 12:18–25; Luke 20:27–36), bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1–13), unmarried women (1 Corinthians 7), those who take part in unnatural intercourse (Romans 1:26), and virgins (Luke 1–2; 1 Corinthians 7). Sexualized language, image, and

metaphor are used largely and almost exclusively in connection with women, their bodies, and their behaviors. For example, adulteresses, as discussed in John 8:3–11 and generally in James 4:1–13, are read as actors who operate within the larger christological condemnation of disloyal, unchaste behavior.⁴⁸ Social constructs surrounding female sexuality had very real-life effects when it came to marriage expectations, pregnancy, sexual behaviors, coercion, and even rape. We would do well to read these sexual archetypal descriptions with some compassion, some mercy, and the clear realization that the male partner is often absent from the narrative. Often, women privileged their material, spiritual, social, and physical security over their own power, will, and ability to act and were prone to both the social stigma and physical consequences of the behavior of themselves and others.

Whereas issues of purity laws are the focus of sexual behaviors, especially as we take our cue from unnamed women, we must recognize and deliberately consider the way we read narratives that harm or exclude women for merely being female. The anonymity of unnamed women, in its most frustrating guise, perpetuates the objectification of women designated by their sexual actions by proclaiming a judgment akin to damnation. Even if the sinning female from these narratives is forgiven, the hermeneutics of imagination may perpetuate her as an exile within the biblical context and, perhaps, beyond.

We must further complicate our thinking toward unnamed women in the New Testament who are reduced to their sexual identity. It is to our advantage to ask questions like the following: How does women's sexuality determine control over their bodies by others or demonstrate control over their own bodies and possessions? What burdens and advantages does reality place upon the lives of married, single, divorced, and ascetic women? What issues arise around health and cleanliness laws specific to women? Does pointing out special cases of healing for women unduly highlight their vulnerable positioning for shame? These questions can be particularly helpful because they help us recognize the complex nature of these women who are otherwise relatively passive in the restorative accounts of their bodies.

On the other hand, desexualizing women can be detrimental. By denying their specifically female sexual power in creation, we find that women are transmuted into anonymity or rhetorically into the male domain where all of mankind become men and sons. The devaluation of marriage, motherhood, and other creative capacities for sexually engaged women within the familial dynamic can also remove women's power from the long-held mother archetype of the *creatrix*.

Unnamed women and social relationships

Unnamed women are also categorized in the New Testament as social outsiders and insiders. Outsiders like the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21–28) and the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1–42) were faced with initial social resistance in their narratives but were also instrumental in drawing former outsiders into the larger covenant community.⁴⁹ The responsibility to hold faith in divine promise is also relevant for unnamed Greek women, “outsiders” who were also believers, as well as the unnamed “insider” companions to male disciples and

apostles. Unnamed women were often described according to their social status. At one end of the spectrum were women of elect status, leading women, and at the other end, slaves. Unnamed women within the community of believers also acted in roles concerning civic action and well-being. For example, the woman, a widow, who in Luke 18:20 pleads or acts as an advocate for herself against an unjust judge is recognized for her strength and persistence as she is successful in her case. Others within the community tended to the physical needs of others, especially the most vulnerable, generally in the role of a nurse (Matthew 24:19; Mark 13:17; Luke 21:23; 1 Thessalonians 2:7).

To find women participating in socially and theologically instructive ways, it is sometimes useful to incorporate imaginative and inquisitive ways of reading the scriptural narrative. For example, Elaine Wainwright asks important questions regarding Jesus's interaction with the Syro-Phoenician woman. She demands of us as readers to consider the anonymity of her possessed daughter, whose ailment is at the center of the narrative.⁵⁰ The interpersonal conversation takes place in the border region between Israel and Tyre/Sidon, a place of marginalization.⁵¹ Jesus initially ignores the woman's plea to heal her daughter, citing her ethnic designation as a Canaanite in order to argue that "it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Matthew 15:26 NRSV). From her position of vulnerability, she still bravely replies as an advocate for her ill, foreign daughter, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (Matthew 15:27 NRSV), and is ultimately blessed with a healing miracle.

The sociality of unnamed women was also intricately connected to their bodily state of being. For example, the woman who hemorrhages, the bent woman, and various iterations of pregnant, laboring, and nursing women provide very clear images of women whose social narrative is specifically bound to their bodies. Many of these accounts are acutely essentialist, meaning that the narrative is wholly dependent on their female bodies. Their physical circumstances are framed in ways connected with shame, issues of gendered cleanliness, and the commodification of their sexuality. These women have endured over time, not because they merely tolerated their circumstances or survived them but because they were extraordinary actors who, in spite of their bodies, autonomously reached beyond their physical circumstances. Their stories are not necessarily different from many other women around them who could have also been exemplars, but they are prioritized into the New Testament text in ways that call our attention to their bodies in specific ways, often as a contrast point for Christ's healing touch.

Women's social actions were also connected bodily to gendered expectations regarding hospitality, work, patronage, and household chores. New Testament women were socially connected to acts of hospitality. They were the actors who fed others, washed others, prepared meals, and leavened the bread of life and their communities. Parables often feature domestic tasks accomplished by women who sweep, provide sustenance, even offer coins. Women's affiliation with hospitality is deeply connected to their role as patrons to the disciples. Without question, women were at hand within the household, acting as and staying with the disciples of Jesus in shared fellowship.

Unnamed women and holy or devotional acts

The largest group of unnamed women are those identified by their actions. Holy and devotional acts are underscored in the New Testament by the accounts of women who anoint, praise, teach, lament, pray, and prophesy. Women take action as true believers; they are baptized, persecuted, and devoted (at places of prayer). They are witnesses to Jesus's resurrection and are called deacons, profess reverence, and are moved on by the Holy Spirit.

We sometimes understand women's devotional practices in the early church through the reaction of men toward them rather than from an explicit record of the acts themselves. For example, in 1 Corinthians 11:5 it is clear from Paul's letter that women in the Corinthian church prayed and prophesied publicly, a tradition that "may perhaps go back to the example of Prisca"⁵² as a founding missionary in Corinth. Paul argues in behalf of these women and stresses that a woman should have *exousia*, or authority, over her own head and "appeals to the new church order marked by mutual interdependence of men and women."⁵³ In the same chapter (11:14–16 NRSV), Paul also adds ambiguity to his former statements by expressing the persistence of nature and custom in the acceptable quality of women's devotions, the subordination of which is traditionally emphasized over other interpretations.⁵⁴ This has led many scholars to argue for one of these two perspectives, rather than seeing the productive tension inherent in Paul's own arguments.⁵⁵

Apart from arguing for the official capacities of women in devotional settings, there are also customary circumstances in which women were primary actors. Women who anoint, female messengers, and women who participate in rites of death and burial come immediately into view as we examine the events surrounding Christ's passion, crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection. Women in the New Testament perform holy acts that indicate a high level of perception, foreknowledge, or intuitive understanding of coming events.

The realms of hospitality and death are simultaneously the domains of women. The act of the anointing woman, recorded anonymously in the Synoptic Gospels and named as Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus in the Gospel of John, is not outside her office, even if its enactment is somewhat unconventional. Dennis McDonald prioritizes female participation and its significance by underscoring the anointing act as one that moves beyond hospitality into the realm of prophetic seership.⁵⁶ The woman acts from recognition of Jesus's forthcoming passion, and she does so without the need of an exterior revelatory sign. MacDonald compares the varied story of the woman anointing Jesus with ointments, oils, and tears to the account of the nurse Eurycleia, who recognizes Odysseus's feet as she washes them on his return to Ithaca.⁵⁷ This trope of recognition is presented as a specifically female act of wisdom and is enacted in moments of birth, death, and rebirth—all realms where women stand at the gates, attend, participate, and witness.

Unnamed women are dominantly present at the cross as well as in the burial and resurrection accounts. Their presence was credible to the audience of the New Testament, which illuminates the acceptability of women within rituals and practices of mourning, watching, waiting, and lamenting the dead. Carolyn Osiek has highlighted the incongruities of the New Testament world, where apotheosis accounts and messianic rhetoric were crucial to the

communal memory of first-century believers, and yet when that message was first delivered by women, they were not believed.⁵⁸

Unnamed women and unholy or profane actions

In addition to unnamed women being associated with holy acts, there are also those who are anonymously associated with tale-tellers, silly women, and even the false female prophetess Jezebel, who is typified and vilified in Revelation 2:20. The term *Jezebel* is, of course, associated with the Israelite queen from 1 Kings 16 who encourages her husband, King Ahab, to abandon the worship of Jehovah in favor of the deities Baal and Asherah. Women who speak falsely are first presented in the example of Sapphira, the first female speaker in Acts, whose words are lies and who is struck dead (Acts 5:1–11). Women as tale-tellers are a problem because their words are viewed as being in conflict with the true faith. The Pastoral Epistles of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus include warnings relevant to the last days. Part of their rhetoric warns against “false teachings,” adhering to extreme behaviors like asceticism or celibacy, and believing legends or old wives’ tales rather than gospel teachings.⁵⁹ The practice of describing women as tellers of tales was dually problematic for the early church, which collectively set its hope in the living God. First, by associating these practices specifically with women, the writer(s) immediately connects women with irrational and emotional superstitions in opposition to men’s spiritual or rational mind. Secondly, the common refrain from 1 Timothy 5:13, describing women as “gossips and busybodies,” aligns women’s idle nonsense against sayings that are “sure and worthy of full acceptance” within the gospel framework from 1 Timothy 4:9. By associating women with the foolish woman as an archetype, we can naturally focus on her naïveté, but we would be wise to also consider that those who ultimately find a path of mature thinking, even the path of Woman Wisdom, begin with questioning, simple discourse, and new experience.

By gendering authoritative voices, there is a clear bias against women’s “silly” narratives. Even though there were legitimate concerns over correct teachings perpetuated amongst the faithful, this diminutive name-calling is rhetorically dismissive. As mentioned in 2 Timothy 3:6 within the context of the apocalyptic discussion of the last days, silly women are those who are most vulnerable to false teachers. They are swayed by their desires and never arrive “at a knowledge of the truth” (3:6).⁶⁰ The struggle for authentic instruction, especially within the nascent church at Ephesus, indicates both the growing nature of the congregation and the fact that the church was conceptually faced with the prospect of apocalyptic finality. Time is perceived as essentially short, and women who professed proper and correct reverence for God are put in high contrast with women, personified or real, who are traditionally denigrated for their silly ways.

Conclusions

In thinking through the experiences of New Testament women, we should focus attention on the fact that they were holy, nurturing, humble, and submissive as well as decisive, reve-

latory, intuitive, resilient, powerful, and fallible human beings. It is not the intention of this study to use gender as a tool of categorization, especially if it limits and marginalizes women as other or differentiates or separates them from the powerful discourses within scripture. Each of the women discussed here contributes to a larger, more holistic way of comprehending women in the world of the New Testament.

Suggesting specific archetypal meanings for New Testament women is not meant to be the definitive or final word on the matter. This kind of examination attempts instead to be helpful in highlighting patterns and characteristics in the text. The entirety of each scriptural account and all iterations of commentary for each woman would be impossible to convey here. However, when we encounter their pericopes, it is useful to consider these New Testament women, if not from all perspectives, at least from broader vantage points. What we are offered, as faithful and conscientious readers, is an intimately deep, and often surprising, engagement with the expansive lives of women whose devotion, in many ways, reflects that of modern women.



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Further Reading

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Notes

1. Volumes of commentaries, dictionaries, and academic studies are available. See, for example, Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002); Christine E. Joyes and Christopher C. Rowland, eds., *From the Margins 2: Women of the New Testament and Their Afterlives* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009); Elizabeth A. McCabe, ed., *Women in the Biblical World* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009); Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer, eds., *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000); and Camille Fronk Olson, *Women of the New Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014).
2. Archetypes are patterns or models from which copies, examples, or imitations can be derived. The origin of archetypes is ancient and dates back to the forms within Platonic thought. Archetypal criticism is used

- in the assessment of literature and art and is expansive and useful when considering symbolic language in scripture. See, for example, Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964).
3. Compare Catherine C. Taylor, "The *Pignatta Sarcophagus*: Late Antique Iconography and the Memorial Culture of Salvation," *Biblical Reception* 3 (2014): 30–56.
 4. David R. Cartlidge and J. Keith Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha* (London: Routledge, 2001), 1–20.
 5. J. K. Elliott, *A Synopsis of the Apocryphal Nativity and Infancy Narratives* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2006), ix.
 6. The combination of images on this sarcophagus, including the Annunciation scene, may indicate that this imagery was specifically chosen by or for a particular client rather than being part of the typical decorative repertoire readily available in the workshop.
 7. This pose is commonly seen in numismatic evidence as female members of the imperial household take on this seated profile or three-quarter pose demonstrating *pudicitia*, or modest virtue.
 8. All facial features have been weathered or worn away, yet her face remains in profile without indication of any sideward or forward glance.
 9. Protevangelium of James 6.2, in J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005), 59.
 10. Protevangelium of James 7.2 in Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 60.
 11. Ioli Kalavrezou, "Images of the Mother: When the Virgin Mary Became *Meter Theou*," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990): 165–72.
 12. Averil Cameron, "The Early Cult of the Virgin," in *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, ed. Maria Vasilake (Milan, NY: Skira, 2000), 3.
 13. Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 48–51.
 14. Compare Catherine C. Taylor, "Peter in the House of Tabitha: Late Antique Sarcophagi and Christian Philanthropy," in *The Ministry of Peter, the Chief Apostle*, ed. Frank F. Judd Jr., Eric D. Huntsman, and Shon D. Hopkin (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 191–210.
 15. Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *The Widows: A Women's Ministry in the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 23.
 16. Thurston, *Widows*, 24.
 17. Thurston, *Widows*, 25.
 18. Thurston, *Widows*, 23.
 19. Richard I. Pervo, "Joanna," in Meyers, Craven, and Kraemer, *Women in Scripture*, 102–3.
 20. Pervo, "Joanna," 103.
 21. Pervo, "Joanna," 103.
 22. Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, 109–202.
 23. Eric D. Huntsman, *Jesus Christ and the World of the New Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 161.
 24. Valerie Abrahamsen, "Lydia," in Meyers, Craven, and Kraemer, *Women in Scripture*, 111.
 25. Abrahamsen, "Lydia," 111.
 26. Shelly Matthews, "Elite Women, Public Religion, and Christian Propaganda," in *A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 130–33.
 27. Matthews, "Elite Women," 132.
 28. Elizabeth McCabe, "A Reevaluation of Phoebe in Romans 16:1–2 as a *Diakonos* and *Prostatis*: Exposing the Inaccuracies of English Translations," in McCabe, *Women in the Biblical World*, 99.
 29. McCabe, "Reevaluation of Phoebe," 99–101.
 30. Brian Dodd, *Problem with Paul* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 23.
 31. Richard B. Hays, "Paul on the Relation between Men and Women," in *A Feminist Companion to Paul*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 144.
 32. McCabe, "Reevaluation of Phoebe," 100.
 33. Jouette M. Bassler, "Phoebe," in Meyers, Craven, and Kraemer, *Women in Scripture*, 135.

34. Jouette M. Bassler, "Prisca," in Meyers, Craven, and Kraemer, *Women in Scripture*, 136.
35. Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 144.
36. F. Scott Spencer, "Women 'of the Cloth' in Acts: Sewing the Word," in Levine, *Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles*, 152.
37. Dennis MacDonald, "Lydia and Her Sisters as Lukan Fictions," in Levine, *Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles*, 105–10.
38. Bassler, "Prisca," 137.
39. T. J. Wray, *Good Girls, Bad Girls of the New Testament: Their Enduring Lessons* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 193.
40. Kate Cooper, "Household and Empire: The Materfamilias as *Miles Christi* in the Anonymous *Handbook for Gregoria*," in *Household, Women, and Christianities, in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2006), 91–108.
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42. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "What Ever Happened to Those Prophesying Daughters?," in Levine, *Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles*, 60.
43. Gaventa, "What Ever Happened," 58–60.
44. Gaventa, "What Ever Happened," 60.
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46. Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 435–83.
47. Sheila Briggs, "Married Women (and Men), Unmarried Women (and Men), and Women (and Men) Married to Unbelievers," in Meyers, Craven, and Kraemer, *Women in Scripture*, 471–74.
48. Adele Reinhartz, "Adulterous Woman," in Meyers, Craven, and Kraemer, *Women in Scripture*, 454–55.
49. See, for example, Gale R. O'Day, "Surprised by Faith: Jesus and the Canaanite Woman," in *Feminist Companion to Matthew*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 114–25; and Elaine Wainwright, "Not without My Daughter: Gender and Demon Possession in Matthew 15:21–28," in Levine, *Feminist Companion to Matthew*, 126–37.
50. Wainwright, "Not without My Daughter," 132–34.
51. Wainwright, "Not without My Daughter," 132.
52. Margaret M. Mitchell, "Women Praying and Prophesying," in Meyers, Craven, and Kraemer, *Women in Scripture*, 476.
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