

New books spotlight women's leadership in New Testament

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Emerging from the narrow entrance to a cave south of Jerusalem, scholar Joan Taylor found herself saying a blessing for Salome.

Salome is described in the Gospels as following and ministering to Jesus and is named as one of many women present at his death and at his tomb after his resurrection.

Ancient Greek graffiti inside the cave also asks “holy Salome” for mercy, suggesting to Taylor and her travel companion, scholar Helen Bond, that Salome may have been remembered as a healer in the early centuries of the church, just as many of Jesus’ male disciples were.

“These early women disciples of Jesus should be celebrated. They should be restored somehow, as this place should be restored,” Taylor says, sitting outside the cave in the British Channel 4 documentary *Jesus’ Female Disciples: The New Evidence*.

“They were working alongside the men. They were as important to the early Jesus movement as the men were,” she continues. “They are clearly there in our texts, and to forget that is a shame. If it’s all about men and the band of 12 men around Jesus, we’re forgetting the other half of the story.”

The documentary gained unexpected attention, with the duo writing it receiving more press coverage than any other religious program since the BBC’s *Son of God* in 2001.

Women's roles in the Bible 'have been obscured'

Taylor and Bond—who also wrote the book *Women Remembered: Jesus' Female Disciples*, which details the scholarship that didn't fit into their 50-minute film—aren't the only scholars working to restore the picture of Jesus' first female followers.

Several new books are taking a fresh look at the roles of women in Jesus' ministry and in the early church.

"It's not that we're making new discoveries about women. It's not that we're trying to rewrite history. It's simply that women have been obscured, and women's actual roles in the Bible have been obscured," said Beth Allison Barr, the James



Vardaman Professor of History at Baylor University and author of *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*.

"It's time when we've got to see them for how they really are," she said.

That time comes as many Christians—particularly white evangelicals—are asking questions about how their faith was formed and what they were taught it meant to be a Christian, Barr said. That includes ideas around women and gender roles.

"People are like, 'Hey, maybe what I was always taught about this—maybe there's more to the story.' And, I mean, it's such an encouraging moment," Barr said.

Gupta: ‘I was wrong’ about women in ministry

Nijay Gupta—professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary and author of *Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church*, released in March with a foreword by Barr—said he was forced to reconsider his belief that the Bible forbid women from leadership in the church when he was in seminary.

Gupta had been warned to stay away from women studying for a Master of Divinity degree because they were being “disobedient,” he said. He ended up marrying one.

And the more women he met in seminary, the more he realized they believed the same things he did about the truth of the Bible.

Two years of research into what the Bible said on the topic started with him writing a paper on why women shouldn’t be in ministry and ended with him writing a paper on why they must.

In the New Testament, Gupta encountered Nympha, who not only hosted a church in her home but is described in the same way church leaders are described elsewhere. When writing about her in *Tell Her Story*, he was tempted to name the chapter “The Most Important Early Christian You’ve Never Heard Of,” he said.

He also reencountered Mary, the mother of Jesus, whom he always envisioned frozen in time as a teenager in the Christmas story. But, he realized, she was there throughout Jesus’ life, at his death and even afterward among the disciples when the Holy Spirit arrived at Pentecost.

Gupta started teaching and writing about the stories of women found in the New Testament because, he said, “I was wrong, and I was so sure of being

right before.”

How we view these women has impacts far beyond biblical interpretation, he said.

“An accumulation of modern life experiences tells us if the Bible is God’s word, if it’s the authority for Christians, we need to take seriously everything in there, and that’s going to affect how we treat women today,” he said.

Focusing on neglected women in Scripture

Other scholars have focused their attention on individual women who receive passing reference in the New Testament.

Phoebe, whose name appears in a list of greetings from the apostle Paul at the end of the Book of Romans, takes center stage in Susan Hylen’s book *Finding Phoebe: What New Testament Women Were Really Like*, published in January. The two verses about Phoebe describe her as “sister,” “deacon” and “benefactor.”

Hylen, professor of New Testament at Emory University, uses those lines as a jumping-off point to investigate some of the “vague clues” the New Testament gives about the lives of the women in its pages.

She offers historical context to help readers reach their own conclusions about the roles women may have played in the early church and beyond, which may look different than they had assumed.

“I sense right now that there are a lot of churches where it hasn’t been conventional for women to have leadership roles, but people are open to it,” she said.

The scholars argue much of what they're writing isn't new.

'An exercise in amplification'

Gupta describes *Tell Her Story* in its introduction as an "exercise in amplification" of the stories of women in the biblical text.

Taylor, professor of Christian origins and Second Temple Judaism at King's College London, points to the work of German theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who pioneered the field of feminist biblical interpretation in the 1980s and 1990s with such works as *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* and *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*. Taylor studied Schüssler Fiorenza's methodology at Harvard Divinity School.

Bond said she still was surprised to encounter women as more than "light relief" in the biblical texts.

"This is genuinely part of the story that hasn't filtered out from academic towers and academic institutions," said Bond, professor of Christian origins and head of the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh.



Diana Butler Bass

Much of what is being written now about women in the New Testament “is really an evangelical phenomenon,” according to popular author and public scholar Diana Butler Bass.

“I think these questions have been, by and large, explored very thoroughly, and pursued with great success, in Catholic and liberal Protestant circles for more than four generations already, but now evangelicals are just finding them.”

The 1970s and 1980s saw a surge of feminist biblical scholarship as mainline Protestant denominations began to ordain women, Butler Bass said, pointing to the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elizabeth Johnson.

Still, Butler Bass said, she was surprised when a sermon she delivered last summer sharing new scholarship about Mary Magdalene—whom she called “first among the apostles, really, when it comes to women in the New Testament”—went viral.

In the sermon, she pointed to the work of Elizabeth Schrader Polczer, incoming assistant professor of New Testament at Villanova University. Schrader Polczer’s research suggests the oldest text of the Gospel of John was altered to split in two the character of Mary in the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

As a result, today’s Bible translations place sisters Mary and Martha—who are featured in a different story in the Gospel of Luke—in the passage. Schrader Polczer argues instead it should be Mary Magdalene in the passage, making one of the first statements of belief in Jesus as the Messiah.

That would put Mary Magdalene, who is named elsewhere in the Bible as

traveling with Jesus and his disciples and as the first witness to Jesus' resurrection, on par with Peter among Jesus' disciples, Butler Bass said.

After delivering the sermon to a largely progressive Christian audience of mainliners and exvangelicals last July at the Wild Goose Festival, Butler Bass sent the audio to her Substack subscribers. By the time she arrived home a few hours later, it had been downloaded nearly 100,000 times.

To date, she believes it has been listened to 750,000 times.

But imagine, she said, if the church had been listening to Mary Magdalene and other women named in the New Testament all this time.

"Is there a pathway to finally reimagine the nature of leadership in early Christian communities and the ways in which Jesus understood the callings of men and women?" Butler Bass said.