

*In Search of Our Stories:  
Retelling and Reclaiming Women's Leadership in  
Religious Tradition*



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# Mercy Global Action Emerging Leaders Fellowship Final Project

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Dedicated to all the women of the  
Mercy Global Action Emerging Leaders Fellowship.

I want to express my deepest gratitude for all the women of the Mercy Global Action Emerging Leaders Fellowship. To the fellows, the leaders, and all contributors, thank you. A special thank you also to our donor, a generous woman of Mercy.



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## Introduction

When I was in high school, I read Anita Diamant's book *The Red Tent*. This novel follows the story of Dinah, a biblical woman referenced briefly in Genesis. She is the only mentioned daughter of Leah and Jacob, and is the sister of the twelve sons of Jacob—the famous twelve tribes of Israel. Unlike the tale of the twelve tribes, Dinah's story in Genesis is short and tragic. Dinah's story consists solely of the violence committed against her, and it provides a stage for her brothers and father to flex their control and power over local Canaanite royalty.

In *The Red Tent*, Anita Diamant dives deeply into this short and sad story, expanding the few lines of Dinah's account into a full-length novel. Diamant imagines Dinah as a woman who is rebellious of her family, and who takes control of her own body, life, and love. The book absolutely captivated me, and despite it being a fictional tale, it sparked in me a fascination for the hidden lives of women of the Bible.

Growing up as a Catholic child, I heard about the extraordinary lives of countless biblical men: Abraham, Moses, Noah, Jacob, Solomon, David, John the Baptist, Jesus. I learned about biblical women as well, including Deborah, Miriam, Mary the Mother of God, and Mary Magdalene. But it is no doubt that biblical men are given central concern over women, especially for their reputation as spiritual leaders.

It is not hard to see that this biblical pattern remains entrenched in contemporary Christian practices. Like many men in the Bible, men in the church today also generally take a central role, as official Christian leadership is often allocated to men. Actually, the gendered limitations women face in church leadership may arguably be even worse today than in some biblical stories, as some women did take central leadership roles in the budding Christian

community.<sup>1</sup> Today, however, women in the Catholic Church are restricted from taking any positions of ordained leadership. As I became more and more aware of these gendered limitations found in my faith community, I turned away in anger and confusion. My experience is not unique. Many women, and many people in general, feel angered and betrayed by the fact that the Church limits women, a limitation which seems so out of sync with the depth of spirituality and adept leadership skills women possess.

This problem of gender in religion is not restricted to Christianity, but spans many faiths practices around the world. Indeed, women from the writings of many religions are often given secondary importance to the men in those same stories. Of course, there are in fact women from our traditions whose stories do display qualities of leadership, and this project does not intend to diminish or disregard these stories. Instead, the project takes a close look at the fact that women's stories in scripture are often abridged, ignored, or not always valued and celebrated on par with men's. Therefore, for this Mercy project, I have aimed to compile an anthology which reimagines the often undervalued, misrepresented, or misunderstood stories of women in religion. These stories are retold in order to display and uplift the incredible examples of leadership women of our traditions can offer us today.

Why bother resurrect, reimagine, and retell the stories of these women who lived thousands of years ago? Why do their stories matter to us today? Why not just accept that they played a more minor role than we would have liked, and hope that as women living here and now, we can continue to overcome this?

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of this include Junia, who is considered an apostle of the early church (found in Romans.) Her name is believed to have been changed to the masculine version, Junias, in a later redaction. Another example is Mary Magdalene, who witnesses the risen Christ and is promptly told to go and tell the news.

These are important questions. The not so simple answer is that religion still matters a great deal today, not just for the individual's faith, but for national and global affairs. Religion is a major engine of human history and contemporary social progress. Today, religion affects law, education, medicine, war, peace, economics, culture, social custom, art, literature, government, politics, technological advancement, and more. Religion remains incredibly influential around the world. It also remains largely dominated by men. If religion is so deeply and powerfully embedded in our societies, can we be satisfied with its deep-rooted sexism? I would argue no, we shouldn't and we can't. This, in short, is why it is still important to revisit our scriptures. Not only is the work of interpretation important, but it is also essential to revisit, reimagining, and retell the stories of our traditions. While the idea of retelling scripture may turn many away, there is already a strong precedent for this, at least in regards to the Bible.

In biblical antiquity, stories were orally passed down throughout the years. As they were, the stories shifted in tandem with the changing needs and sentiments of each new generation. Biblical scholar Bernhard Anderson calls the early period in Israel a "creative time" when today's biblical stories were told, retold and elaborated upon; where each version echoed the nuanced perspectives of the storytellers' tribe. Many of the final recorded stories we now know are undoubtedly compiled and unified versions of numerous popular retellings, stitched into one final account.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, even after the texts were recorded, this type of creative storytelling continued.<sup>3</sup>

There is a vibrant tradition in Judaism of reimagining holy scriptures as a way of engaging with the text. In fact, in ancient Jewish tradition, rabbis "did not hesitate to embellish, retell,

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<sup>2</sup> Bernhard W Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament: Fourth Edition* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1986), 24.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament: Fourth Edition*, 23.

reimagine, or even radically change the stories of the Torah.”<sup>4</sup> An example is the biblical story of Isaac. In Genesis, Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son Isaac. Yet at the last minute, Isaac is saved when an angel tells Abraham to stop. However, in another version, Isaac is sacrificed, and brought back to life three years later.<sup>5</sup> Narrations such as these have been recorded in the Midrash, a collection of biblical exegesis or interpretations. The reason that these types of tales were not seen as heretical is because of the creative and dynamic nature of oral storytelling. Oral storytelling is not simply about relaying information, but instead offers an experience—with each new retelling, the stories live, breath, and grow alongside human society and culture. A similar phenomenon still exists in storytelling. While oral storytelling may not be as prominent, religious and cultural stories are constantly being reimagined and reworked today.

This happens a great deal through literature, art, and other forms of storytelling. For example, most people’s imagery of heaven and hell comes far more from literature than scripture. Indeed, Dante and Milton have sculpted our imagination of the afterlife to a far greater extent than the actual Bible has. And this is true for other religious ideas and themes as well. Movies, shows, books, and artwork tend to have an incredible impact on shaping religious and spiritual thought. Religious stories and mythology were never meant to be locked away in a book or set into stone, but they were meant to be living word. And through the art of storytelling, they still are.

Therefore, the concept of revisiting the stories of our spiritual mothers in order to tell them in a more egalitarian light is built on a strong foundation. As has been done for thousands of years, we can today retell and reimagine our scriptural stories to better fit a more inclusive

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<sup>4</sup> Howard Schwartz, *Reimagining the Bible: The Storytelling of the Rabbis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Schwartz, *Reimagining the Bible: The Storytelling of the Rabbis*, 4.

theology, a theology which affirms the inherent and equal dignity of all. Of course, this concept or method of breathing new life into scripture is not a perfect one. This method can raise some concerns, namely—what will be lost with each new telling? Is there any central truth to a story which can be retold and reimagined time and time again? Does this mean that the story and its messages are completely relative to each generation, each context, and even each individual? Furthermore, there is admittedly some danger in this methodology. Scripture has often been (and continues to be) molded to fit agendas of abuse and control. Given this, is it ethical to retell and reimagine scriptural stories?

The purpose of this project is not to indoctrinate anyone into a new way of thinking, believing, or practicing. Catholic Feminist theologian Dr. Rosemary Radford Ruether wisely states that “there is no final and definitive feminist theology, no final synthesis that encompasses all human experience, criticizes what is sexist, and appropriates what is usable in all historical traditions.”<sup>6</sup> In that same vein, this project and the resulting collection of art and stories do not claim to represent all experiences, speak for every woman in religion, or showcase all leadership styles and theories. Instead, I hope that this collection will shed some light on the fact that scripture is often told from an androcentric viewpoint and that are alternative perspectives. While the original scripture is valuable, it is not without bias. Therefore, when approached with balance and caution, the retelling of women’s stories can be not only beneficial to people today, but illuminating in our rapidly changing world. Just as the admittedly fictional story of Dinah in the novel *The Red Tent* inspired and empowered me as a young girl, I think that these retellings can deepen curiosity, spur conversation, and hopefully bring more attention to the women of our religious traditions.

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<sup>6</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: towards a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 20.



So, why not just focus on adding to existing feminist theology and building new interpretations of scriptural women? For this Mercy project, I wanted to focus more heavily on the stories than the theological reflection—to actually retell these women’s stories, through prose, poetry, or visual art. This is for a few reasons. Firstly, the actual stories of the women in the Bible are often shrouded in indifference at best and misogyny at worst. Take, for example, the story of Delilah and her relationship with Sampson. In the biblical account, Delilah is represented as a sneaking, deceitful, often clueless temptress who leads Sampson to his death. However, in my collection, her story is reexamined. She is considered as a woman who is called by God to save her people and put an end to Sampson’s trail of murders.

Secondly, but most importantly, I chose to focus on storytelling because stories are engaging and memorable. A story can also provide an avenue into other important focuses, such as theological interpretation. Storytelling is a vital and seemingly universal part of the human experience. We all love stories.

Ruether offers an example of this. At the start of her book *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, Ruether writes a story called *The Kenosis of the Father: A Feminist Midrash on the Gospel in Three Acts*. In this creative story, complete with dialogue, scenes, and acts, Ruether encapsulates the message of her entire book. Mary Magdalene delivers this message, saying, “A new God is being born in our hearts to teach us to level the heavens and exalt the earth and create a new world without masters and slaves, rulers and subjects.”<sup>7</sup> After the end of the story, Ruether goes on for 266 pages detailing her feminist theology. While Ruether’s thorough theology is fascinating and important, the most meaningful and memorable aspect of her book, for me at least, is the creative story at the beginning. Interpretation and theology are

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<sup>7</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: towards a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 11.

important, but revisiting our stories and reimagining how we tell these stories is vital. This is why I have chosen to focus on compiling this anthology of stories and artwork.

## **Methodology**

In order to compile this collection, I asked people who identify as women to reimagine and retell the story of a woman from their religious/spiritual tradition. The format was open-ended, and contributions took the form of creative prose, poetry, prayer, and visual artwork. I also reached out to women of all different religious and spiritual backgrounds to create an interfaith collection. We live in a highly connected and globalized world, and our theological studies and practices should reflect this pluralism. Furthermore, this project is not reserved for people who identify with major world religions only, but includes contributions from people who do not follow organized religion. Additionally, people identifying as atheists, agnostic, etcetera were also welcome to make a contribution. All religious/spiritual perspectives are valuable to this project. This is true for several reasons.

For one thing, many people leave the religion of their upbringing due to sexist and androcentric tendencies, and the perspectives of those who have had these experiences are so vital to hear. Secondly, what it means to be religious or spiritual can vary greatly from person to person. Ultimately, a person's outward religious identity does not necessarily determine the depth of their spiritual thought, curiosity, or interests. Regardless of background, each author and artist's contribution displays a rich diversity of perspective and experience.

Furthermore, each author and artist approached the prompt through their own varying methodology. Some chose to retell a familiar story through an unfamiliar viewpoint, some chose to fill in omitted details, while others took a highly creative approach similar to the Midrashic story of Isaac, telling an entirely new tale. After collecting all of the contributions, I compiled

them, grouping together pieces that featured the same woman, and organizing them all in scriptural/historical order. Contributions are listed in the following section, titled *Celebrating Our Stories*.

## Celebrating our Stories

*Her Goddess*

*Lilith Artwork*

*The Original Dream*

*Mother Eve*

*The Daughters of Zelophehad*

*The Prophecy of Delilah*

*The Concubine's Story*

*The Prayer for Peace*

*The Story of Esther*

*Mother Mary Artwork*

*Mother Mary*

*Mary Magdalene Artwork*

*Junia*

*Judges*

*Litany for Our Mothers*

***Her Goddess***

Carly Perini

Historians would say it was love; Medusa knew it was rape.  
The gods demanded punishment,  
She asked for safety.  
Her Goddess provided both.

To any man it was a curse; to Medusa it was a blessing.  
Athena's solution gave her power,  
She embraced her new role.  
Her Goddess gave her a weapon.

To men it was a fate worse than death; to Medusa it was armor.  
Her likeness gouged into the sides of homes,  
She stood guard for those within.  
Her Goddess gave her courage.

Men knew her to be a monster; Medusa knew she was a protector.  
The narrative of her story was twisted,  
But her strength remained.  
Her Goddess was very clever.

*Lilith Artwork*  
Natalie DiBona



Though I come from a Catholic background, I am drawn to Lilith's story because of her symbolic nature in the feminist community, as she is the epitome of female power and independence. I wanted to showcase her separation from the Garden of Eden by representing her standing alone between the garden on either side of her. Since some people see Lilith as evil, I portrayed her with devil horns and a snake, though you can see she looks content and unbothered by these labels. For me, she represents the freedom of feminist women who do not want to be good, obedient girls, and therefore she is the first powerful figure in the feminist community.

## *The Original Dream*

Julia Morisi

There finally came a day in the Garden when thoughts of what grew beyond the banks started to arise in Eve. Deep in her sleep, a tiny seedling spontaneously and miraculously began to hint of a fast-coming sprout.

The warmth and comfort of the Garden cocooned Eve in her sleep, but in her dream, the tiny seedling at last began to push up through the soil. Eve awoke, rose, stretched, yawned, and meandered out into the rest of the Garden.

Eve never imagined anything else beyond the Garden. That is, until that budding and burgeoning dream. The dream which had—in the short time since her awakening— spread like moss in her mind, climbed link vines onto her hands, and rooted into her steps.

In the quiet of her dawn-lit walk, Eve admired the familiar beauty all around her. She knew each stone on each step before taking it. Glancing to the river, she could already taste the sweet water on her lips. She remembered the name of every creature living beside her in this home. The only surprise was the flower now blossoming in her mind and the vines creeping out in front of her steps.

Eve followed the path of the vines, which was now full, and dark green, and rooting itself in place. At the end of the path was a clearing, and Eve finally saw where the vines led. She had never seen this tree before, but there it was. Its leaves stretched up towards the sky and its roots dug down deep. The tree continued to grow and blossom, and as Eve looked on, a cluster of purple petals bloomed on a high branch.

The flower was a beauty Eve had never before seen in the Garden. She eagerly stretched her limbs up to its branch, ready to take it. Yet as she did, a voice sang from the soil and the sky: *Once you take this, there is no going back.*

Upon hearing this voice, Eve sank back to the Garden's floor. The thought of the fruits on the vines, the sweetness of the water, the protective walls of the Garden, and the memory of the warm sleep all rooted her back into her safe spot on the ground. To take the flower would mean to venture outwards to a place of terrifying possibility. But the tree rose and the flower grew. Frozen for a moment, Eve gazed up at the tree, then back towards the rest of her Garden home. Then, with determination, she began to climb the branches.

*Mother Eve*  
Julia Morisi





## *The Daughters of Zelophehad*

Laura S. Ellis

*The following narrative is based on the events found in  
Numbers 27:1-11, Numbers 36, and Joshua 17:3-6*

Mahlah's fingers worked expertly through the knots in Tirzah's hair, untangling the dark strands from the sand and wind of the desert. Tirzah sat patiently as she listened to Mahlah and Milcah discuss and recite the law. Noa ducked into the tent and side-stepped Hoglah who was dancing with free abandon in the middle of the tent. No man was there to tell her not to dance, and Noa didn't stop her either.

"They're almost finished counting for the census," Noa said, interrupting Mahlah and Milcah from their religious discussion.

Hoglah slowed her circling dance, but the other sisters did not respond.

"The count will dictate who gets land and how much of it," Noa continued, as if they needed the reminder.

Mahlah hummed in response without taking her eyes from Tirzah's hair. Mahlah could feel Noa watching her, waiting for her to agree.

But it was Tirzah who spoke, "We should go tomorrow."

Mahlah's hands paused and she leaned over to look at her sister's face in surprise.

"The land should be ours," Noa persisted.

"Because our father is gone and we have no brothers," Hoglah mused. It was an obvious statement that they all knew, but Hoglah wanted to be a part of the conversation.

Mahlah exhaled deeply, her breath biting her chapped lips. Then her eyes fell to Milcah.

Milcah shrugged. "Yahweh's law is not against it."

Mahlah wasn't sure whether that was true or not. But if any of them knew the law, it was Milcah. "Well, let's hope Moses isn't either," Mahlah replied before resolutely returning her attention to Tirzah's hair.

The next morning the five sisters went to the tent of meeting, prepared to petition their case before Moses, Eleazar the priest, and the other leaders. Though the sisters were respected in the community the congregation gawked at them as they parted the crowd. Mahlah felt the gazes of the people follow them as they walked, but she tried not to meet any of their eyes. Out of her periphery, she saw an uncle—his arms crossed defiantly over his chest. She refused to look in his direction and lifted her head a little higher. They were the daughters of Zelophehad. The only lasting heirs of his line. She would not allow them to be swallowed into the line of her father's brother.

Mahlah, Noa, Milcah, Tirzah, and Hoglah moved as one in a line until they were in front of the leaders. Eleazar looked surprised to see them. Perhaps he expected that they would kneel, but they did not. The five sisters stood before the men. And for a moment no one spoke. The crowd pressed forward in curiosity. The leaders leaned toward the sisters in anticipation. Eventually, Moses gestured lightly, politely encouraging them to get on with it.

Mahlah cleared her throat and began, "Our father died in the wilderness." But then she paused, suddenly forgetting what else she was supposed to say. She should have memorized something and practiced with Milcah.

But she was not alone. Tirzah was standing next to her. And feeling Mahlah's body tense against hers, Tirzah added, "He was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against the Lord in the company of Korah, but he died for his own sin."

Mahlah was grateful for her sister and thought that it was a good thing to add. They wanted Moses on their side, and reminding him that their father was not in the rebellion against Moses seemed like a good place to start.

"And he had no sons," Hoglah blurted suddenly.

Mahlah glanced at her sister with raised eyebrows. But she supposed it was only right that they did this together.

Milcah spoke next. "Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son?" Her voice was soft as always, but today there was a newfound power behind it.

Noa finished their request in plain and fearless words. "Give to us a possession among our father's brothers."

Moses glanced over each of them carefully before leaning back into a lounged position, his frizzy graying hair slipping over his dark shoulder. He brought his hands together in thought and massaged his knobby and swollen knuckles. Finally, he stood and said, "I will ask the Lord." Then he disappeared behind the tent.

No one dared speak to the women while they waited for Moses to return with Yahweh's response. The sisters were not sure how long it would take. Moses was known to go off for days at a time in order to consult the Lord. But they decided not to leave the tent of meeting until he returned.

They huddled together and spoke softly about things they could not truly predict. Milcah said that she thought it was a good sign that Moses wanted to take their case before the Lord. It meant he was taking it seriously. She had faith in Yahweh's plan, and her belief that the law was on their side was unwavering. Noa wondered aloud what this could mean for future generations if they were given land—the first women to be allotted land. Hoglah merely confessed that she wanted them all to stay together. Tirzah mediated between each of the sisters.

Mahlah was silent, overcome with a nervous giddiness. She wanted what each of her sisters were saying to come true. She wasn't sure if it would, but she deeply wanted it. And she knew in her bones that it was right and that they deserved the land.

They waited for hours. The people of the crowd mingled together, speaking in hushed anticipatory tones. Some left, but most eventually returned, sometimes bringing their neighbors and cousins.

A few of the sisters' female cousins approached them to offer water and bits of bread. The sisters drank and nibbled gratefully as they waited. And though their cousins never spoke more than a few polite words, excitement and hope radiated from their faces as they tended to the sisters. Once they left, Noa reiterated her statements about future generations. And with some food in her belly, Hoglah began to sway slightly. None of the sisters had the heart to stop her.

Finally, when the sky was growing dark, Moses returned. The sisters hurried to take their place in a line in front of him as the crowd hushed and gathered behind the women.

Moses, who looked weary after his conversation with the Lord, remained standing as he said, "You, daughters of Zelophehad, are right in what you are saying. You shall indeed possess an inheritance among your father's brothers. And the inheritance of your father shall be passed on to you." Then turning his gaze to the crowd, he continued, "And from this day forward, if a man dies, and has no son, then his inheritance shall pass on to his daughters. If he has no

daughters, then his inheritance shall be given to his brothers. It shall be for the Israelites a statute and ordinance, as the Lord has commanded.”

The sisters managed to control their excitement until they returned to their own tent where for once, Hoglah was not the only one dancing. Their female cousins and neighbors stopped by under false pretenses in order to dance and rejoice and congratulate the sisters.

Eventually the five women piled together on the ground and tried to stop the giggling long enough to sleep. As each sister drifted off, Mahlah stayed awake, staring up at the top of the tent flapping gently in the wind. She replayed the day’s events in her mind and reveled in the truth that her sisters were right and Yahweh was just. Moses not only granted their request but in obedience to Yahweh, he added a new ordinance that passed an inheritance to future daughters. Mahlah thought forward to the day when they would finally enter the promised land. And she knew that the five sisters would stand with all the other sons, brothers, and leading men of each family—all the other heirs—and they claim their inheritance. They, daughters of Zelophehad, daughters of Israel, heirs to the land.

## *The Prophecy of Delilah*

Julia Morisi

Delilah hoped that in burying the seven braids, she could bury the past along with them. She knew, though, that no amount of time could weaken her memory of the days which, even now, seemed like only yesterday.

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When the rumors had started to spread of thirty men killed, Delilah had held her breath. When she saw the smoke rise over the orchards, she prayed for the winds to change. When she heard of the thousand men lost, she resigned to her fate.

And when he finally reached the city, the man behind the crimes seemed a fitting culprit. Sampson's was a lion—he was large and mean with an uncut mane of hair. Sampson was despised, despicable, a terror to her own. And in their fear, Delilah's family clung to the sliver of hope which rested heavily on Delilah's shoulders.

Yet a lightness came to Delilah that she never expected. Inside the terrible lion was a sweet honey. Despite her best efforts, Delilah found herself in love with the man who was a curse to her kin. This was not a part of the plan or the prophecy. The prediction never included love, or at least not as Delilah was told.

She held the soldiers off for as long as she could. For several nights, she told them falsehoods about Sampson, who, like Delilah herself, had been consecrated to his own God at birth, and who had his own fate to fulfil. But as long as she resisted, she saw her city still smoldering, her neighbors still mourning, and her family waiting for her to fulfil God's plan and set an end to it all. So as Sampson drifted off in her lap, Delilah reached for the razor.

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She pated the soil with her palm. Seven years was long enough to hold onto the tangles of the past. She did not place a stone on the spot, and as she turned to go, she prayed that the sands would render the spot lost forever.

## ***The Concubine's Story***

Julia Morisi

I wish I knew your name.  
I wish I knew your tribe.  
I wish I knew the name of your hometown.  
Instead, I'm told that you are property of the Levite.

I wish I knew your story.  
I wish I knew your dreams.  
I wish I knew your laugh.  
I wish I knew your sisters' names.

Maybe you were a singer.  
Maybe you were a leader.  
Maybe you were a teacher.  
Maybe you were a saint.  
Maybe you turned to prayer in your last moments.

I think I know your fears.  
I know you ran away.  
I know you turned to others for help.  
I know that didn't stop your tragedy.

I wish I knew your name.  
I wish your story was unique.

*Prayer for Peace*

Julia Morisi

Woman of the Book of Judges,  
Woman remembered through her abuser, the Levite,  
Woman forgotten for her joy,  
How can we call out to you?  
How can we remember you?

We remember you as a woman.  
We see you as a sister.  
We name you in our hearts.  
And we turn to you today in a prayer of hope.

Hear our prayer to end domestic violence,  
To bring healing and hope to those lost, hurt, and abused.  
We pray for peace.  
We pray for change.

On paper, you remain a woman without a name,  
But in living story, you have many names.  
In scripture, you are silent,  
But we invite you to find voice in us.

In every language,  
By every name,  
We call out to you.  
We remember you.

Hear our prayer.

Amen.

## *The Story of Esther*

Jemima Welsh

The story of Esther – the Jewish queen of Persian king Ahaseurus – is part of the Christian and Jewish theological traditions. Esther is a Jewish woman living in Persia and reared by her cousin Mordecai. Known for her great beauty, she is taken to the King of Persia, Ahaseurus, to become part of his harem. It isn't long before Ahaseurus, vexed by his first wife, Vashti, chooses Esther to be his new queen.

There is, however, a catch. Mordecai does not tell the king of Esther's Jewish heritage, believing that this would put her in great danger. Ahaseurus' closest advisor, Haman, dislikes the Jews, and seeks to rid the kingdom of their influence. Fuelled by his hatred of Mordecai, he leads a plot to destroy the Jewish people. He tells the king, "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them" (Esther 3:8 NIV). He independently announces a government-issued edict of genocide.

Watching the plans for the genocide, Mordecai persuades Esther to approach the king on behalf of the Jewish people. As a queen, Esther occupies both a powerful and subordinate position. She is the only Jewish person with access to the king, but she knows that going to the king unsolicited could be her death sentence. Mordecai speaks to her: "Who knows but that you have come to a royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14 NIV).

Summoning her courage, Esther goes to the king, telling him of her own Jewish heritage and Haman's plot against her people, and urges Ahaseurus to stop the imminent genocide. Moved by her beauty and honesty, the king agrees, and the Jewish people are saved, while Haman is hanged.

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As a child, reading this story gave me the same excitement as you would expect from watching a spy or mystery thriller. The imminent danger, the political wrangling, and the high stakes passion playing out against a court seething with betrayal and tradition. I didn't fully comprehend the magnitude of evil or devastation that genocide represents; I just focused on the story as an example of a woman 'saving the world'.

Revisiting the story as an adult, I'm struck by the lack of voice or presence that Esther occupies as an agent in her own right. I'm further intrigued by the myriad of modern reflections offered on the internet (from both Christian and Jewish perspectives) that speak primarily of Mordecai and Haman and of God working through Esther, such that the story becomes one of 'men' as change drivers. Esther, as a woman, is considered only for her God-given beauty, and it is this leveraging tool that enables her to do God's will and change the fate for the Jewish people.

As a woman in a changing world, I believe that the leadership values Esther embodies – as a *woman* – are significant guides for life, and are worth highlighting for their own sake. Whatever Mordecai's influence on her, or her standing in the eyes of the king, Esther could only have acted the way she did from *choice*. And that choice was profound.

So, in honour of Esther and her leadership in a time when women were given little space to lead, below are five ‘Esther’ traits that I would like to celebrate in an attempt to retell the modern significance of this story.

### **Fortitude**

This trait describes the emotional strength and resilience required to show courage in the face of danger. Esther exemplified fortitude in the planning of her approach to the king, and her choice to follow through with a plan that she knew would place her in compounded peril.

While the traditional telling of this story focuses on Mordecai as initiating the plan and encouraging Esther to follow through with it, the success of the initiative came down to Esther’s personal choice to put her life at risk in service of her people. No one else could have approached the king with such an entreaty; Esther made a conscious decision to see herself as uniquely capable of driving change. In other words, she recognised her own agency, and took responsibility for right action when she knew the odds were against her.

### **Discernment**

I see Esther as demonstrating intelligence as well as insight into her personal situation, despite the subordinate station she was forced to occupy. Approaching the king unsolicited (which usually meant execution) to speak on behalf of a people who were largely disparaged, would necessitate sensitivity and tact. We can infer that she didn’t just march into the room, demanding change, and raging against injustice. She would have approached carefully (though purposefully), speaking with respect, and admitting her own vulnerability. She would have employed all her powers of persuasion to convince the king that the Jewish people should be saved.

Being able to discern not just the position of potential power she held in a world dictated by men – but how to wield this power effectively in pursuit of goodness – shows a degree of nuanced understanding of the context in which she lived and the people with whom she interacted on a daily basis.

### **Diplomacy**

Diplomatic negotiation follows naturally from discernment. It refers to Esther’s ability to draw on her understanding of her situation to employ those tactics that she felt would be most persuasive and helpful to her cause.

It’s unlikely that she approached the king with no preparation; she probably thought deeply about how best to speak with him. Again, we can safely assume that she didn’t go in ‘all guns blazing’, but instead, employed a gentle but decisive negotiating style and highlighted her own allegiance to those people under attack.

While diplomacy isn’t always appropriate, its recourse to mediation, understanding and negotiation can be highly effective in mending arguments and brokering respect, even in situations like Esther’s, where the potential harm is unimaginable. In its purest form, diplomacy recognises the dignity in others and works from this foundation.

### **Authenticity**

This story could have played out very differently. Other than the encouragement from her uncle, Esther was under no obligation to put herself at risk in revealing her own Jewish heritage or



speaking up for her own people. She could have kept quiet and preserved her own position of untested favour with the king.

Nevertheless, Esther chose to see her Jewish identity as an innate part of herself – indeed, as something worth preserving and celebrating. At the moment of truth, she didn't hide this fundamental aspect of herself, but remained authentic to her tradition, culture and community.

### **Servant Leadership**

Somewhat underrated in modern times, servant leadership means placing the needs of the people you lead front and centre of your decision making.

Esther acted in a moment of terror for the benefit of her people. She put herself at the mercy of someone more powerful than she to serve the interests and wellbeing – indeed, the perseverance – of those who remained powerless. She put the immediate needs of the Jewish people before her own good standing and need to survive. It was a truly selfless act.

While many people see servant leadership as weakness, I choose to see it as the ultimate strength. It is perhaps the greatest form – the telos – of leadership. Which makes this story of Esther so important for today.

*Mother Mary Artwork*  
Anneliese Hardman



The mixed media work was inspired by a figurine my grandmother gave me--she was a devote Catholic and served devoutly at her Parish. She embodied servant leadership, just like Mary, the mother of Jesus. When I was younger, my grandmother would read me stories from my children's storybook Bible. She passed when I was in fifth grade, and my family and I were put in the difficult position of selling her house and most of her possessions. Despite this, I kept my grandmother's statuette of Mary because it was so important to her. (My grandmother's name is also Mary).

***Mother Mary***

Laura Pierson

Tattered and raw, her feet soiled from the journey.  
 Tired and sore, her back broken from the weight.  
 She cried out in joy-  
 she cried out in pain-  
 she cried out for the life leaving her body.

*Can a leader cry?*

Mama, when we tell your story I think we miss out on some things.  
 We don't talk the blood you lost in your fight to bring Light into this world.  
 We don't talk about the months of sickness, aches, and fatigue you endured.  
 We don't talk about the postpartum fear you felt as you watched your baby grow.

*Can a leader cry?*

I wonder what you thought about as you watched strangers adore your baby,  
 while you cleaned up the aftermath.  
 Mother, dear, did you think your job was over?  
 Could you have even considered the heartache,  
 the joy,  
 the grief  
 you would live with for the rest of your life?

*Can a leader cry?*

You see, Ma', these are the feelings we miss out on.  
 Your hopes, dreads, and wishes are forever locked away,  
 and those who care are left with questions.  
 The burden of motherhood.  
 Was it because you had self-sacrificial faith of your Beloved,  
 or could it be that you saw yourself as  
 a life-giver,  
 an emancipator,  
 the Mother of God.

*Can a leader cry?*

Mary.  
 Woman.  
 Mother.  
 She who cried out as she birthed her baby.  
 She who wept with joy, with hope, with love.  
 She who bled for the agony of life.

*Can a leader cry?*

Mother Mary, what a gift you are.  
With fear, faith, pain, and love you gave life to Beloved.  
Leading your son from your womb into the world.  
Cry Mary.  
For the love of God, cry.

**Mary Magdalene Artwork**  
Anonymous Contributor



Maryam Magdalene

John 20:1-18  
19:25

Matt 27:56, 61  
28:1

Mark 15:40  
16:1, 9

Luke 8:2  
24:10

Ⓜ

***Junia***

Cecilie Kern



*“Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives and my fellow prisoners; they are prominent among the apostles and they were in Christ before me.” (Romans 16:7 NAB)*

After I graduated from college, I moved to Washington, D.C. and began my first year of service through the Loretto Volunteer Program. Rooted in Catholic tradition, the Loretto Community is made up of the Congregation of the Sisters of Loretto and Loretto Co-members. Co-Members are people of any gender, Catholic or non-Catholic, who share in the values and mission of the Community. Like the founding sisters who called themselves Friends of Mary at the Foot of the Cross, today the Loretto Community commits itself to improving the conditions of those who suffer from injustice, oppression and deprivation of dignity. My experience as a volunteer made me a more compassionate, critical and self-aware person, and this personal growth translated into my leadership, which is more empathetic and committed to the growth of others.

During that year in D.C., I lived with a community of four other volunteers in a group house called “Junia House,” named after the woman apostle who served alongside Paul in his ministry to the early Church. Hundreds of years after Paul wrote the Epistle of the Romans in Greek, translators changed the female name “Junia” into the male name “Junias,” seemingly because they didn’t believe a woman could be an apostle or have any prominence or power in the Church. Despite this, it is clear that Junia and other women named in Romans played an important leadership role in the early Church – a new community where all people could use their gifts to serve God and minister to others.

I see the spirit of Junia in our little community dedicated to spirituality, solidarity, sustainability and social justice. We valued and celebrated the unique perspectives, contributions and dreams of each person. We inspired one another to grow into the best people we can be – working hard, thinking critically and seeking solutions to the injustice in the world. Years after living in Junia House, I am still inspired and challenged to grow in leadership and to build communities that are inclusive, forward-thinking and justice-oriented. Junia and the early Church are enduring examples for us in the twenty-first century to exercise courageous leadership that is welcoming of all people, open to change, and that looks to the future with hope and determination.



## *Judges*

Julia Morisi



This painting was inspired by the woman caught in adultery from John 8:2-6 as well as the Levite concubine found in the book of Judges, from which the painting takes its name. However, the woman in the painting does not represent any particular woman, but instead represents some of the struggles many women often face. The woman stands in front of a crowd of men. One man holds a pen, one man holds a scroll, and another two stones. This represents how men have historically controlled the story, how it has been recorded, interpreted, and how its message has been enforced.



***Litany for Our Mothers***

Julia Morisi

Mother Eve, patron saint of change and transformation, pray for us.

Saint Mary Magdalene, patron saint of leaders, pray for us.

Mother Mary, patron saint of mothers, pray for us.

Saint Catherine McAuley, patron saint of Mercy, pray for us.

Mother Lilith, patron saint of freedom, pray for us.

Saint Deborah, patron saint of judges, pray for us.

Mother Khadijah, patron saint of business women, pray for us.

Saint Delilah, patron saint of the protectors, pray for us.

All unnamed sisters from our scriptures, pray for us.

All unvoiced mothers from our stories, pray for us.

All unheard grandmothers in our books, we remember you,  
we hear you.

All holy women, mothers, saints, friends, thank you for guiding us.

We learn from you,

We look to you,

We cry with you,

We bask in your eternal blessing.

We learn from you shouts and whispers left behind  
and we wonder about your secrets untold.

We look to you for comfort in our suffering.

We turn to you for light in our darkness.

We seek your wisdom in our questions.

We rejoice with you in our success.

Holy Mothers, kindred friends, saints, guides,

Hear our prayer.

## Conclusion

What kinds of lessons can women of ancient scriptures offer us in contemporary times? In many ways, our lives are so far removed from theirs. It seems that we live in different worlds. Yet, as women in religious circles, we do face at least some similar problems as our predecessors. Like many of our spiritual ancestors, women today often still face sexism and male-dominated doctrine. But more than this, there is wisdom in their stories that is passed down, that can persist for thousands of years, that can ring true regardless of context. I believe there is an abundance of wisdom these women can teach us—about friendship and hope, about motherhood and sisterhood, about strength and persistence, about leadership.

That is the center of this project, searching for and recovering our mothers' stories and wisdom. Yet this focus on women, a marginalized group in religion, relates to other justice concerns beyond gender. Ruether states that

In rejecting androcentrism....women must also criticize all other forms of chauvinism: making white Westerners the norm of humanity, making Christians the norm of humanity, making privileged classes the norm of humanity. Women must also criticize homocentrism, that is, making humans the norm and crown of creation in a way that diminishes the other beings in the community of creation. This is not a question of sameness but a recognition of value.<sup>8</sup>

In aiming to affirm and promote the spiritual equality of all people, this project cannot then rest on other harmful hierarchical models of thought. Instead, it is important to seek out all voices pushed to the margins, not just women's.

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<sup>8</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: towards a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 20.

In the process of compiling this anthology, women from all different backgrounds wrote, drew, mused, and painted their stories. As they did so, they inevitably brought their own brilliant light into the project. As much as this is a search for our mother's stories, it is truly a search for our own. Women not only have a valuable spiritual perspective, but also a drive to share it. Yet we are still often faced with communities that continues to draw us a short hand. There is so much work still to do. In the meantime, we will continue in search of our stories.

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