

Bonus Chapter 1
Women and the Judeo-Christian Tradition

Introduction

Is the Bible for or against women's equality? Whether or not you come from the Christian tradition, this debate will affect every reader because many political leaders rely on the Bible in determining their actions. For example, Presidential candidates such as Mike Huckabee openly speak about his own faith: "the former pastor urged Americans to focus on faith, arguing that the Bible is mightier than the ballot box and that prayer is more powerful than politics..." Ultimately the hope for this country is not in the politicians; it's in the pews of our churches" (cited on www.mikehuckabee.com). Because the Bible has influenced Western society in such a sweeping manner, it is critical that we look at the role of women in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.

In this political and social context, is the Bible for or against women's equality? Some would argue that the Bible is against. In the *Conservapedia* website, the reader finds anti-feminist language in St. Paul's famous lines in Ephesians 5:22-24: "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything." However, this website's entry on "anti-feminism" does not include any quotes from the Gospels—which are the four different versions of Jesus' life (www.conservapedia.com).

In the male-dominated era of the Bible, women appear rarely in the book. A recent study finds that 93 women speak in the Bible, with a total of 14,056 words spoken—around 1.1% of the total words of the total. Noting how these women had been silenced, the researcher states that "We have for whatever reason overlooked the witness of women in the Bible for all these

thousands of years and all the contributions they've made to the faith and to world history... We are just finally finding out their stories" (Freeman cited in Blumberg, 2015, no page). These stories resonate with a deep power that can move readers of any faith tradition.

Feminists and the Bible

Can the feminists save the Bible from patriarchal interpretations that perpetuate the subordination of women? One feminist theologian expresses this question in her article title "If the Bible's so patriarchal, how come I love it?" (Trible, 1992).

Not only is Judaism patriarchal, it is also monotheistic. The story of early Judaism, then, is the story of the fight against other deities than the one God—including goddesses. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore the transition from ancient religions. It is noteworthy, though, to point out that this transition resulted in a diminished status for women. Fiorenza (1998) uses the term "kyriarchal" instead of "patriarchal" to describe Biblical society because of the stress on an elite lord and master (Fiorenza 1998, p. 87). For centuries, Christian men silenced women through religious control. She claims that "In Western though wo/men have been seen as the source of all evil and the fountain of all falsehood. Beginning with the Pastoral Epistles, the sin of Eve looms large in the arguments against wo/men's leadership and for wo/men's second-class citizenship" (Fiorenza, 1998, p. 31).

Tertullian, an Early Church Father, is widely quoted for linking women with the world's first sinner, Eve. Because she allowed herself to be tempted by the Devil and then tempted Adam, she symbolizes the weak nature of females. If a woman were faithful to God, she should not wear fancy clothes but:

Rather to affect meanness of appearance, walking about as Eve mourning and repentant, in order that by every garb of penitence she might the more fully expiate that which she derives from Eve,— the ignominy, I mean, of the first sin, and the odium (attaching to her as the cause) of human perdition. In pains and in anxieties do you bear (children), woman; and toward your husband (is) your inclination, and he lords it over you. And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. *You* are the devil's gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: *you* are the first deserter of the divine law: *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of *your* desert— that is, death— even the Son of God had to die. (Tertullian, On the Apparel of Women, website newadvant.org)

Despite the legacy of Tertullian and other misogynists, many feminists claim that the Bible is not the source of patriarchy, and that if the reader remove the stories themselves from the historical context of the time period, one can see the Bible as less misogynistic. This type of “active reading” is encouraged by the following historian. (Frymer-Kensky, 2002, p. xxv).

It is important to get the facts straight: though patriarchy preexisted the Bible, the Bible was not written to construct it. Readers can accept the Bible's moral stature without conforming to the patriarchal social structure within it. At the same time, there is no ignoring the fact that even though the Bible did not create patriarchy, it also did not eliminate it. The Bible did not question the patriarchy in the social structure it shared with the rest of the ancient world, just as it did not question another glaring social inequality, slavery (Ibid, p. xiv).

Reading the Bible as a collection of stories can deepen one's understanding of humanity. Frymer-Kensky urges the Bible reader to understand that "From their beginning and throughout their transmission, they have been means to express our ideas about community, identity, and spirituality" (Ibid, p. 350).

(Box One)

Don't Forget the Goddesses!

Before the Judeo-Christian faith traditions began, of course, other religions prevailed. In the classic work *When God Was a Woman*, Stone (1976) presents the archaeological evidence of ancient goddesses.

The deification and worship of the female divinity in so many parts of the ancient world were variations on a theme, slightly differing versions of the same basic theological beliefs, those that originated in the earliest periods of human civilization. It is difficult to grasp the immensity and significance of the extreme reverence paid to the Goddess of either twenty-five thousand (as the Upper Paleolithic evidence suggests) or even seven thousand years and over miles of land, cutting across national boundaries and vast expanses. Yet it is vital to do just that to fully comprehend the longevity as well as the widespread power and influence this religion once held. (Stone, 1976, p. 23)

In most societies that worshipped goddesses, the status of women was equal or sometimes even superior to the men's status. For example, the Greek historian Herodotus wrote of Egyptian women conducting business in the city while "the husbands stay home and weave." (cited in Stone, 1976, p. 36). Matrilineal (family name and inheritance through the mother)

instead of patrilineal customs enabled many women to be more independent in both the marketplace and family.

However, Navarro and Sanchez Korrol (1999) remind us that goddess worship is not synonymous with women's equality or superior status. "Gender complementarity," such as the Incans in South America, emphasized the fertility of goddesses (Navarro & Sanchez Korrol, 1999, p. xii). For the Aztecs, "Almost half of the Mexica calendar was dedicated to goddesses. The Aztecs had numerous goddesses identified with fertility, nourishment and agriculture....Despite the centrality of goddesses to Aztec religion, however, women played a secondary role in public religious ritual..." (Navarro & Sanchez Korrol, 1999, p. 13).

Writers such as Tate (2008) still find meaning in the concept of the "Sacred Feminine" (Tate, 2008, p. 45). In describing a dream she had before a trip to explore the ancient goddess sites, she writes:

But more than just symbols representing ideas, the dream was making a statement about the tenacity of Goddess within the world....Patriarchy has attempted over thousands of years to totally obliterate knowledge and worship of Goddess from the center of the world stage, yet it has failed and she has endured, albeit a shadow of her former potency. Seeing the horn in the dream revealed it had been badly damaged and was made of twisted metal. It was obviously badly weathered, perhaps by time and adversity, but it remained standing as she still remains with us (Tate, 2008, p. 47).

In the recent past, a sacred poem that stresses female divinity was found at the Nag Hammadi archeological site. This poem, translated by George W. MacRae, is related to the Gnostic Gospels that have intrigued scholars since their discovery in 1945.

I was sent forth from the power,
and I have come to those who reflect upon me,
and I have been found among those who seek after me.
Look upon me, you who reflect upon me,
and you hearers, hear me.
You who are waiting for me, take me to yourselves.
And do not banish me from your sight...
Hear me, you hearers
and learn of my words, you who know me.
I am the hearing that is attainable to everything;
I am the speech that cannot be grasped.
I am the name of the sound
and the sound of the name (cited in Robinson, 1990).

Discussion Questions

- In your opinion, is focusing on the “Sacred Feminine” a way to empower women? Why or why not?
- How important is female-centered spirituality to you?
- Do other faith traditions such as Buddhism or Sikhism value women as equals? How would you research that question?

(End Box One)

Overview of Women in the Hebrew Scriptures

Like other ancient cultures, the Jewish people did not regard females as persons with rights but as property. The Tenth Commandment, for instance, states: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” (Exodus 20:17, NRSV). While the Commandment, as stated in Deuteronomy lists the “wife” as the first in the laundry list of items, the mere fact that the wife is listed among other mere pieces of property suggests that she herself is no greater than an ox or a donkey.

Having just one “wife” was often discouraged because like all other property, the more the better. King Solomon’s 700 wives typifies this norm. Concubines (sexual servants) were another social tradition, with King Solomon also having the most recorded: 300 concubines. However, women were not allowed to be polygamous themselves. Quite the contrary- a woman who had more than one sexual partner was subject to being stoned to death. Even when it came to divorcing, men had the advantage because only they could initiate divorces.

The Hebrew Scriptures contain many indications of women’s inferiority to men, including the passage in Leviticus (27:6) that stated that female infants were worth three shekels but male infants were worth five shekels. Census counts often did not include females (Numbers 3:15). In fact, females who were sold into slavery faced a lifetime of bondage while their male counterparts were free after six years. (Exodus 21: 2-4). In this culture, women could not enter the sacred temple or inherit property.

However, the laws in the 21st chapter of Exodus also indicate that the status of women was not entirely subordinate to men. According to the Religious Tolerance website, the owner of an ox that had gored a woman would have to pay the same penalty as if she were a man

(www.religioustolerance.org). Biblical scholars also indicate that famous leaders such as Deborah were signs that the culture sometimes supported strong women.

Scholars who emphasize a higher position for Hebrew women include Meyers (1999). In early Israel, women were not only mothers but essential members of the family who contributed to its economic survival. The setting was a harsh desert. In this “pioneer society,” women were almost equal to men because they “exerted control over significant tasks and over numbers of persons” (Meyers, 1999, p. 40).

Eve and Lilith

For centuries, theologians have used the story of Eve as an example of the moral inferiority of women. In the Book of Genesis, Eve was made from Adam’s rib and later tempted him to sin. Saint Augustine wrote, “What is the difference whether it is in a wife or a mother, it is still Eve the temptress that we must beware of in any woman... I fail to see what use woman can be to man, if one excludes the function of bearing children” (cited on www.biblewheel.com).

Tertullian, one of the Church Fathers, wrote that God had cursed Eve—and all women--because she was the “devil’s gateway” who tempted Adam into sin. “In pain shall you bring forth children, woman, and you shall turn to your husband and he shall rule over you” (cited on www.biblewheel.com). This popular attitude (that women were born to suffer) affected the medical establishment’s refusal to use anesthesia for childbirth when it was first introduced. Since the Bible stated that women should suffer giving birth, then it was against the will of God to give them any painkillers.

In contrast to the diatribes against Eve, Sojourner Truth wrote a great rebuttal to those who used Eve as an excuse to degrade women:

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman. Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them (text of Ain't I a woman? Speech available on www.feminist.com).

Scholars dispute the simplistic interpretation of Eve as a sinful temptress. For example, Sloane (2012) writes that the story is “one of fundamental equality, which is marred by sin, so that hierarchy is a sign of disorder, of the disharmony that sin (is and) generates” (Sloane, 2012, p. 2). Another angle is presented by Sabo (2002), who analyzes Jewish texts for this interpretation:

It is here (after the Fall) that the woman is first named. Up until now she has been merely isha, the one ‘from man’. If one knew the tradition before reading the narrative, a name reflective of the accusations against her might be expected. Instead, her name is Chava, which we transliterate as Eve, and which means ‘life’. Further, it was noted by the Rabbis that her name is also a cognate of the Hebrew for ‘to declare’, which led them to assign to her the role of adviser to Adam.

The image of Eve, both from Scripture and from tradition, Jewish as well as Christian, is far from simple. She is both mother and seductress, temptress and advisor. As we have seen, however, the earliest tradition calls her mother before all else. The fall from innocence is not solely her responsibility, nor is it clear that Adam is any less to blame (Sabo, 2002, no page).

Another interpretation of Eve emphasizes that the Hebrew word “helper” does not imply subordination—“and, in fact, the word is used mostly of God” (White, 2014, no page). In fact, Biblical archeologists have found evidence that “Everyday Eves” lived much different lives than described in the Bible.

If Eve is a multi-layered character, so is her counterpart Lilith. She is only mentioned once in the Hebrew Scriptures as a prophet. But in folklore, she is called Adam’s first wife who was created the same day and from the same material as him. In Genesis, there are actually two creation stories: Eve and the rib, and “Man and woman he created him.” (Genesis 1:27) So Lilith’s supporters would stress the second story (Cantor, 1983).

According to ancient Jewish tradition, Lilith was not a submissive woman:

After the Holy One created the first human being, Adam, He said: “It is not good for Adam to be alone.” He created a woman, also from the earth, and called her Lilith.

They quarreled immediately. She said: “I will not live below you.” He said, I will not lie below you, but above you. For you are fit to be below me and I above you.”

She responded: “We are both equal because we both come from the earth.”

Neither listened to the other. When Lilith realized what was happening, she pronounced the Ineffable Name of God and flew off into the air.

Adam rose in prayer before the Creator, saying, “The woman you gave me has fled from me.” Immediately the Holy One sent three angels after her.

The Holy One said to Adam: “If she wants to return, all the better. If not, she will have to accept that one hundred of her children will die every day.”

The angels went after her, finally locating her in the sea, in the powerful waters in which the Egyptians were destined to perish. They told her what God had said, and she did not want to return. Alphabet of Ben Sira (23A-B)—cited in Cantor, 1983, p. 40)

One Jewish feminist, Aviva Cantor, writes of Lilith's power. "Not only does Lilith immediately recognize tyranny for what it is, but she immediately resists it, too. Nowhere do we see her complain (as Adam does); she states her case and takes risks for her dignity. She is courageous and decisive, willing to accept the consequences of her action" Cantor adds that Lilith's knowledge of the Ineffable Name shows that she also had spiritual power (Ibid, p. 42)).

Legend tells of a more rageful Lillith. In this version, she became a demon who harms reproduction by killing off new mothers and newborns. She also takes sperm away from men to create her own children. Cantor speculates that these accusations, written during the Exile in which the Jewish people were worried about their people dying out, symbolized the fear of women who refuse to submit to men or bear their children.

Although some saw Lilith as a demon, others regard her as a heroine who asserted herself. The Lilith Fair, for instance, was a concert series in the 1990s that promoted female-only musicians. Wiccans and other non-traditional practitioners have honored Lilith in their rites.

Discussion Questions

- Why would the story of Lilith be more appealing than the story of Eve?
- What is your reaction to the statements that because Eve tempted Adam, all women are sinful and should suffer? Do you see any traces of this attitude today?

Story of Esther

Esther, whose name means “Star,” is an inspirational figure to the exiled Jews who had been living under oppressive regimes for centuries. The Jewish holiday of Purim celebrates her story. The story begins with the ruler of Persia, Xerxes and his unhappiness with his queen, Vashanit, who had refused to parade her beauty for the guests. Weems (1988) writes that women should focus on the story of Vashti, who had openly defied the king and may have been executed for this bold action.

Responding to such a debasing request would not have served the public interest and, evidently, would have violated the queen’s sense of propriety....Something more was at stake in the king’s request than the queen’s personal comfort. Queen Vashti found nothing flattering in her husband’s desire to show off her beauty before his drunken guests. She refused, even in the face of banishment, to comply with his dehumanizing command” (Weems, 1988, p. 104).

Enraged by his Queen’s disobedience, Xerxes held a beauty contest to find a new wife for his harem. Esther wins the contest, but does not tell Xerxes that she is a Jew. Mordecai, who had been raising Esther, had told her to keep her Jewish identity a secret.

Before she could come to her new husband, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. The king had the right to send her back if he was not pleased with her appearance or her lovemaking. Fortunately, Xerxes was so pleased with Esther that he gave her the royal crown and made her the new queen.

Mordecai, though, had some bad news for Esther about two of the king’s advisers plotting against him. Esther warned her husband, who hanged the two men. Now he wanted

everyone to bow to him. This was against Mordecai's religious beliefs. He asked for an exception because he was a Jew, but this triggered the King's adviser to plan to kill all the Jews.

When Mordecai heard of this, he tore his clothes and wailed loudly and bitterly. There was great mourning among the Jews about this planned massacre. When Esther heard of this, she risked her life by visiting the King without being asked first. She said, "If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated" (Esther 7:3, NRSV). The King rescinded the order, thus sparing the Jewish people.

Discussion Questions

- Why do you think that this story is so popular in the Jewish faith?
- Which aspect of Esther is more important, her identity as a woman or her identity as a Jew? Does this question still affect women from different ethnic groups, such as Latinas?

(Box Two)

The Woman's Bible

In *The Woman's Bible* (first published 1895 and 1898), a group of scholars led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton disputed the misogynistic interpretations of the Bible with its own. In the introduction, Stanton writes that:

(some) invidious discriminations of sex are found in all religious organizations, and the most bitter outspoken enemies of woman are found among clergymen and bishops of the Protestant religion. The canon law, the Scriptures, the creeds and codes and church

discipline of the leading religions bear the impress of fallible man, and not of our ideal great cause, “the Spirit of all Good... (Stanton, 2002, p. 13).

After analyzing the scene in which Adam and Eve are ordered away from the Garden of Eden, the scholars make a provocative point about the curse on Eve to bear children in pain.

The curse pronounced on woman is inserted in an unfriendly spirit to justify her degradation and subjection to man. With obedience to the laws of health, diet, dress, and exercise, the period of maternity should be one of added vigor to both body and mind, a perfectly natural operation should not be attended with suffering. By the observance of physical and psychological laws the supposed curse can be easily transformed into a blessing. Some churchmen speak of maternity as a disability, and then chant the Magnificat in all their cathedrals round the globe. Through all life’s shifting scenes, the mother of the race has been the greatest factor in civilization (Ibid, p. 25).

With passages like these, it is not surprising that critics would call the book Satanic.

Even among other feminists, the book was seen as too provocative and could be used as a way to discredit the suffragette movement. This book has its limitations, though. Biblical scholarship was primitive in the late nineteenth century, so many observations in this book are dated.

Fiorenza (1998) also points out that Stanton and her cohort were white, middle-class and Christian. The book’s critique of the Jewish attitude toward women, for example, appears antisemitic in the modern age.

Discussion Question

Why was it so important for Stanton and her cohort to write their own interpretation of the Bible regarding women’s lives?

(End Box Two)

Lot's Daughters

Two women who have received less recognition but could still be regarded as heroines are the daughters of Lot. Kirsch (1997) retells the story of how Lot and his family were staying in Sodom. Two male angels were his guests. When the Sodomites came to the gate of the house and demanded that they have sex with the two men, Lot refused. He instead offered his two virginal daughters to the crowd.

God decided to punish Sodom for its wickedness, but gave advance warning to Lot so he could flee with his wife and two daughters. They frantically ran away from the conflagration. Lot's wife, though, looks back upon the destruction and turns into a pillar of salt.

Now Lot and his daughters climb up a mountain and stay in a cave for protection. For weeks, it seems that it is the end of the world and they are the only ones left alive. Since the daughters believe that the human race would die out if they did not get pregnant, they make plans to get Lot drunk and get impregnated by him without his knowledge. The plans succeed, and the women are honored in the Bible as the mothers of the Moabite and Ammonite tribes.

After remarking on the fact that clergy do not condemn Lot's willingness to sacrifice his daughters to a mob, Kirsch discusses the historical setting of the story. In neighboring Egypt, incest was not taboo. He notes that God does not punish Lot and his daughters for the incest. Indeed, he uses the term "sacred incest" because the women were willing to do anything to help their race to survive. Without their bold actions, humanity was at risk of dying out.

Discussion Questions

- Do you agree with Kirsch that this was sacred incest that showed how determined the daughters were to save their race?
- Women's ability to procreate is of prime importance here. In this culture, what do you think happened to women who were infertile or married to an infertile man?

Story of Tamar

Kirsch also retells the story of Tamar, another woman honored in the Bible for her bold actions that broke the rules. She marries into the tribe of Judah. After her first husband dies, she must marry his brother according to Hebrew custom. Any sons she would bear to the brother would be the first heirs to Judah's legacy.

Onan, the second son, refuses to impregnate her because he does not want to lose his inheritance. God is offended by his action, so he also gets struck down. By now, Judah is afraid to let Tamar marry his third son. He sends her back to her father—a shameful gesture that is made even worse because she is still childless. Judah had violated God's law by not allowing her to marry the third son.

Tamar, then, has the right to bear children as a member of Judah's tribe. To claim this right, she dresses as a veiled harlot and stands by the road to wait for Judah. When he rides by, he does not recognize her as his daughter-in-law. She seduces him, gets pregnant, and claims his paternity for the child.

Tamar is honored not only by Judah (who does not sleep with her again, but supports her) but by the Biblical listing of her descendants. According to the Book of Matthew, she is directly related to Jesus. As Kirsch concludes:

So Tamar's sexual ambush of Judah on the road to Timnah was the act of a courageous and resourceful woman who refused to accept passively the fate that the patriarchy of ancient Israel decreed for a childless widow. She was not merely a seducer who tricked her father-in-law into giving her children by playing the harlot. Rather, she was a woman who stood up for her legal rights in the only manner available to a woman of her time and place (Kirsch, 1997, p. 137).

Discussion Questions

- Are you surprised by the fact that Judah is not judged for visiting a prostitute?
- The practice of widows marrying their brothers-in-law (levirate marriage) is still practiced in some African nations. What are the benefits and harm done by this practice?

Jezebel

The term "Jezebel" is still used today as an insult for a sexually promiscuous or deviously scheming woman. The prototype of the woman who leads her husband into sin is still in popular culture. For instance, Depeche Mode's "Jezebel" song includes the lyrics: "They call you Jezebel/whenever we walk in/you're going straight to hell/for wanted acts of sin, they say..."

The Biblical story of Jezebel is quite intriguing. As a young princess from Phoenicia, Jezebel had to move to northern Israel to marry the Jewish King Ahab. She persuaded her husband to worship Baal instead of the Hebrew God, and was seen as the power behind the throne. She represented sexual promiscuity and tyranny to her enemies. After her husband died, she influenced her son's kingship. Then the crowd attacked her and she was thrown out of the

window (not before she put on some nice clothes and make-up, though.) Dogs feasted on her remains.

Hazleton (2007) writes that the term “harlot” does not refer to sexual misconduct but the betrayal of one’s principles. “Harlotry and infidelity are two of the most powerful metaphors ever invented. The fact that they have maintained their impact over three thousand years is testament to their strength” (Hazleton, 2007, p. 66) The word “infidelity,” then, refers to both betraying one’s spouse and worshipping another god. Ezekiel, the prophet who denounced Jezebel, cried out that Yahweh (the Jewish god) would punish Israel as severely as would a husband with his unfaithful wife.

However, the term “Jezebel” and its related insults (slut, whore, etc.) is still a powerful weapon against women leaders. In the 2010 governor’s race in California, for example, Meg Whitman was called a “whore” by the staffer of her rival (Wing, 2010). This may be related to the traditional attitude as expressed in this quote from a Bible study website: “It has been said that “when a woman rules, the order of nature is inverted.” Ruling your husband is not God's plan and will never gain His approval” (www.thebiblestudypage.com). Hostility to women seen as Jezebels, then, continues in today’s society.

Jewish Feminism

The drive for women’s equality has affected many facets of Judaism in the U.S., including the ordination of 300 female rabbis since 1972 (Herschel, 2001). In the 1980s, feminists such as Adler (1983) considered the impact of male domination in Jewish law. Women, slaves, and children were not full Jews like men. “In other words, members of this category have been ‘excused’ from most of the positive symbols which, for the male Jew, hallow

time, hallow his physical being, and inform both his myth and his philosophy” (Adler, 1983, p.13).

Historically, then, Jewish women had a lesser status than men. Motherhood and self-sacrifice were the motifs for Jewish immigrant women, who were also expected to work outside the home to help support their families. Besides providing economic support, then, Jewish women continued their culture by teaching the younger children. The Jewish mother stereotype, who symbolizes overprotectiveness and an amazing ability to evoke guilt in her children, is one result of these demands on women (Duncan, 1983).

A female rabbi (Goldstein, 2009), reflecting on the influence of feminism on Jewish synagogues, writes of how women have expended their roles in worship. This has resulted in some theological changes, as noted in the quote below.

Our God concepts changed and, with them, our concepts of ourselves as Jews. We used a different language to describe the Divine; it came forth from birth and moon and mothering imagery and thus we began to wonder about what we looked like, made in that divine image. We began to write theology; we corrected the patriarchy of traditional Jewish thought and created our own brand that took into account not only feminist but also ecological and political concerns (Goldstein, 2009, p. xxii).

These changes have not been easy. Cherishing tradition while implementing reforms can result in conflicts. “Jewish feminists have striven to conserve while changing, to remain faithful to the tradition while questioning and adapting it. We sought to enrich and expand while holding on tight. What a balancing act! What a tightrope we have walked! (Ibid, pp. xxiii-xxiv).

Even the Orthodox Jews have been grappling with feminism (Ross, 2004). When somebody suggests a small change in a ceremony, for instance, a backlash may occur because

the “cultural haloes” are threatened (Ross, 2004, p. xv). However, yeshivas are opening up and women are forming their own groups to study the Torah. Not all women advocate for equality in the synagogue, though. For some, reading the Torah confirms their confidence in centuries-old traditions.

One Jewish feminist relates a story that illustrates the tension between tradition and modernism. As a college student, she attended a party commemorating a Jewish holiday. She watched the men dancing, then decided to join in. “I simply threw myself into the crowd of men and started dancing, too. A rabbinical student angrily grabbed me and demanded, Who gave you permission to dance?” Calmly, I replied, ‘God.’ He threw me out (Herschel, 2001, p xvi).

Was Jesus a Feminist?

Like the Hebrew Scriptures, the Christian Scriptures present questions for feminists. Would Jesus have supported full equality for women? For centuries, Christian theologians have stressed that none of the Apostles were women. (That is why the Roman Catholic Church and other institutions have refused to allow women to be priests or ministers.) Jesus also did not condemn Levirate marriages, in which widows must marry their brothers-in-law. He lived in a patriarchal society that stressed male leadership over treating women as persons—did he conform to the rules, or did he protest the unfair treatment of women?

Christian scholars would stress that the fact that women were even mentioned in the Gospels was critical, since females were often considered invisible. Jesus not only publicly talked to women but even had women students. He accepted women into his inner circle. In the story about the woman with the bleeding disorder who touched his robe to be healed, he ignored

the ritual impurity laws by allowing a woman with menstrual blood to touch him. He even talked to her instead of shunning her.

By referring to a woman as a “daughter of Abraham,” Jesus also broke with the tradition of only regarding men as spiritual persons. His restriction that neither men nor women could divorce meant that women were protected from abandonment by their husbands (which in Biblical times, could even mean death.) After he rose from the dead, women were the first to see him.

The Two Marys

The two most venerated women in the Christian Scriptures were Mary (his mother) and Mary Magdalene, who has been wrongly identified as the prostitute for centuries. Both women embodied strength. His mother risked her life by agreeing to be Jesus’ mother, since she was not yet married to Joseph and could have been stoned for having an out-of-wedlock pregnancy. The theme of the Virgin Mother (a woman without sin) combines with the theme of the Mother of the Church for Roman Catholics and other Christians.

For two thousand years, believers have experienced apparitions of Mary. Zimdars-Swatz (1991) writes of how many visions have come during a time of social disorder, such as the rise of communism.

On a personal level, Mary is seen as a tender and concerned mother who calls her children away from the brink of disaster and offers them safety and comfort under her sheltering mantle. On a social level, however, Mary is presented as the leader of a mighty army of spiritual warriors ready to do battle with the forces of evil” (Zimdars-Swatz, 1991, p. 19).

One of the most famous apparitions of Mary occurred in 1531 in Mexico, when a peasant was told by Mary to build a church on the site in Guadalupe. He went to the bishop, who did not believe him. He went back to the site of the apparition, where Mary told him to cut some roses and put them in his cloak for proof. When he opened his cloak for the bishop, though, there was a miraculous picture on his cloak. This image of the Lady of Guadalupe has touched many believers in Mexico and the rest of the world for centuries (Zimdars-Swatz, 1991).

Mary Magdalene, who has been wrongly identified as a prostitute for centuries, is another famous character in the Gospels. Jesus cast out seven demons from her, which indicates that she was a single woman rejected by society. Later, she was the first to see Jesus after the Resurrection. Medieval Christians honored her with the title “Apostle of the Apostles,” stressing that she was closest to Jesus. The controversial question of whether she had married Jesus continues today as Magdalene specialists discuss the importance of her role in Christianity. (Burstein & De Keijzer, 2006.)

Another intriguing aspect of Mary Magdalene is her symbolism as the “fallen woman” as contrasted with the eternally pure Virgin Mother. The term “Madonna/Whore” used to describe this split very well, until the popular singer Madonna gave us a different image of that term. The original term, Madonna, speaks of self-sacrifice and an amazing spiritual love combined with perfect motherhood. The “whore” term, as exemplified by Mary Magdalene’s tarnished image, stresses the weak nature of women who cannot control their passions. The Madonna is the only one who could save humanity from its sin by giving birth to Jesus, while the whore continued the tradition of Eve’s sinfulness and Jezebel’s evil ways.

Feminism and the Roman Catholic Church

Since the Roman Catholic Church is one of the largest religious institutions in the world, the Church's relationship with feminists deserves a brief overview. In 1972, when the new wave of feminists challenged U.S. social norms, the League of Catholic Religious Women (LCRW, once known as LCWR) adopted a pro-feminist stance. Since then LCRW, which represents 90% of Catholic nuns and sisters, has had several confrontations with the Vatican.

One notable Catholic feminist is Sister Joan Chittister. Asked many times how a woman like herself could stay in the Catholic Church, she responded with the story of an oyster in which she symbolizes the sand. "During the spawning season...when the sand invades the oyster, the oyster emits a gel to protect itself from the sand....The more sand that comes in, the more gel is excreted. So at the end of the process...you have a pearl (and) and oyster is more valuable." In her role as the sand, then, "I discovered the ministry of irritation" (Bonavoglia, 2005, p. 7).

Besides the Church's opposition to artificial birth control (i.e., hormonal and barrier methods but not the natural method), the Church's refusal to ordain women as priests has stirred controversy for decades. In a 1976 document, "Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood," the Vatican stated that "women could not be ordained because women's very nature as females disqualifies them" (Radford Ruether, 2008, p. 83). One of the reasons cited against ordination was that Christ was a male. "The maleness of Christ is not simply a social accident, but intrinsic to the representation of Christ (who represents God the Father)" (Radford Ruether, 2008, p. 84).

In his passionate call to reform the Church, Kung (2013) writes that:

A Church paternalistically committed to a stereotypical idea of women, to the use of exclusively masculine language, and to pre-defined gender roles can hardly be saved; but a Church based on partnership, combining office and charism (gift) and accepting the

participation of women in all ecclesial offices, can indeed survive and flourish again (Kung, 2013, p. 333).

Feminism in Protestant Churches

Although several Christian denominations have ordained female ministers (e.g., Anglican Catholics), others have rejected the idea. In her books, Aldredge-Clanton (2007) writes of her experience as a feminist Baptist minister in Texas. At her ordination, she wept ““tears of sadness over the hundreds of years my sisters had been denied this sacred blessing....I wept for my sisters in all faiths who were still denied this blessing” (Aldredge-Clanton, 2007, p. 2). Later, she was shunned by many for being ordained, and called a heretic for calling God a “she.”

As the author of books about the Christ-Sophia (the feminine symbol of Wisdom), she describes her vision of a Christianity that honors women as well as men.

By symbolizing partnership, Christ-Sophia offers new possibilities for relationships. The name ‘Christ-Sophia’ suggests a connecting bridge between Christianity and Judaism by linking Christ, the resurrected deity of the Christian Scriptures, and Wisdom (Sophia), a personification of deity in the Hebrew Scriptures. Christ-Sophia symbolizes the equal relationship between male and female in that the name ‘Christ’ has traditionally denoted male divinity, and ‘Sophia’ denotes female divinity (Ibid, p. 4).

The Church of the Latter-Day Saints (commonly known as Mormons) also grapple with the idea of women’s equality. Kline (2014) describes how the theology does not blame Eve for the first sin as do other Christian churches. Women’s subordination is not based on the perception of male superiority but on the complementarity of two genders.

Mormon feminist must contend with the threat of excommunication from the Church, a troubling punishment for those whose families and lives are based in Mormonism. For example, Sonia Johnson was excommunicated in 1981 for her support of the Equal Rights Amendment. Since then, many other women have faced this version of social death. One woman, interviewed for a Frontline documentary, tells the story of facing a panel of sixteen men. Although they were nice to her, “There’s something vicious about niceness that struck me in this –that niceness covered over the violence of what was being done, because, in fact, excommunication is a violent action. And yet you had this veneer of niceness that covers it over. That was horrifying to me (cited in George, 2013, p. 55).

Discussion Questions

- Which social work value best applies to this chapter? Write a paragraph explaining the connection.
- What was the most striking aspect of this chapter? Discuss its importance to your understanding of feminism and/or cultural competence.

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