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**MARY MAGDALENE
THE APOSTLE:** The Bible never says she was a prostitute; in fact, she may have been Christ's trusted confidante. But was she his wife? Probably not, scholars say.

The Penitent Magdalene, by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1654-1710)

FUELING FAITH AND IGNITING DEBATE, A NEW GENERATION OF SCHOLARS IS ALTERING OUR BELIEFS ABOUT THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE SCRIPTURES

The Bible's Lost Stories

BY BARBARA KANTROWITZ AND ANNE UNDERWOOD

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HE YEAR'S SURPRISE "IT" GIRL IS the star of a mega best seller, a hot topic on campuses and rumored to be the "special friend" of a famous and powerful man. Yet she's still very much a woman of mystery. For close to 2,000 years, Christians have known her as Mary Magdalene, but she was probably named Miriam, and came from the fishing village of Magdala. Most people today grew up believing she was a harlot saved by

Jesus. But the Bible never says that. Scholars working with ancient texts now believe she was one of Christ's most devoted followers, perhaps even his trusted confidante and financial backer. This revisionist view helped inspire the plot of "The Da Vinci Code," which has been on The New York Times best-seller list for 36 weeks, with 4.3 million copies in print. Author Dan Brown draws on some credible discoveries about the first followers of Jesus as well as some rather fantastical theories about Mary Magdalene to suggest that she was far more than the first to witness the risen Jesus (her most important role, according to the New Testament). The blockbuster novel has enraged many theologians who consider it anti-Catholic, but it has also added new force to an already dynamic debate among women who see Magdalene's story as a parable for



EVE UNVEILED: Scholars say the apple is a myth; the Scriptures do not name the forbidden fruit
Detail from "Eve" by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528)

their own struggles to find a place in the modern church. None of this would be possible without a new generation of women Biblical scholars who have brought a very modern passion to the ancient tradition of scriptural reinterpretation—to correct what these scholars regard as a male misreading of key texts. It has not been easy work. Despite the undeniably central role of Mary, the mother of Jesus, the Biblical focus has largely been on what God has accomplished through the agency of men—from Adam to the Apostles. Of some 3,000 characters named in the Bible, fewer than 10 percent are women. Female scholars are trying to redress the imbalance by unearthing narratives that have been overlooked for centuries and reinterpreting more-familiar stories, including Mary Magdalene's and even the story of Eve (where, one could argue, the problems really began). And they are rigorously studying the Biblical period to glean what they can about the role of women in ancient times.

ACROSS THE COUNTRY, FRESH RESEARCH is inspiring women of all faiths. Evangelical Protestant women hold their own Bible-study groups where the distaff version of history is a major draw. Jewish worshippers now add to the litany of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob the names of their wives: Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel. In addition to Moses at Passover, some celebrate his sister, Miriam, who defied a powerful and tyrannical ruler to rescue her baby brother from a death decree and became a prophet and leader in her own right. For Roman Catholics in particular, Mary Magdalene has emerged as a role model for women who want a greater church presence after the wave of sexual-abuse scandals. "I want my daughter to feel that she is as equally valued as her brother in terms of her faith," says Dr. Jo Kelly, 38, of Sinking Spring, Pa. Not long ago, Kelly's daughter, Mary Shea, 7, told her mother she wanted to be a priest. Kelly, a pediatrician who belongs to a religious-discussion group, didn't discourage her. "Keep believing that," she replied, "and maybe we can change people's minds."

Mary Magdalene inspires, these women say, because she was not a weakling—the weeping Magdalene whose name begat the English word "maudlin"—but a person of strength and character. In an era when women were commonly identified in relation to a husband, father or brother, she was identified instead by her town of origin. Scholars believe she was one of a number of women who provided monetary support for Jesus' ministry. And when the male disciples fled, she steadfastly witnessed Jesus' crucifixion, burial and resurrection, providing the thread of continuity in the central story of Christian history—an extraordinary role in an age when women generally provided legal testimony only in the absence of male witnesses. Tradition, however, has consigned Mary to a lesser role. "Instead, we've been given the image of Mary as a forgiven sinner," says Sister Christine Schenk, cofounder of FutureChurch, an organization calling for women's equality in the Roman Catholic Church. "Well, Peter was a forgiven sinner, too, but that's not what we remember him for." Schenk helped institute nationwide observances of Mary Magdalene's feast day, July 22.

To honor their heroine, Catholic women like Kathy Kidder and her friends in Gainesville, Fla., are forming reading groups to discuss the dozens of new scholarly and literary books about her and debating her role on religious Web sites like Magdalene.org

A Chorus of New Voices

WOMEN OF ALL AGES AND FAITHS ARE finding renewed inspiration in ancient texts, in part because of the work of Biblical scholars. The researchers' insights demonstrate the importance of women in the formation of early Christianity—a finding that inspires women who want to play a bigger role in today's Protestant and Roman Catholic churches.

THE HISTORIAN: Harvard's Karen King (right) uses early Christian writings to flesh out a more complete portrait of Mary Magdalene's role at the time of Jesus



ROLE MODELS TO ADMIRE: Members of a women's group at St. Peter the Fisherman Church in Eagle River, Wis., portray Catholic heroines from Biblical and modern times for school groups



A CHANCE FOR THEIR DAUGHTERS: Dr. Jo Kelly (center) and her friend Mary Megna (right) want Jessica Megna (left) and Mary Shea Kelly-Buckley (seated) to feel comfortable in the church



REVISING THE RECORD: Lisa Bellevie (with her son, Zinn) started the Web site Magdalene.org to spread the word. It's now attracting thousands of hits a day.



HER OWN CAUSE: Inspired by Magdalene, Maggie Albo (above) got the Diocese of Spokane to provide cemetery space for unclaimed bodies



RECALLING ANCIENT STORIES: These members of a women's reading group at St. Augustine Church in Gainesville, Fla., are on a mission to learn as much as they can about the roles of women in Biblical times

and Beliefnet.com. The new insights they gain can shatter old beliefs, but often also help them deepen their faith. College student Frances Garcia, 26, of Orlando, Fla., was raised Catholic, but now attends a Baptist church. "The Da Vinci Code" raised troubling questions for her about how women's contributions to early Christianity were suppressed by church leaders. "My faith was really shaken," she says. "I started doing a lot of research on my own." Learning more made her feel "closer to God," she says.

What started out as scholarship with an openly feminist political agenda has evolved into serious and respected inquiry. To understand this change, consider what has happened to the field during the career of Bernadette Brooten. As a graduate theology student at Harvard in the late 1970s, Brooten was told that scholars already knew everything there was to know about women in the Bible. Yet Brooten, now a professor of Christian studies at Brandeis University, made the remarkable discovery by reading older versions of the Bible that Junius, one of the many Christian "Apostles" mentioned by Saint Paul, was in fact a woman, Junia, whose name was masculinized over the centuries by translators with their own agenda. Brooten's discovery became "official" when Junia's real name was incorporated into the New Standard Revised Version of the Bible, which came out in 1989.

Today, there are female Biblical scholars at dozens of institutions, and at least two universities—Harvard and the Claremont Graduate University in California—offer degree programs on women in religion. These scholars have produced a new dictionary called "Women in Scripture," a woman's study Bible, and feminist commentaries to various books of the New Testament and early Christian literature. "There are increasing numbers of resources concerning Biblical women that are making their way into libraries, classrooms and bookstores," says Amy-Jill Levine, professor of New Testament studies at Vanderbilt University Divinity School. "They're no longer just cleaned up or romanticized stories, but rigorously historical, imaginative, cross-cultural collections." These insights are also filtering out into popular culture with a slew of literary interpretations of women's Bible stories in the wake of Anita Diamant's 1997 best seller, "The Red Tent," including many about Mary Magdalene.

The fascination with Magdalene has a long and rich history of its own. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, a cultural historian at



JUDITH THE CONQUEROR: The most striking protofeminist heroine in Scripture. When Israel was threatened, she killed the enemy general Holofernes and took his head home in a bag.

Judith and Holofernes, by a follower of Cristofano Allari (1577-1621)

Georgetown University, curated an exhibit last year of Magdalene portraits at the American Bible Society in New York. "She's gone through conflations and misinterpretations and reinterpretations and retrievals," she says. "I've seen her represented in every medium of art through every Christian period—as the witness to the Resurrection, the seductive temptress, the haggard desert mother signifying penitence, the beautiful woman reborn signifying new life." But for most people, the image that sticks is the rehabilitated prostitute. Scholars blame Pope Gregory the Great for her bad rep; in A.D. 591, he gave a sermon in which he apparently combined several Biblical women into one, including Magdalene and an unnamed sinner who anoints Jesus' feet. Although the Vatican officially overruled Gregory in 1969, the image stuck until quite recently. "It became a snowball that grew and grew until her name

The ferocious warrior-heroine Judith is 'like Wonder Woman, only Jewish,' says one scholar



HAGAR THE HANDMAIDEN: Hispanic and African-American women have identified with Hagar. God promised Abraham many offspring. His childless wife, Sarah, suggested that Hagar be the mother.

Sarah Presents Hagar to Abraham by Victor Orsol (1705-1050)

in legend and art history evoked the whore," says Jane Schaberg, professor of religious studies at the University of Detroit Mercy and author of "The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene."

Part of the problem may stem from what scholars have called "the muddle of the Marys." There are a lot of women named Mary in the New Testament, and it's not always clear which is which.

BUT SOME SCHOLARS ALSO THINK MARY Magdalene was defamed because she was a threat to male control of the church. As the "Apostle to the Apostles"—the first to encounter the risen Christ and to take the news to Peter and the other male Apostles—she was clearly more than just an ordinary follower. In several Gnostic Gospels—written by Christians whose alternative views of Jesus were eventually suppressed as heresy—Mary Magdalene rivals Peter for the leadership of the early church because of her superior understanding of Jesus' teaching. The Gospel of Philip, for example, describes her as Jesus' close companion whom he often "used to kiss." Karen King of Harvard Divinity School, author of "The Gospel of Mary of Magdala" and a leading authority on women's roles in the early church, sees her as a target of jealousy because she threatened Peter's status. By

transforming her into a reformed whore, King believes, the church fathers "killed the argument for women's leadership"—and for recognizing women as fit recipients of divine revelation. King says the transformation also created a powerful symbol of the prostitute as redeemed sinner, the female version of the Prodigal Son. If Jesus could accept her, he could accept anyone.

In "The Da Vinci Code," Brown suggests that she still had one more hold on Jesus—as his wife. That theory has been circulating for centuries. Some historians think it is possible because Jewish men of that era were almost always married, but many others dismiss that reasoning. Some argue that Jesus wasn't conventional in any other sense, so why would he feel the need to be married? Others say that relegating her to the role of wife is belittling. "Let's not continue the relentless denigration of Mary Magdalene by reducing her only importance to a sexual connection with Jesus," says John Dominic Crossan, professor emeritus of religious studies at DePaul University in Chicago. "She's not important because she was Mrs. Jesus. That's like saying Hillary Rodham Clinton is only important because she's married to Bill Clinton. Both women are important in their own right."

That's certainly true for the women who see in Mary Magdalene's rediscovered importance a pathway to their own new roles in the church. Mary Magdalene's story

gave Maggie Albo, a 49-year-old volunteer hospice chaplain from Spokane Valley, Wash., the courage to lobby the Diocese of Spokane for space in local Catholic cemeteries to bury abandoned remains from the county medical examiner's office. "Mary has taught me to step out in faith to do the work of Jesus," she says. "I aspire to be a Mary of Magdala ... a woman unafraid to speak up."

Mary Magdalene is not the only Biblical heroine to benefit from a modern makeover. A number of scholars have gone back to the original Hebrew texts for a clearer understanding of Eve, the original woman in the Bible. The popular conception of Eve is the product of centuries of myth and artistic interpretation. One widely held misconception is that the fruit Eve offered Adam in the Garden of Eden was an apple. In fact, scholars say, the Bible never states that. "Just because Milton mentions it in 'Paradise Lost' or some Renaissance painter puts it in a picture doesn't make it an apple," says Carol Meyers, professor of Biblical studies at Duke. Meyers says that not only is the apple missing from the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis, but there is also no mention of the words "the temptation of Adam," "seduction," "curse of Eve," "Fall of Man," "sin" or "original sin." And yet the Creation story has traditionally been the basis for the argument that women are responsible for sin and should therefore be subservient to men. This error "has

oppressed both women and men," says Phyllis Trible, professor of Biblical studies at Wake Forest University, "because the master-slave relationship isn't a relationship of freedom for either party." Trible gives a more egalitarian rendering of a passage that has long troubled many women readers. When God tells Eve "Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you," Trible sees a patriarchy turning description into prescription. In the original Hebrew, Trible insists, "it doesn't say he shall rule over you. It just says he does rule over you—a description of the way things are."

In the ancient cultures where the Bible was formed, men did indeed rule over women. They owned and sold them, often as slaves. One slave in particular, Hagar, has captured the imagination of contemporary Hispanic and African-American women. Just as women's perspective is not necessarily the same as men's, minority women do not necessarily share the same perspective as white women. According to the Bible, God promises Abraham land and a multitude of offspring. But because he and

his childless wife, Sarah, are old, Sarah suggests that he father a child with Hagar, her Egyptian handmaiden. After a son is born, Hagar feels superior to the jealous Sarah, who in turn abuses her handmaiden—forcing Abraham to send Hagar away. Eventually God addresses Hagar directly (the first woman after Eve so honored), names her child Ishmael and encourages her to return. Later, Sarah also conceives and, at the age of 90, delivers Isaac, through whom Jews claim their spiritual lineage to Abraham. Hagar's has always been the lost voice in this narrative, but no longer. "Her character resonates by ethnicity and class—as an African and a slave," says Renita Weems, an associate professor of the Hebrew Bible at Vanderbilt Divinity School. "And we understand slaves." Similarly, Megan McKenna, author of several books on Biblical women, found that the figure of Hagar powerfully appealed to the Hispanic maids in her Bible-reading group at a California motel. She remembers one illegal immigrant from El Salvador saying in halting English: "Oh, now Sarah knows what it's like to be treated like dirt all the time."



Decoding 'The Da Vinci Code'

For millions, the phenomenal best seller is their introduction to the arcane and mysterious 'shadow history' of the early church. Herewith, an attempt to separate truth from fiction.

Did Leonardo include Mary Magdalene in his "Last Supper"? Most art scholars say no. The figure reputed to be Mary Magdalene is actually the beloved disciple John, who is usually depicted young and clean-shaven.

Were Jesus and Mary M. married? Although there is no way to prove or disprove this, most experts consider it highly unlikely. Their main argument: there is no mention of it in canonical writings.

Was Mary M. a prostitute? This misperception probably began with a sermon by Pope Gregory the Great in A.D. 591 in which he conflated several figures into one. In 1969 the Vatican officially overruled Gregory.



MYSTERY GUEST: Is that a woman to Christ's right in 'The Last Supper'?

What happened to Mary M. after the Resurrection? Nobody knows. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, she went to Turkey. A Western legend says she went to Provence.

Is there a secret cache of documents that reveal the true history of Christianity? No one knows, but scholars are busy analyzing ancient

documents found in Egypt in the last century. These texts, known as the Gnostic Gospels, were lost for centuries, and could shed new light on the origins of the church.

Did Leonardo hide clues about church secrets in his paintings? Art historians doubt it.

HOLY GRAIL? Chalice in the National Gallery

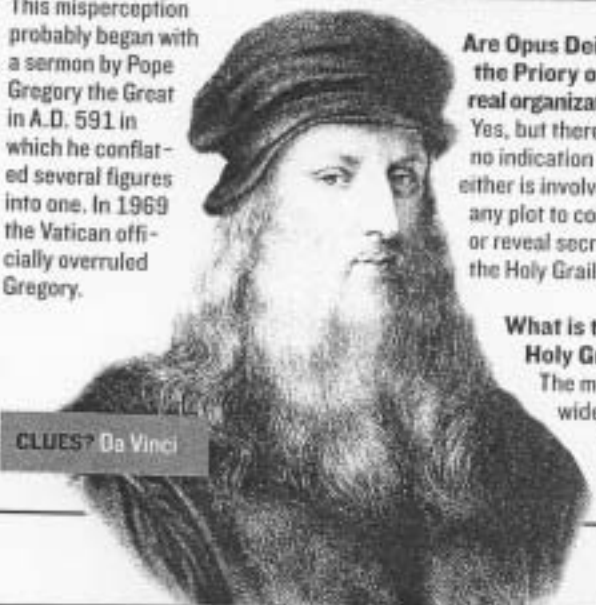


Are Opus Dei and the Priory of Sion real organizations? Yes, but there is no indication that either is involved in any plot to conceal or reveal secrets of the Holy Grail.

What is the Holy Grail? The most widely

accepted idea is that it was the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper. Others have hypothesized that it was a secret book. In the 12th century a French abbot claimed to possess it; his silver chalice now resides in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

Did male leaders cover up the true role of women in the early church? Yes, in the sense that history is written by the winners, and in a patriarchal society, men had a big edge.



CLUES? Da Vinci



MIRIAM THE PROPHET: Jewish women celebrate the story of the sister of Moses, who defied a tyrannical ruler to save her baby brother from a death decree. Later, she is at his side in the struggle for freedom as a prophet in her own right who leads only women through the Red Sea (above).

The Song of Miriam the Prophetess by William Gale (date unknown)

Equally appealing to modern women looking for inspiration are overlooked stories that celebrate the bravery of women. In the Book of Joshua, it is Rahab, a prostitute, who helps Joshua conquer Jericho by hiding his spies in her house. For her courage, she and her children are the only ones spared in the Israelites' sacking of the city. One of the most prominent warriors in the Book of Judges is Deborah, a military commander and judge who leads an army into battle because her general will not go without her. Deborah predicts that only a woman will capture the enemy leader, Sisera. That woman, it turns out, is Jael, into whose tent Sisera flees for refuge. Jael feeds him, puts him to bed and then, as he sleeps, picks up a mallet and drives a tent peg through his head.

PERHAPS THE MOST STRIKING PROTOFEMINIST text in Scripture is the Book of Judith, wholly devoted to a heroine who saves Israel. "She's like Wonder Woman, only Jewish," says Vanderbilt's Levine. Judith's moment comes as Israel is being threatened by a neighboring power. The male Jewish leadership prepares to surrender, but Judith, a beautiful and pious widow, has another plan. Dressed in her alluring best, she enters the enemy's camp. The general, Holofernes, becomes infatuated and plans to seduce her. But when she is alone in his chambers, Judith decapitates Holofernes and takes his head home in her food bag. The enemy flees. All of Israel, including Jerusalem and its temple, are saved, and Judith, whom scholars see as a personification of Israel, returns to her previous life.

The spotlight of new scholarship has even revealed the human side of the most revered female in Christianity—Mary, the mother of Christ. Next to her son, Mary is probably the best-known character in the Bible, but for many, she is an alabaster figure. Some theologians have been looking for a more multidimensional Madonna. "Let's stop treating her as this virgin mother we have no relationship with, that we can't touch and understand because she's so different from us," says Weems, author of "Showing Mary: How Women Can Share Prayers, Wisdom and the Blessings of God." Weems starts her reinterpretation not with Mary the exalted and untouchable Queen of Heaven, but with Mary the simple teenage girl. On that fateful day when the Archangel Gabriel appeared to her and told her she would carry the Son of God, Mary was terrified—just as Moses, Isaiah and Jeremiah all protested that they were too young or not worthy of the task when presented with their own challenges from God. But Mary put her trust in God and was rewarded for it. God gives her the much-needed companionship of her older cousin Elizabeth, a long-barren woman who was also suddenly and miraculously pregnant and ultimately gives birth to John, a prophet who would be called "the Baptist."

Embedded in the story of Mary and Elizabeth is a theme, finally being openly explored, that speaks directly to the experience of contemporary women. Unlike other Biblical figures, Mary is not bowing to the demands of a patriarchal society by providing her future husband with a male heir. On the contrary, she has scandalized her betrothed, Joseph, by freely accepting

The popular conception of Eve is the product of centuries of myth and artistic interpretation

God's will that she bear a child by the power of the Holy Spirit. In the Mary and Elizabeth visitation scene in Luke's Gospel, Mary has come to visit her cousin for three months. As Luke paints it, this is more than just a domestic interlude. Through Elizabeth, the history of the Old Testament will end with the last of the Hebrew prophets, John. Through Mary, a new history of salvation will begin with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In a powerful closing hymn, Mary glories in a God who often uses the powerless—especially women—to accomplish His purposes. Acknowledging her "lowliness" as God's "servant," she goes on to predict—rightly—that henceforth "all generations will call me blessed."

Mary and Elizabeth's dependence on God and each other—a Biblical example of sisterhood in action—contrasts with the struggle of their spiritual ancestress, Tamar, who has to rely only on herself to outwit the patriarchal social structure. As her story is told in Genesis 38, her first husband dies, leaving her childless. According to the law of the time, she is then married to her husband's younger brother in order to produce a son who would continue her husband's lineage. It is not to be. God strikes her second husband dead for practicing *coitus interruptus* in order to avoid fathering a child who will take away his inheritance. By law, Tamar should then have been married to the third son, but her father-in-law, Judah, suspects that Tamar herself is behind his sons' deaths. He declines to give her to his third son, who is underage, and, at the same time, won't declare her a widow—which would leave her free to marry again. Instead, he sends her back to her father's house, where she must remain chaste while she waits for Judah to give her to the third son. Eventually, Tamar tricks Judah into impregnating her himself. It ends well when he accepts her and Tamar gives birth to twins—two sons to replace the two he has lost.

Tamar has to deceive the most powerful man in her life in order to get what she deserves. Her Biblical sisters have had to wait thousands of years for their day in the sun, but their voices, too, are finally being heard. No one is trying to claim that the women of the Bible were anywhere near as powerful as the men in their world. But neither were they weak and passive. Perhaps they were just misunderstood. And ignored. Take the story every Sunday-school kid has heard about how Jesus fed a multitude of 5,000 with just five loaves of bread and two fish. What the Bible really says is that there were "five thousand, not counting women and children." In other words, assuming there was a wife and at least two children for every man, Jesus actually fed 20,000 people. Why didn't the man



MARY AND ELIZABETH, THE HOLY MOTHERS: Protestant theologians are looking for a more multidimensional Mary—beyond the Madonna image. Here, a pregnant Mary (left) seeks comfort from her cousin Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John (later called 'the Baptist').
'The Visitation,' by Werner M.S. (15th century)

who recorded this tale capitalize on the opportunity to make Jesus' miracle seem even more impressive? It seems that women and children were simply too unimportant. "The amazing thing is that there are any women at all in the ancient texts," says Deirdre Good, professor of New Testament studies at General Theological Seminary. As the scholarly debate continues, one thing worshipers might keep in mind is how often these marginalized characters prevail and are entrusted to deliver the Word of God. From Eve to Miriam to Mary, they were all players—and are, in our unfolding spiritual drama.

With PAT WINGERT and KAREN SPRINGEN

Some say Magdalene was defamed because she was a threat to the male control of the church

God's Woman Trouble

SCHOLARS WHO EXPLORE THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE BIBLE WITH A POLITICAL AGENDA IN MIND ONLY HURT THEIR CAUSE

BY KENNETH L. WOODWARD

PITY POOR MARY MAGDALENE. For nearly two millennia she was loved and honored by Christians as the archetypal reformed sinner. Then, a half-century ago, Biblical scholars recognized that she was a victim of mistaken identity: the "real" Mary of Magdala was not a prostitute. In truth, she was so faithful a follower of Jesus that she was chosen to be the first of his disciples to behold the risen Christ (Jn 20:11-18). Now, at the hands of some feminist revisionists, Mary is undergoing yet another cultural face-lift.

Relying on Gnostic Gospels rejected by compilers of the New Testament, these revisionists claim that Mary was actually Jesus' intimate female partner. After the Resurrection, she became a leader within the early church and a rival of Saint Peter's. All this, they argue in books such as Jane Schaberg's "The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene," was suppressed by patriarchal authorities who favored a males-only clergy. The implication is that gender warfare lies at the heart of Christianity, and if Mary and her faction had triumphed the history and structure of the church would be radically inclusive.

No one, of course, denies that both the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures—like the God who rules the Biblical heavens—exhibit an overarching androcentric outlook. Few women are mentioned by name, fewer yet get their stories told. The promise of feminist Biblical scholarship is that it can alter this imbalance by interpreting the Bible from the perspectives of women's experiences. The danger is that feminist ideology will overreach the text.

One important goal set by feminist scholars such as Prof. Carol Meyers of Duke University is to uncover the roles and status of women in ancient Israel. Already, some have found—surprise!—that then, as now, women exerted considerable, sometimes controlling, power within the household, despite an officially patriarchal culture. Others, however, are in quest of a grander holy grail: proof that sometime before the institution of kingship, there was an ideal era when Israelite men and women lived as public equals. But without a lot more archeological evidence, the real world behind much of the Hebrew Bible will never be recovered. "We just don't have the information about some historical periods," acknowledges Susannah Heschel, associate professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth, "so

there is a temptation to resort to fantasy."

That temptation especially bedevils those who employ "historical imagination" to fill the Bible's gaps. For instance, the Book of Exodus calls Moses' sister Miriam a "prophet," leading some feminist scholars to imagine that "the party of Moses"—presumably males—suppressed stories of her prophetic acts so that none survived in the written scrolls. But the desire to plug the holes in the Bible is itself gender inclusive. In the first century B.C., male Jewish writers went farther: they created prophecies for Miriam because, like nature, they abhorred vacuums in their sacred texts. "Misrepresenting what the Bible says has a very distinguished history, going back to the third or fourth century B.C.E.," notes Harvard professor James L. Kugel, an expert in the history of Biblical interpretation. "So perhaps we ought not to get too self-conscious about modern feminist distortions."

Every act of reading, of course, involves interpretation. Your Don Quixote or Molly Bloom is not mine because we bring different expectations and experiences to the text. But the Bible presents a particularly difficult world to enter into because it is internally self-referential: the later books of the Hebrew Bible reinterpret passages from the earlier books, just as the New Testament advances reinterpretations of the Old. It is also, in key passages, self-correcting from a gender perspective. Thus, to approach this world as if it were all a patriarchal conspiracy is to miss those texts that reflect a gynocentric point of view. Among the most important for Christians are those Gospel passages in which women—including Mary Magdalene—discover the empty tomb and deliver this good news to Jesus' fearful male Apostles. Even a male reader like myself can't miss the implication: 12 men formed the inner circle of the Jesus movement and got titles to go with that privileged access, but it was women who were rewarded at the Resurrection because they were more faithful to Jesus. So much for patriarchal titles.

Feminists aren't the first to approach the Bible with a political agenda. But it would be exemplary if women were to be the first to check contemporary ideologies at the Bible's door. The plain truth is that the Bible throughout is partisan—mostly concerning Israel. If women see themselves as the Bible's chosen victims, God's chosen people, ironically, have a better case. "Any husband who treated his wife the way God treated Israel," observes Old Testament scholar John Collins of Yale, "his wife would put him in jail."

The test of Biblical scholarship is not how user-friendly it makes the Scriptures to groups that feel neglected. Rather, it is how well it sheds new light on texts that millions hold to be authoritative. My only regret is that women were not permitted to enrich the interpretation process sooner. This may not be Augusta, but welcome to the club.



DEEPENING FAITH: Frances Garcia found a spiritual connection to Mary Magdalene