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Biblical Herstory

Women in Scripture

Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears
the Lord is to be praised.

Honor her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her
praise at the city gate.

~ PROVERBS 31:19–30

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, “When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.” The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.

~ EXODUS 1:15–17, 20–21

So Moses brought their case before the Lord, and the Lord said to him, “What Zelophehad’s daughters are saying is right. You must certainly give them property as an inheritance among their father’s relatives and give their father’s inheritance to them.

~ EXODUS 27:5–7

SOMETIMES, IN CHURCH, MY perspective on certain biblical stories is changed through what I hear preached. I remember when, just after Easter, a church I visited was celebrating the women that went to the tomb to take care of Jesus' body—the “myrrh-bearing women.” The pastor told their story, about how they met the angel, found that Jesus was alive, and were commissioned by Jesus to go and tell the disciples that Jesus had risen. He then stated that these women were the first apostles—the first sent (*apostello* in Greek) to tell others the most miraculous story ever told. I had never heard them called apostles, and was fascinated and encouraged by the pastor's words.

Another time, the reading was John 4. I like John 4—the woman at the well. Whenever I'd heard it preached on before, it was about Jesus and what it meant to worship in spirit and truth. This time, however, the focus was on the unnamed Samaritan woman. Though from a not-so-good background, she was spoken to by Jesus, believed, and evangelized her whole town. She is a woman to be emulated, according to the preacher, and we should all strive to follow her example of faith and evangelism.

Our theology is deeply influenced by on *what* and *whom* we focus when we interpret Scripture. And sometimes, because we've been taught the story one way, we miss other aspects of the story that are equally valid. I knew that the myrrh-bearing women were sent, but I had never considered that the sending was just like other apostles; I knew the Samaritan woman evangelized, but I had only focused on worshiping in spirit and truth. I want to be stretched in my biblical interpretation with differing and valid perspectives. My relationship with God and my understanding of my role(s) in the kingdom of God are influenced by these women's stories.

Jesus and Women

Primarily, the Bible is a story of God loving people with some people loving back and following and others not. Sometimes it seems that we miss the story, especially its story of women. When we think about a woman's relationship with God, the best place to begin is to understand how Jesus, God in human form, related to women. Looking at the Gospels from this perspective is both surprising and extraordinary.

Women Witness Jesus' Resurrection First

Let us start at the end of the Gospels, when women were chosen to be the first witnesses to the supreme event in history: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Gospels are unanimous that it was the women who were the first to be told of the resurrected Christ and to see him. Their original goal was simply to serve and to take care of the body of their friend and leader, and yet their diligence was rewarded when Jesus called them to be the first to “go and tell.”

Women, whose witness was considered invalid in courts of the time and who were considered weak by Romans and Jews alike,¹ were the ones Jesus chose as the first to experience and to spread the gospel. Jesus could have gone straight to the road to Emmaus or to the upper room—he was not limited to being at the tomb, but it seems that he wanted to appear to and send the women. Jesus’ actions made women’s witness significant.

Women are Disciples of Jesus

Sometimes, when we think of Jesus walking on earth, we picture him only with the twelve disciples. Well, the truth is, we usually cannot name all those disciples, but are primarily concerned with Peter, James, and John. Unfortunately, that is a very incomplete picture. Among those who followed Jesus were many women who supported his ministry from their own means as he went from town to village (Luke 8:1–3). At one point, Jesus sent out a group of seventy-two who must have been trained by him to heal the sick and cast out demons, and this group may have included both women and men (Luke 10:1–17). Furthermore, in the oft-quoted Mary/Martha scene, Jesus commended Mary for taking the position of a student with a rabbi and learning from him (Luke 10:38–42). Jesus also stated that his disciples, those who do the will of God, are his mother and brothers, showing both sexes as disciples (Matt 13:49–50). Thus, quite a few women, too many to name, were disciples of Jesus.

Jesus Speaks to Women and About Women

In a culture where men and women were not to speak to one another unless they were relatives, Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman at the well,

1. Spencer, “Jesus’ Treatment of Women,” 139–40; Okorie, “Sexuality,” 165.

and she is empowered to evangelize her people (John 4). This theological conversation with a woman directly follows a theological conversation with Nicodemus. The story about the father and his lost son directly follow the story of the woman and the lost coin (Luke 15), and the parable of the Talents follows that of the Ten Virgins (Matt 25), showing that Jesus liked to use illustrations that told the stories of both women and men. Jesus commends the woman with the issue of blood (Matt 9:22, Mark 5:34) and the Canaanite woman (Matt 15:28) for their faith, is anointed by and applauds the actions of a woman at Bethany (Matt 26:6–13, Mark 14:1–9, John 12:1–7), raises a widow’s son (Luke 7:11–17), heals a crippled woman (Luke 13:10–17), commends a widow’s offering (Luke 21:1–4), and is close friends with Mary and Martha.

In fact, though the Gospels depict Jesus citing several faithless acts of male disciples (think Peter), no specific example exists of faithless women. Certainly, when Jesus addresses all his disciples as having little faith, women were in that number, but they are not singled out. Though women’s past acts may not have been faith-filled (think the Samaritan woman), when Jesus interacts with them, the interactions are positive portrayals of those women. Furthermore, though Jesus reprimands Martha for being distracted by household duties, he actually calls her out of the “female role” and into the “male role” of learning at a rabbi’s feet as a disciple.² And, she has great faith that he can raise her brother Lazarus from the dead the next time he visits her (John 11:20–27). Women are portrayed in an obviously positive manner in the Gospels, and they have deep relationship with Jesus.

“The fact that my mind has been opened about women and their inclusion in God’s intentions has helped me to be aware of my own lens that I had put on scripture, so I think I’m able to read more open-mindedly.”

Biblical Women

Having established Jesus’ relationship with women, we now move on to specific women mentioned in Scripture who may act as role models for Christian women and their relationship with God and the world. Historically, many Christians received a special name when baptized or confirmed.

2. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 208.

For many, that name is a character in Scripture or a renowned historical Christian whom they deeply respect and would like to emulate. If I were of that tradition, I would want to be named Mary, for the mother of Jesus, possibly because we can know so much about her.

Mary the Mother

Protestants view Mary with suspicion because they believe that other Christian traditions worship her. For that reason, her role in the life of Jesus has been downplayed in many churches. Recently, however, there has been renewed interest in her, and my study of Mary has been rich and rewarding. *Before you read my interpretation of her story, why not read the original account in Luke 1:26–56 and 2:1–52, John 2:1–12 and 19:17–27?*

Mary is likely an early teenager, promised to Joseph and awaiting her marriage, when the appearance of an angel interrupts her plans for her life. She is told not to be afraid (words angels always say) and that the Lord is with her (words God says to prophets in the Hebrew Bible [Old Testament]). She's told she will be pregnant with God's child, and the only question she asks is how that could happen, given her virginity. Personally, I might have "gone all Moses" on Gabriel if I were her, arguing and asking many questions. But not Mary: she first asks how, and then states her identity as the Lord's servant and agrees to her fate.

What a risk-taker! She agrees to be pregnant out of wedlock in a time when women in her condition would be divorced in a way that brought her great shame, thus almost guaranteeing that she would never again have the opportunity to be married.³ The pregnancy and the divorce would bring shame not only on her, but also on her entire family. Her words, "I am the Lord's servant . . . May your word to me be fulfilled" (Luke 1: 38), are not the words of a little kid. They are the words of a courageous woman of God who cares more about her identity as God's servant and about her obedience to God than she cares about anything else. These are the words of a woman of focus and determination.

When Mary makes this choice and states these words, the early Christian writer Irenaeus says that she redeems the negative choice of her ancestor.

3. Ibid., 48.

For as Eve was seduced by the word of an angel to flee from God, having rebelled against his word, so Mary by the word of an angel received the glad tidings that she would bear God by obeying his word. The former was seduced to disobey God [and so fell], but the latter was persuaded to obey God, so that the virgin Mary might become the advocate of the virgin Eve. As the human race was subject to death through [the act of] a virgin, so it was saved by a virgin, and thus the disobedience of the virgin was precisely balanced by the obedience of another.⁴

Mary's act and words redeem the acts and words of her ancestor.

"And then the angel left her" (Luke 1:38). Whatever proof she has that the baby was from God disappears, and so Mary does what anyone might have done—she runs to her cousin's house. Perhaps it's because the angel had mentioned her cousin, and she thinks she might be safe with her. There, she receives confirmation that she had actually heard God. Her cousin Elizabeth, pregnant with John the Baptist, feels John leap in her womb upon the appearance of Mary, and Elizabeth speaks, filled with the Spirit. She blesses Mary's obedience and the child that would come from it.

And it is after she is blessed by Elizabeth that Mary sings the beautiful poem that we call the Magnificat, whose words echo Hannah's in 1 Samuel 2. She begins, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46–47). To know Mary, we must realize *when* she declares these words. Does she glorify God when all is fulfilled and everyone understands it? Does she glorify God when she's accepted by Joseph? Does she glorify God when Jesus is born? No, she glorifies God before all this. She glorifies God before most people would have even known she was pregnant. She glorifies God for God's future actions, as though they are already accomplished. What a song of faith! She sees what is not as though it is! Lutheran pastor in Nazi Germany Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached on Mary's words in an Advent sermon:

This song of Mary's is the oldest Advent Hymn. It is the most passionate, most vehement, one might almost say, most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. It is not the gentle, sweet, dreamy Mary that we so often see portrayed in pictures, but the passionate, powerful, proud, enthusiastic Mary, who speaks here. None of the sweet, sugary, or childish tones that we find so often in our Christmas hymns, but a hard, strong, uncompromising song of bringing down rulers from their thrones and humbling the lords of this

4. As cited in Webber, *Ancient-Future Time*, 49.

world, of God's power and of the powerlessness of men. These are the tones of the prophetic women of the Old Testament: Deborah, Judith, Miriam, coming alive in the mouth of Mary.

Mary, filled with the Spirit and prepared. Mary, the obedient handmaid, humbly accepting what is to happen to her, what the Spirit asks of her, to do with her as the Spirit will, speaks now by the Spirit of the coming of God into the world, of the Advent of Jesus Christ. She knows better than anyone what it means to wait for Christ. He is nearer to her than to anyone else. She awaits him as his mother. She knows about the mystery of his coming, of the Spirit who came to her, of the Almighty God who works his wonders. She experiences in her own body that God does wonderful things with the children of men, that his ways are not our ways, that he cannot be predicted by men, or circumscribed by their reasons and ideas, but that his way is beyond all understanding or explanations, both free and of his own will.⁵

Mary's words are words of valor and faith. She takes a risk that few would be courageous enough to take, stating, "I am the Lord's servant May your word to me be fulfilled," and then faithfully proclaims what is not yet as though it is. And this is just the first step.

Mary was the mother of God—God was within Mary, born, and then grew up as a human. The depths of that truth are unfathomable. As a mother, she presents her son to the Lord, is greeted by Simeon and Anna's praise and joy, but is startled by the sword that will pierce her soul. She's not always the best mother, since she does leave her son behind in Jerusalem (Luke 2:41–52), but it is clear that her son Jesus loves her and listens to her as she encourages his first miracle (John 2:1–11). I picture her giggling about the great wedding wine in Cana. Motherhood brought her great joy, but also great suffering. No mother should have to watch her son die. Some of the last words Jesus said, though, were to tell John to take care of his mother (John 19:26–27).

Mary the mother, risk-taker, faith-singer, miracle-encourager—who wouldn't want to be like her? She joins a line of courageous and not-so-courageous mothers in Scripture, the most exemplary of which include Hannah who prayed, received, and sacrificed (1 Sam 1–2), Ruth who followed God and was great-grandmother to King David (Ruth), and Lois and Eunice who instructed Timothy in the faith (1 Tim 1:5). Motherhood, however, is not limited to biological children, for Isaiah cries,

5. Bonhoeffer and Robertson, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christmas Sermons*, 97.

“Sing, barren woman,
 you who never bore a child;
 burst into song, shout for joy,
 you who were never in labor;
 because more are the children of the desolate woman
 than of her who has a husband,”
 says the LORD (Isa 54:1).

Many women take faith-filled risks with people who are not their children. They sing and dream of things that are not as though they are. Though biological motherhood is a special role, women can be mothers in the best sense even when they do not have biological offspring. Often, like Mary, the words that they sing are prophetic words, a fact that brings us to the story of another woman, Huldah, a Hebrew Bible prophet.

“The roles of the women in the Bible are examples for us to follow. We can be as bold and make an impact as those women did.”

Huldah the Prophet

Huldah is not the only female prophet in the Bible, for Miriam, Anna, Deborah, and the daughters of Philip are all identified in that role. Huldah's story is found in 2 Kings 22. She is a prophet during Josiah's reign, arguably the best king of Judah because of all his reforms.

At that time, a prophet's work was twofold: forthtelling and foretelling. Forthtelling encompassed telling the truth to the people, and when one reads the prophets, that message was generally that people were sinning and needed to turn back to God. Foretelling involved telling what would happen in the future, which was usually that if the disobedient did not turn to God that they would be destroyed. The biblical books called major or minor prophets are thus divided simply because of their length, not their importance. Just as we do not have a book called “Nathan” for the prophet who confronted King David, we do not have one called “Huldah,” but both were very important prophets for their time.

Huldah is, in fact, a prophet during a time when few were following God. King Josiah's two closest predecessors rebelled. The book of the law (presumably Deuteronomy) had not been read for years but was found

stashed in a broken-down temple that Josiah was restoring. Huldah, however, is known as a prophet during this time, which is quite remarkable considering that so many were not following God.

She is an important prophet, too. When the king tells the high priest, the secretary, the king's attendant, and others to inquire of the Lord regarding how to respond to the book of the law, they go to her. The high priest does not make a sacrifice at the altar and inquire of the Lord himself, nor does he put on the ephod or consult the Urim and Thummin as had been done in the past. No, he probably leads this large and high-powered group directly to Huldah, the prophet. And the story makes no apology for visiting a female prophet rather than a male prophet, possibly because it was not unusual. Though Jeremiah and Zephaniah are also prophesying at this time, they are not consulted. It seems that, in the mind of the high priest, Huldah is the best prophet of whom to inquire.

The only background we have about Huldah is that she is married and lives in Jerusalem. She seems to be in communion with God since she does not have to stop and consult God in order to deliver the answer to the men. She knows the words of the Lord and speaks them out directly. She forthtells the negative truth (God is angry because the people have followed other gods) and the positive truth (Josiah has responded to God's word), then foretells the negative future (disaster) and the positive, comforting future (Josiah will rest in peace).

The men she instructs take her words back to the king, and the king responds, calls for repentance and cleanses the land. Huldah is a powerful prophet who gives the words of the Lord to a king, high priest, and other leaders, and the leaders respond to what she says. Because of her prior work, her reputation is known, and she directly speaks both hard and comforting truth. Huldah, who knows God and fearlessly acts as God's spokesperson regardless of the difficulty of the words—hers is an impressive story and a great example for us to follow.

Deborah the Political Leader

Another leader for whose sex the text makes no apology is Deborah, the prophet and judge. Her story is found in Judges 4–5. The time of the Judges was not a good time for the Israelites. It was after Joshua's conquest of the land and before the establishment of the kings. While a judge ruled over a portion of the land, the people followed God and prospered, but after

the judge died, the people did “evil in the eyes of the Lord.” Some see the state of the people disintegrating during the time of the Judges as a parallel development to the disintegration of their regard for women. Judges starts with Deborah’s capable leadership, continues with the judge Jephthah killing his virgin daughter (11), and ends with the Levite’s concubine cut up to be sent to the twelve tribes (19) and stolen wives (21).

Deborah is a high point in the narrative, holding court under the Palm of Deborah, deciding Israel’s disputes, and sending others into battle against the army that was holding Israel captive. She is the only judge in the book of Judges who is also a prophet, and the land had peace for forty years because of her. The primary story associated with Deborah is sending Barak into a victorious battle against Jabin’s army. She tells Barak that God commands him to go and fight, but he won’t go unless she goes with him.

Now, this is an odd predicament. Deborah tells Barak that God will give Jabin’s army into his hands, but Barak wants Deborah with him in the battle. The reason for his desire is unclear—is it timidity or simply great confidence in Deborah? Regardless, it seems that had he simply gone, the honor of the victory would be his rather than given to another (the valiant Jael). Deborah quickly agrees to his request; they go into battle and they win.

Regarding Deborah’s character and valor, commentators Cundall and Morris state, “Barak himself plays a secondary part to this great and gifted woman, and drew courage and inspiration from her presence.”⁶ Even the early Christian writer Ambrose of Milan states, “It is not sex but valor which makes strong. And . . . no fault is found in this woman, whereas most of the judges were causes of no small sins to the people.”⁷

Judges 5 recounts the song of Deborah and Barak, a song that holds her in high honor. She is the one who incited the people to battle their adversaries: “Villagers in Israel would not fight; they held back until I, Deborah, arose, until I arose, a mother in Israel” (5:7). She encourages them to fight and appears an equal military leader to Barak.

Deborah is an impressive political leader. The people come to her for judgment, she defeats Jabin’s army, and her legacy to the people is forty years of peace. Courageous in battle, wise in her judgments, and broad in her legacy, she is not a woman who is easily forgotten, and her example is one that we can emulate. Though their leadership is different, the New

6. Cundall and Morris, *Judges [and] Ruth*, 82.

7. As quoted in Franke and Oden, *Joshua*, 115.

Testament teacher, Priscilla (Acts 18:24–26), and Phoebe the deacon (Rom 16:1–2) are also great women leaders who influence others.

Martha the Single Woman

Perhaps it is a surprise to see Martha as an example with women like Deborah, Huldah, and Mary. Martha's example is usually one that women are

“Reading the biblical accounts of women showed me that women can fulfill different roles, even be leaders.”

encouraged *not* to follow, rather than to follow. And perhaps the thought that Martha was single has never stood out in the story. Deborah, Huldah, and Mary were married, but their identity as wives is just background to their identity as individuals. Those biblical examples whose identity as a wife is central are not the best examples in

that role (think Sarah, Rebekah, or Leah). Though there are passages that address the relationship of a wife to her husband, and the wife of noble character (Prov 31), biblical women do not seem to receive attention for being outstanding wives, but rather for other personal characteristics.

Far be it from me to disparage the vital role a wife plays in the family and in society. One wonders what would have happened should Pilate have listened to his wife's concern for Jesus. And it is probable that many exemplary biblical men had exemplary wives whose stories were (unfortunately) unwritten. I do, however, find it interesting that being a wife does not seem central to the biblical portrayal of many women. Though some may assume they were married, Martha and her sister Mary, Miriam, Moses's sister, and Phoebe (Romans 16) were single, and Lydia (Acts 16) was either single or a widow. In the same way that their identities as wives is not central to the story of Deborah and Huldah, singleness is also not central to the stories of Martha and Miriam. Though marriage was even more common in biblical times than it is today, biblical women are not praised for being wives or stigmatized for being single.⁸

Martha is no exception, and her story is in Luke 10:38–42 and John 11:1–12:8. Martha's problem in the familiar Luke 10 story is that she is focused on the details of hospitality, a woman's job. In first-century Palestine

8. Even in Proverbs 31, where the wife of noble character does good to her husband and takes care of her children, the list of all her other work both inside and outside her home receives greater emphasis.

and the Middle East today, hospitality is what one does in order to honor one's guests. Martha is accomplishing what is prescribed by her society, and Jesus breaks social norms when he praises her sister for sitting at his feet as any man (but no woman) would. Martha is distracted by all the details of honoring Jesus and misses *being with* Jesus. "Her activity was not out of place but out of proportion."⁹ Later in the narrative, at Simon's house, Martha receives no rebuke for her serving, apparently because her service was more balanced (John 12:2).

Martha was distracted and appears frustrated. Perhaps she wanted to sit at Jesus' feet with Mary, but *someone* needed to get the food ready. If I were her, I might have been annoyed that my sister was where I wanted to be and that I was doing all the work. Perhaps that's why she says (I might have whined), "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me" (Luke 10:40). Jesus says that she's so concerned about other things that she's missing whom she is with and whom she is serving. In the same way, many women are distracted by details and miss what is in front of them. Some single women are working on the details of finding "Mr. Right" and miss both the beauty of being single and the great men and women around them.

So Martha is a negative example in that she does not sit and enjoy, but perhaps she learned from Jesus' words. And showing hospitality for Jesus meant also showing hospitality to his companions who were many, as we have seen. What we miss is that single Martha seems to have her own home and takes care of her sister and brother. We also miss that she had close friends of the opposite sex—including Jesus. The Gospel of John states, "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (John 11:5).

Martha was also more of a go-getter than her single sister Mary. They sent for Jesus when their brother Lazarus was sick and they waited for him as Lazarus died. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him while Mary stayed home. As illustrated in her haste to meet him, it seems that Martha had learned the "one thing necessary": to focus on Christ. Though she does not understand everything about Jesus, her faith was clearly very strong for she said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him" (John 11:21–22). When Jesus reveals to her a truth that is revealed to no one else, that he is the resurrection and the life, she confesses her faith that Jesus is the Messiah. This confession is significant—the

9. Silva and Tenney, *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 112.

only other person who confesses the same is the Apostle Peter. Martha is a woman of great faith and intimacy with Jesus.

After she converses with Jesus, she tells Mary that Jesus would like to speak to her. This time, the roles are reversed—Martha spends intimate time with Jesus *before* Mary does, and then she leads Mary to Jesus. Martha was discreet but Mary runs out to him, making the same statement Martha already did, “Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died” (11:32). While Martha’s statement had added words of faith, “But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him,” Mary’s did not. Jesus does not converse with Mary then, but is rather moved by everyone’s grief and weeps.

When Jesus asks to have the stone rolled away from Lazarus’s tomb, Martha is concerned about the stench, revealing that her faith is still growing. After Lazarus’s resurrection, Martha provides for everyone by serving at Simon’s house (John 12:2).

Martha is a go-getter who cultivated great faith and independently led her own home, but acts interdependently with her siblings. She is a close friend of Jesus to whom he reveals special secrets. Her faith is strong and growing and she learns from Jesus’ words to her about not worrying about material things but focusing on him. She is a great example of a woman, and she was single.

“Through studying several females of the Bible, I learned to find value and lessons from scripture that I had not considered before.”

Perhaps you would choose differently from me, if you were to choose a woman for your baptism name. As I’ve written her story, I find myself especially thinking about Martha. No doubt knowing the story of these biblical women is inspiring, and we’ve only focused on a few. May Mary, Huldah, Deborah, and Martha continually serve as examples for us as we learn about them, so that we can follow in their footsteps!

To chat about over tea, coffee, and/or chocolate:

What ideas surprised you in this chapter? What are you currently thinking about them?

Which of the biblical women's names would you choose as your baptism name if you were to choose? Why?

How does knowing these biblical women affect your relationship with God?

Read the stories of the following women in Scripture, and chat about them:

Num 27:1–11 (Daughters of Zelophehad); Judg 4–5 (Deborah); Ruth, 1 Sam 1–2:11 (Hannah); 1 Sam 25 (Abigail); 2 Kgs 22 (Huldah); Prov 31; Luke 1:26–66 (Mary and Elizabeth); Mark 5:21–43 (Bleeding Woman); Mark 16:1–8, Luke 24:1–12, and John 20:1–18 (women proclaiming resurrection); Acts 16:11–40 (Lydia); Acts 18 (Priscilla); Rom 16 (great women); 2 John (the lady chosen by God and her children)

Prayer

O God, in whose image I am created, I beg you to never stop showing me yourself from glory to glory. I repent of the times I have underestimated your image and actions, please forgive me. Teach me, for I want to know the depth to which I reflect your image. Remind me of the women through whom you have worked and empower me to emulate them. I praise you and thank you for making me a woman.

Amen