

Voices Long Silenced

Women Biblical Interpreters through the Centuries

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Introduction

Restore Me That Am Lost

“Restore me that am lost.” English Protestant noblewoman Frances Abergavenny (ca. 1530–ca. 1576) composed these words as part of a penitential prayer pleading for spiritual restoration.¹ After her death, Abergavenny’s prayers circulated under the names of theologically educated men.² When her name *was* attached to her prayers, the man who anthologized her writings highlighted her maternal role, manufacturing a story about Abergavenny on her deathbed, bequeathing the written prayers to her daughter. Thus he ensured that Abergavenny would be remembered primarily for conventional feminine virtues, and that her prayers would be construed as an expression of motherly concern for her daughter’s spiritual well-being.³ Only recently have scholars unearthed the facts regarding the history of these prayers and given Abergavenny due credit for her sophisticated biblical and theological knowledge, thus restoring her to her rightful place in the history of religious thought.⁴ This is what we would like this book to do: *restore* the works of overlooked or forgotten female scriptural interpreters *and record* their names and stories as part of the history of biblical interpretation.

In the last several decades, biblical scholars and religious leaders have increasingly expressed interest in how the Bible has been interpreted throughout history. Yet, for the most part, studies have only recorded the history of men’s interpretations. As recently as the 1980s, biblical scholar Marla Selvidge was preparing for a qualifying exam for her PhD: she would be required to identify and describe the contributions of fifty interpreters of the Bible from the past two millennia. However, when she asked her adviser, a prominent New Testament expert, if she could include a few women on the list, he replied that there were none worthy of inclusion.⁵ Even today, despite a growing body of

1. “Thou biddest me seek; make me to find. Thou has taught me to knock; open unto me that stand knocking [Matt. 7:7]. Strengthen me that am weak. Restore me that am lost.” Frances Abergavenny, “A Devout Meditation to Be Used after Prayer,” in *The Monument of Matrones*, by Thomas Bentley (London: H. Denham, 1582), 2:206–7. Spelling and punctuation have been modernized.

2. John Phillips (fl. 1570–91), a Cambridge-educated writer, published her prayers under his own name, giving her no credit, in *The Perfect Path to Paradise: Containing Most Devout Prayers, and Fruitful Meditations for Several Situations* (London: T. Purfoot, 1626), first published ca. 1580. Decades later, Abergavenny’s prayers were credited to the prominent English clergyman John Colet (ca. 1467–1519) in *Daily devotions, or, The Christian’s morning and evening sacrifice digested into prayers and meditations* (London: Nathaniel Ponder & Edward Evets, 1684), first published 1641.

3. Bentley, *Monument of Matrones*, 139.

4. Louise Horton, “‘Restore Me That Am Lost’: Recovering the Forgotten History of Lady Abergavenny’s Prayers,” *Women’s Writing* 26, no. 1 (2019): 3–14.

5. Marla Selvidge, *Notorious Voices: Feminist Biblical Interpretation, 1500–1920* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 1–2.

scholarship on the history of female interpretation of Scripture, women's voices continue to be underrepresented and their contributions overlooked. A dictionary of major biblical interpreters published in 2007 contains entries for more than two hundred men but only three women.⁶

In fact, thousands of women studied and interpreted the Bible from 100 CE to the present. The number has grown since the 1970s, when women in increasing numbers became rabbis, ministers, and biblical scholars. College and seminary Bible courses now regularly include readings from modern women interpreters. Yet hundreds of earlier writings by women have survived and deserve our attention. Through the centuries, Jewish and Christian women—rabbinic experts, nuns, mothers, mystics, preachers, teachers, suffragists, and household managers—interpreted Scripture through writings, art, and music. Some of these works are known to only a handful of specialists. Others were forgotten and remain altogether neglected in archives and library storage facilities. Some, like Sojourner Truth and Florence Nightingale, are known for their other accomplishments yet deserve recognition as biblical interpreters as well.

This book refutes the myth that no significant women biblical interpreters existed before the twentieth century. In this volume, we connect readers with a lost tradition of women's interpretation, introducing the fascinating stories of overlooked women and their significant contributions to the study of Scripture. We examine works by Jewish, Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, and sectarian women (and a few atheists, freethinkers, and skeptics). We tell stories of women representing a diverse range of communities and geographical settings, including Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Middle East. These stories help to set modern feminist, womanist, and Latina biblical scholarship into historical context within the larger faith community.

The title of this book is *Voices Long Silenced*. Through the centuries, religious communities have tried to silence women, or at least mute their voices.⁷ All too often, Scriptures such as 1 Timothy 2:11 ("Let a woman learn in silence, with full submission") were used to reinforce cultural expectations about women's roles and limitations. Though countless women in the last two millennia reflected upon Scripture, in most cases their insights have been lost to the ages because they were denied the education or opportunity to publish their writings. Sometimes their written works were intentionally suppressed or destroyed by religious authorities. Other times women censored themselves, aware of potential criticism or persecution from their communities. Women of color, especially enslaved women and those in colonial settings, have faced particularly brutal obstacles. In many cases, all we have are echoes of female voices in the form of fragments of their teachings and writings embedded in a letter or report authored by a man. In these instances, special care is needed to evaluate how men may have shaped women's written accounts to serve their own agendas. (Sometimes the agenda was to portray an idealized woman

6. Donald K. McKim, ed., *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

7. In 1975, anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener coined the phrase "muted group" to refer to women and other groups whose ability and opportunities to express themselves were circumscribed—their voices "muted"—by their cultures. Shirley Ardener, "Ardener's 'Muted Groups': The Genesis of an Idea and Its Praxis," *Women and Language* 28, no. 2 (2008): 50–54.

adorned with conventionally “feminine” virtues like modesty and humility.) Frequently women’s works circulated without their names attached. Yet, with diligent research and creative sleuthing, scholars can retrieve at least a portion of women’s contributions to biblical study—contributions that are impressive in their depth, insight, and originality and often edifying and inspiring to today’s readers.

Although recent studies of female interpreters from various eras have dealt with particular themes and Scripture passages, *Voices Long Silenced* is the first book to attempt to narrate a two-thousand-year history of women as interpreters of the Bible.⁸ The authors have devoted years to discovering and analyzing works by women biblical interpreters. Marion Taylor is a Canadian Anglican biblical scholar with expertise in Old Testament Scripture and women interpreters of the 1800s. She has published anthologies of nineteenth-century women’s writings and is editor of the *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, the first biographical encyclopedia of female interpreters.⁹ Joy Schroeder is a Lutheran pastor and church historian from the U.S.A. with expertise in early, medieval, and Reformation church history. She has published books on women’s and men’s biblical interpretation through the ages.¹⁰ Both authors build on the groundbreaking efforts of predecessors who did the initial work of retrieving the history of women’s biblical interpretation and numerous colleagues who have used their expertise to expand our knowledge of the topic.¹¹ They are quoted in our chapters and cited in our footnotes; our debt to them is enormous.

You will find that there is a wide diversity of women’s experiences, perspectives, and approaches to the Bible. In the pages that follow, you will hear the stories of women who, often at great personal cost, broke the silence that religious leaders and communities enjoined upon them. Some received support from male and female friends and colleagues; at times they felt very much alone. Many of these women’s writings are uplifting and inspiring. Some writings, however, will provoke anger and dismay as their female authors express patriarchal, racist, or anti-Jewish views.

8. See, for instance, the study of women’s interpretation of Genesis 1–3 by Amanda W. Benckhuysen, *The Gospel according to Eve: A History of Women’s Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).

9. Marion Ann Taylor and Heather E. Weir, eds., *Let Her Speak for Herself: Nineteenth-Century Women Writing on the Women of Genesis* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006); Marion Ann Taylor and Christiana de Groot, eds., *Women of War, Women of Woe: Joshua and Judges through the Eyes of Nineteenth-Century Female Biblical Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016); Marion Ann Taylor and Heather E. Weir, eds., *Women in the Story of Jesus: The Gospels through the Eyes of Nineteenth-Century Female Biblical Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016); Marion Ann Taylor, ed., and Agnes Choi, associate editor, *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters: A Historical and Biographical Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

10. Joy A. Schroeder is author of *Deborah’s Daughters: Gender Politics and Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); and *Dinah’s Lament: The Biblical Legacy of Sexual Violence in Christian Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007). She is translator and editor of *The Book of Genesis, Bible in Medieval Tradition 3* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015); and *The Book of Jeremiah, Bible in Medieval Tradition 4* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).

11. Pioneering works on this topic include Patricia Demers, *Women as Interpreters of the Bible* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992); Gerda Lerner, “One Thousand Years of Feminist Biblical Criticism,” in Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness from the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 138–66; Elisabeth Gössman, “History of Biblical Interpretation by European Women,” in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 27–40; Selvidge, *Notorious Voices*; Katherine Clay Bassard, *Transforming Scriptures: African American Women Writers and the Bible* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

We understand that no single volume can give adequate attention to all the stories of significant women interpreters. We have not found all the women; and we know that the surviving writings come primarily from European and European-descent Christian women of privilege. Despite our efforts to include substantial contributions from diverse religious, ethnic, and racial backgrounds, we know that countless voices—or at least their echoes—still need to be recovered from archives, colonial records, and other sources. Where parts of the story are missing, we hope others will fill in the gaps.

This book also laments what has been irretrievably lost: the works of biblical interpretation that have been intentionally suppressed or destroyed; the writings that perished in fires or wars; the diaries and notebooks lost forever, simply because no one bothered to preserve them.

Throughout most of human history, women have remained “muted” in literature and public discourse, but their collective voices spoke powerfully, interpreting Scripture with compelling insights and shrewd biblical arguments in favor of expanding women’s roles in religion and society. We invite you to listen.

Abbreviations

AAR	American Academy of Religion
ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
AIA	<i>Album Ibero-Americano</i>
AJSL	<i>American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures</i>
ANF	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
ASOR	The American Schools of Oriental Research
BASORSup	Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research Supplements
BBKL	<i>Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon</i>
BJRL	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands Library</i>
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BMT	Bible in Medieval Tradition. Eerdmans
BSIH	Brill's Studies in Intellectual History
BSNA	Biblical Scholarship in North America
BW	The Bible and Women: An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History. SBL Press
BWA(N)T	Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten (und Neuen) Testament
CBC	The Cambridge Bible Commentary
CBE	Christians for Biblical Equality
CCCM	Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Mediaevalis. Turnhout: Brepols, 1966–
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina. Turnhout: Brepols, 1953–
CF	Cistercian Fathers series. Cistercian Publications
CH	<i>Church History</i>
<i>ChrLit</i>	<i>Christianity and Literature</i>
CS	Cistercian Studies series. Cistercian Publications
CSR	Council on the Study of Religion
CWS	Classics of Western Spirituality series. Paulist Press, 1978–
GOTR	<i>Greek Orthodox Theological Review</i>
HTS	Harvard Theological Studies
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
IVP	InterVarsity Press
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JFSR	<i>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</i>
JJPSup	Journal of Juristic Papyrology, Supplements

JPS	Jewish Publication Society
<i>JSIJ</i>	<i>Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KJV	King James Version
LCL	Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
LQB	Lutheran Quarterly Books
LW	Luther's Works. 55 vols. St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–86
LXX	Septuagint (the Greek OT)
MAS	Middle Ages Series. University of Pennsylvania Press
MRTS	Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies
<i>MSJ</i>	<i>The Master's Seminary Journal</i>
NAPS	North American Patristics Society
<i>NBf</i>	<i>New Blackfriars</i>
NJPS	<i>Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i>
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
<i>NPNF</i> ²	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2</i>
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version Bible
O ECS	Oxford Early Christian Studies
OMSC	Overseas Ministries Study Center
OVIEME	The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe series. University of Chicago Press, 1996–2010; University of Toronto Press, 2009–2014; Iter Academic Press and Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2015–
PG	Patrologia Graeca. 166 vols. Ed. J.-P. Migne. Paris, 1857–86
PL	Patrologia Latina. 221 vols. Ed. J.-P. Migne. Paris, 1844–55
<i>PSB</i>	<i>Princeton Seminary Bulletin</i>
<i>RevExp</i>	<i>Review & Expositor</i>
<i>SB</i>	<i>Sammelbuch griechischer Urkunden aus Aegypten</i> . Edited by Friedrich Preisigke et al. Vols. 1–2. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1915–2002
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SC	Sources chrétiennes. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1943–
SCM	Hymns Ancient & Modern
SPCK	Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
<i>ThTo</i>	<i>Theology Today</i>
<i>ThZ</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
UK	United Kingdom
WCC	World Council of Churches
<i>WesTJ</i>	<i>Wesleyan Theological Journal</i>
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZNTH	<i>Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte</i>

1. Melania's Lost Notebooks

Retrieving the Voices of Jewish and Christian Women in Late Antiquity

The Roman aristocrat Melania the Younger (ca. 383–439) lived a life of self-denial in a monastery on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, devoting herself to the study of Scripture. Fluent in Greek and Latin, Melania kept handwritten notebooks to record the fruits of her study. Her biographer Gerontius (d. 485), an eyewitness and friend, praised Melania for her studiousness and handwritten compilations:

She was by nature gifted as a writer and wrote without mistakes in notebooks. She decided for herself how much she ought to write every day, and how much she should read in the canonical books [of Scripture], how much in the collections of homilies. And after she was satisfied with this activity, she would go through the *Lives* of the fathers as if she were eating dessert.¹

According to Gerontius, Melania devoured the Scriptures and spiritual writings and acquired as many books as she could.

The blessed woman read the Old and New Testaments three or four times a year. She copied them herself and furnished copies to the saints. She performed the divine office in company with the virgins with her, reciting by heart on her own the remaining Psalms. So eagerly did she read the treatises of the saints that whatever book she could locate did not escape her.²

Melania the Younger's grandmother Melania the Elder (325–417) was equally voracious in her biblical studies. An eyewitness reported that the elder Melania had read three million lines from the works of Origen of Alexandria (185–254) and four and a half million lines from other scriptural interpreters.³

Unfortunately, Melania the Younger's notebooks have been lost. All that remain are tantalizing references in Gerontius's account. The reader can only wonder: Did the notebooks contain only scriptural quotations and selections copied from male commentators, or did they also contain Melania's own comments?

Melania's lost notebooks are emblematic of the challenge of retrieving the voices of female interpreters from late antiquity (ca. 150–500 CE). Only four major works of women's biblical interpretation have survived: the prison diary

1. Gerontius, *The Life of Melania the Younger*, trans. Elizabeth A. Clark, *Studies in Women and Religion* 14 (New York: Mellen, 1984), 45; *Vie de Sainte Mélanie*, ed. Denys Gorce, SC 90 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1962), 174.

2. Gerontius, *Life of Melania*, 46.

3. Palladius, *Lausiac History*, in *Handmaids of the Lord: Holy Women in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. and trans. Joan M. Peterson, CS 143 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1996), 305.

of the martyr Perpetua (d. ca. 203); the Holy Land travel narrative of Spanish pilgrim Egeria (ca. 381–84); Faltonia Beltitia Proba's *Cento* (ca. 360s), a poetic retelling of biblical themes stitched together from phrases of the Roman poet Vergil; and Empress Eudocia's (ca. 400–460) *Cento*, which draws on Greek verses from Homer. Remnants and echoes of several other women's words survive, embedded within the writings of men. Granted the limited availability of sources, this chapter will examine the extant works of female interpreters and use imaginative strategies to retrieve the lost voices of ancient Christian and Jewish women.

Ancient Women's Access to Scripture

In late antiquity, most Christian and Jewish women gained access to Scripture through hearing it read aloud during worship and listening to sermons. Another context for scriptural instruction was the catechesis of women preparing for baptism. Literacy rates for both men and women averaged less than 10 percent. Relatively few women were educated or had access to written texts.⁴ Yet, in a culture attuned to experiencing literature aurally, women actively reflected upon Scripture and shared their insights orally with their communities. The North African writer Tertullian (ca. 145–ca. 240), who became part of the New Prophecy (Montanist) movement in the early 200s, mentioned an unnamed woman prophet in his community: "Now to be sure, just as the Scriptures are read, or Psalms sung, or addresses delivered, or prayers offered, so themes are furnished from these for her visions. She doesn't speak during the service, but she shares them afterwards to those who wish to listen, and also to submit them to the community for testing."⁵ This woman engaged in interpretive work that she imparted to her community. Her social status is unknown; there is no indication whether she was literate.

Elite Greek and Roman families sometimes provided for their daughters' education at home by their mothers, private tutors, or literate servants or slaves. Tutors, hired to educate boys in the household, sometimes provided a "bonus" education for the girls in the family at a small additional cost. Some Roman grammar schools admitted female students, who attended while accompanied by a servant or slave.

In 384 CE, the scholarly monk Jerome (347–420) wrote to the aristocratic Roman matron Laeta regarding education for her daughter, Paula the Younger. He proposed that Paula follow the same biblical reading program used by male Christian youths, beginning with Psalms and Proverbs, followed by New Testament books, the prophets, the Heptateuch (Genesis through Judges), historical books (Kings and Chronicles), and finally the Song of Songs—a book whose sensuality posed risks for inexperienced readers who might not realize that its subject was spiritual marriage with Christ.⁶ Jerome assumed that Laeta's daughter had access to the entire range of biblical texts.

4. For literacy rates, see Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 4–6.

5. Tertullian, *On the Soul* 9.4, translated in Ronald E. Heine, *The Montanist Oracles and Testimonia*, NAPS Patristic Monograph Series 14 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 71.

6. Jerome, *To Laeta* (Letter 107), in Peterson, *Handmaids of the Lord*, 264–65.

Ancient Christian documents reveal that women kept collections of Scripture and other writings in their homes. When the Greek martyr Irene (d. ca. 304) was arrested, authorities confiscated her substantial hidden cache of “many tablets, books, parchments, codices and pages.”⁷ Interrogated by the authorities, Irene reported that when she and her companions Chione and Agape had gone into hiding in the mountains, their greatest trial was separation from their beloved books: “[The books] were in our house and we did not dare to bring them out. In fact, it caused us much distress that we could not devote ourselves to them night and day as we had done from the beginning until that day last year when we hid them.”⁸

An early fourth-century papyrus letter discovered in Oxyrhynchus, Egypt, was addressed to an unnamed Christian woman and attests to women owning, lending, and exchanging books: “To my dearest lady sister in the Lord, greetings. Lend the Ezra, since I lent you the Little Genesis. Farewell from us in God.”⁹ (“Little Genesis” is the book of Jubilees. Fragments of this work were found in the Dead Sea Scrolls.) This “sister in the Lord” may have borrowed it not only to study but also to copy for her personal collection.

John of Ephesus (ca. 507–86) praised women’s literacy in his Syriac account of Euphemia, an ascetic widow who lived in Amida (in SE Turkey): “She took up a regulated life of devotion and wore the garb of a religious, while learning the psalms and teaching them to her daughter, who had been thoroughly instructed since her early youth in psalmody, the Scriptures, and writing.”¹⁰ An account of the martyrdom of Febronia (284–305), possibly written by an anonymous nun in Nisibis (in SE Turkey), acclaimed the holy woman for her extensive learning. When afflicted by temptations, Febronia “would open the Bible and lovingly meditate on its living and spiritual words.”¹¹ In fifth-century Persia, regulations for Syriac-speaking churches required each town to support women’s choirs for public worship—“an order of sisters” who were “educated in doctrine” and “instructed in the scripture lesson.”¹² Theologian Jacob of Serug (d. 521) told of their public teaching ministry singing hymns that interpreted Scripture and making “their chants instructive melodies.”¹³

Women copyists were also involved in the production of biblical commentaries and transmission of biblical texts. Historian Eusebius of Caesarea (263–339) mentioned, approvingly, that Origen of Alexandria employed skilled female

7. *The Martyrdom of Agape, Irene, and Chione*, translated in Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 287.

8. *Martyrdom of Agape*, 291.

9. AnneMarie Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord: Early Christians and the Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, HTS 60 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 71.

10. John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* 12, in *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, trans. and introduced by Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, Transformation of the Classical Heritage 13 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 126.

11. *Life of St. Febronia*, trans. Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, 155. The text claims to have been written by Thomais, a female companion of Febronia; however, historical anachronisms suggest a later date. Brock and Harvey (150) believe “it does seem quite possible that the author was indeed a woman,” perhaps a nun from Febronia’s convent in Nisibis.

12. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “Performance as Exegesis: Women’s Liturgical Choirs in Syriac Tradition,” in *Inquiries into Christian Worship*, ed. Bert Groen, Steven Hawkes-Teeples, and Stefanos Alexopoulos, Eastern Christian Studies 12 (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 49.

13. Harvey, “Performance as Exegesis,” 50.

calligraphers to make copies of his exegetical writings.¹⁴ There is an intriguing story about a woman who copied a manuscript and amended a misogynistic comment she found in a letter attributed to Clement of Rome (fl. 96). According to ancient tradition, the fifth-century Codex Alexandrinus, a Greek Bible, was copied by an Egyptian noblewoman named Thecla. Her name had been written on a final page that was torn off and lost due to disrepair; however, medieval Arabic notations in the margins of the second page also attribute it to Thecla.¹⁵ Codex Alexandrinus includes the two letters of Clement, regarded as scriptural by many ancient Christians. The Alexandrinus version of 1 Clement varies from other extant versions. In all other early versions of this text, which probably represent the original wording, Clement exhorts women: “Let them make manifest the gentleness of their tongues by their silence [*sigēs*].”¹⁶ Alexandrinus reads: “Let them [the women] make manifest the gentleness of their tongues by their *voice* [*phōnēs*].”¹⁷ This may be an instance of a woman copyist “correcting” the scriptural text to give women a voice.

Papyri offer glimpses into the familiarity of non-elite women with Scripture and their personal appropriation of biblical phrases and concepts. In her study of Greek papyri authored by Egyptian women (some texts perhaps penned by women and others dictated to scribes), historian Erica Mathieson argues that “the women’s use of biblical vocabulary and imagery is consistent with an oral transmission of Scripture” that they heard in the worshiping community.¹⁸ For instance, a certain Valeria, writing in Greek—probably in her own hand—from Kynopolis (Egypt) in the mid-fourth century, entreated a prominent clergyman to offer prayers for her healing. She echoed 1 Corinthians 5:3 and Colossians 2:5 in writing: “Even if in body I have not come to your feet, in spirit, I have come to your feet.”¹⁹ A fragmentary papyrus from Oxyrhynchus from “sister S.” (most of her name is missing) alluded to the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55) to describe her joy upon receiving a letter from a spiritual adviser: “I received your letter, my lord father, and greatly exulted and rejoiced because such a one as my father remembers me.”²⁰

A fourth-century Egyptian widow who identified herself as the “mother of Philadelphos, the apotactic” (i.e., the ascetic), wrote to a clergyman, probably to ask him to intervene in a matter of taxation. She appealed to him with biblical language she would have heard in worship: “Next to providence, you *have mercy* on and save all those who flee to you. *Have mercy on me* too for the honour of my son, the apotactic.”²¹ According to Mathieson, biblical material played

14. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.23.2 (NPNF² 1:271).

15. For a discussion of the controversy regarding the authenticity of the tradition about the female copyist, see Kim Haines-Eitzen, *The Gendered Palimpsest: Women, Writing, and Representation in Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6–7.

16. First Clement 21.7, Codex Hierosolymitanus, translated in Haines-Eitzen, *The Gendered Palimpsest*, 3.

17. First Clement 21.7, Codex Alexandrinus, translated in Haines-Eitzen, *The Gendered Palimpsest*, 3; emphasis added.

18. Erica A. Mathieson, *Christian Women in the Greek Papyri of Egypt to 400 CE*, *Studia Antiqua Australiensia* 6 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 99.

19. “Letter of Valeria to Paphnouthios” (P.Lond. 6.1926), translated in Mathieson, *Christian Women*, 37.

20. “Letter from sister S.” (P.Oxy. 8.1161, C4), translated in Mathieson, *Christian Women*, 45.

21. “Appeal of the mother of Philadelphos the apotactic, to Apa Johannes” (SB 18.13612), translated in Mathieson, *Christian Women*, 59; emphasis added.

a significant role in shaping the letter writers' self-understanding as Christian women. She argues that the "women identify with biblical characters whose circumstances parallel their own" and "make use of biblical concepts that allow them to articulate their situations to each woman's best advantage and to place those whose help they seek in a position parallel to the biblical rescuer."²² Such papyri, some remaining only as fragments, provide crucial information for reconstructing a picture, even if incomplete, of ancient Christian women's engagement with biblical texts.

Beruriah and the Door Latch: Echoes of Ancient Jewish Women's Voices

The Tosefta, a second-century CE Palestinian compilation of Jewish oral law, contains an authoritative ruling from the female scholar Beruriah: "A claustra [door latch], Rabbi Tarfon declares unclean and the sages declare clean. And Beruriah says: One lets it fall from the doorway and hangs it on the next (doorway) on the Sabbath. These things were said before Rabbi Joshua. He said: Beruriah has spoken well."²³ Beruriah reasoned that a door latch must be kosher because it was customary and permissible to use it on the Sabbath. Her pronouncement was approved by Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah (d. ca. 131 CE), who ruled that Beruriah's interpretation of Jewish law was correct. However, another second-century text, the Mishnah, credited Beruriah's saying to Rabbi Joshua.²⁴ Historian Tal Ilan observes that although "her ruling was deemed worth preserving and codifying," this section of the Mishnah "obviously deprives Beruriah of her legitimate (if somewhat trivial) ruling, placing it in the mouth of the sage who heard the wise woman's decision and approved it."²⁵

Even as the Mishnah suppressed mention of Beruriah, later rabbinic texts contributed to legends about her. The Babylonian Talmud, compiled between the third and sixth centuries, identified her as the wife of Rabbi Meir (2nd c. CE). The Talmud praised her piety and learning, stating that she learned "three hundred traditions in a day from three hundred masters."²⁶ Subsequent traditions reported by Rashi (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac of Troyes, 1040–1105) recounted her alleged sexual infidelity and suicide, brought about when Beruriah's husband desired to win an argument and prove his wife wrong: "One time (Beruriah) mocked the sages' saying: 'Women are light-headed.' (Rabbi Meir) said to her: By your life, you will eventually affirm their words. He instructed one of his disciples to seduce her. (The student) urged her for many days until she consented. When the matter became known to her she strangled herself, and Rabbi Meir fled out of disgrace."²⁷ According to this medieval report, Beruriah got her comeuppance for female haughtiness and for challenging a rabbinic saying. Ancient accounts of Beruriah—whose contributions were suppressed in some

22. Mathieson, *Christian Women*, 99–100.

23. Tosefta *Kelim Bava Metzia* 1.6, translated in Tal Ilan, *Mine and Yours Are Hers: Retrieving Women's History from Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Brill, 1997), 57.

24. Mishnah *Kelim* 11:4, cited in Ilan, *Mine and Yours*, 58.

25. Ilan, *Mine and Yours*, 58.

26. Bavli [Babylonian Talmud] *Pesahim* 62b, quoted in Ilan, *Mine and Yours*, 102–3.

27. Rashi, commentary on Bavli *Avodah Zarah* 18b, translated in Ilan, *Mine and Yours*, 68.

sources and embellished in others—exemplify the challenges associated with retrieving ancient Jewish women’s voices. As with male-authored accounts dealing with Christian women, the extant Jewish sources about women reflect the gendered ideals and ideologies of their authors.

The first-century-CE Jewish philosopher Philo praised the Therapeutae, an ascetic community of Jewish men and women living near Alexandria, Egypt. The term *Therapeutae* refers to “attendants” or “devotees” who serve a deity.²⁸ Philo regarded the allegorical interpretation of Scripture as a form of philosophy and characterized the Therapeutae as learned philosophers. He reported that the men and women of this community dedicated their time to studying and interpreting Scripture.²⁹ Historian Joan Taylor argues that women drawn to this community came from circles of learned Greek-speaking Jewish women from Alexandria, where allegorical interpretation of the Bible was popular.

Philo described the Sabbath gatherings among the Therapeutae: women and men, divided by a partition, listened to instruction delivered by a man. On special occasions, community members held symposiums that included a meal, a lecture on scriptural interpretation, and hymn singing. Both men and women sang, modeling their practice on Exodus 15:1–21, where, according to Philo, Israelite men and women formed a combined choir to praise God for leading them through the Red Sea, the men led by Moses and the women by the prophet Miriam.³⁰ Philo said that men and women alike composed and sang the hymns. If female-authored songs or other writings from the community once existed, they have been lost.

In her groundbreaking study of ancient inscriptional evidence for female Jewish synagogue leaders, historian Bernadette Brooten identified three ancient women holding the title “Head of the Synagogue”: Theopempte and Rufina (both from Asia Minor) and Sophia of Gortyn (Crete). The inscriptions date from the second to fifth centuries CE.³¹ Brooten suggests that these women performed roles equivalent to men who held the same title:

I propose the following reconstruction. Women synagogue heads, like their male counterparts, were active in administration and exhortation. They may have worked especially with women, although we should not assume that they worked only with women. Perhaps they looked after the financial affairs of the synagogue, administering it as Rufina administered her large household; perhaps they exhorted their congregations, reminding them to keep the Sabbath as had the synagogue head in Luke 13:14 before them. We must assume that they had knowledge of the Torah in order to be able to teach and exhort others in it.³²

Numerous other inscriptions refer to women as synagogue leaders, elders, and officiants.³³ If they taught and interpreted Scripture as Brooten suggests, the

28. Joan E. Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers of First-Century Alexandria: Philo’s “Therapeutae” Reconsidered* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 56–61.

29. Philo, *The Contemplative Life* 28–29, trans. F. H. Colson, LCL 363 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), 129–31.

30. Philo, *Contemplative Life* 87–88, LCL 363:167.

31. Bernadette J. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues*, BJS 36 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 5–27.

32. Brooten, *Women Leaders*, 32.

33. Brooten, *Women Leaders*, 35–99.

women's spoken words have been lost, but their roles have been memorialized in inscriptions.

Virtually no extant female-authored ancient Jewish texts have been found, apart from documents that contain no biblical references. An important exception is the work of Maria, a Jewish scientist who lived in Alexandria sometime in the first to the early third centuries. Maria invented scientific equipment and wrote treatises on alloying metals. Extracts from her treatises on chemistry were preserved in Greek, Arabic, and Latin. Although none of these works include biblical interpretation, she referred to herself as a member of "the race of Abraham" and used the phrase "wisdom of the Lord hidden from the Gentiles" to characterize chemistry.³⁴ There may also be echoes of Genesis 1–2 in her explanations of various kinds of moisture, quoted by tenth-century Arab philosopher Abū 'Abdullah Muhammad ibn Umail al-Tamīmī: "Mariya also said, 'The "water" which I have mentioned is an angel [i.e., divine], and descends from the sky, and the earth accepts it on account of [the earth's] moistness. The water of the sky is held by the waters of the earth and the water of the earth acts as its servants, and its Sand [serves] for the purpose of honoring it.'"³⁵ In Maria's worldview, rainwater and dew have a heavenly nature that differs from water originating from the earth. When rainwater and dew fall, they are retained in the moist ground, which acts as an earthly "servant," holding the heavenly waters. Although she did not explicitly quote Scripture, Maria may have had in mind the biblical separation of the waters above the firmament and the waters below it (Gen. 1:6–7).

In the first century BCE, the Greek author Alexander Polyhistor made an intriguing reference to "a woman of Hebrew descent, Moso," who had composed a book titled *The Law of the Jews*.³⁶ Although for centuries many scholars assumed that "Moso" was a misspelling of "Moses" or a mistake on Polyhistor's part, Tal Ilan argues that the possibility of female authorship should not be dismissed. Polyhistor was familiar with Moses and unlikely to confuse the biblical lawgiver with a female interpreter.³⁷ Speculating on the possible contents of Moso's book, Ilan laments its loss:

And what can we say about Moso's book? If indeed she wrote a book on Jewish law, what character did it have? Was it a legal discussion? Was it a commentary? Was it a Midrash? Did it look like the Book of Jubilees, or like the Qumranic Temple Scroll, which were probably both contemporaries? Unfortunately we have no way of answering any of these questions.³⁸

Recent scholars have debated the degree to which ancient Jewish women participated in study of Torah and rabbinic writings. Some ancient sages interpreted Deuteronomy 11:19 to mean that Torah should be taught only to

34. Ralph Patai, *The Jewish Alchemists: A History and Sourcebook* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 70.

35. 'Abdullah Muhammad ibn Umail al-Tamīmī, *The Silvery Water and the Starry Earth*, translated in Patai, *Jewish Alchemists*, 68–69.

36. Quoted in Tal Ilan, "Learned Jewish Women in Antiquity," in *Religiöses Lernen in der biblischen, frühjüdischen und frühchristlichen Überlieferung*, ed. Beate Ego and Helmut Merkel, WUNT 180 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 181.

37. Ilan, "Learned Jewish Women," 181.

38. Ilan, "Learned Jewish Women," 183.

males: “‘You shall teach [the words of the Torah] to your sons’—but not your daughters.”³⁹ In a frequently quoted passage from the Mishnah (Oral Law), Rabbi Eliezer (1st–2nd c.) said: “Whoever teaches Torah to his daughters teaches her *tiflut*,” a word that can mean “nonsense,” “distortions,” or “lewdness”; the latter translation makes most sense in this context.⁴⁰ The rabbis were commenting on Numbers 5:11–31, which describes a test administered by the priest to determine the guilt of a woman accused of adultery. If she drank holy water mixed with dust from the tabernacle floor and no harm arose, she was pronounced innocent; if the bitter water caused her to swell up, she was guilty. The rabbis said that if the accused had acquired merit through previous good actions, a woman guilty of adultery could suspend the curse:

There is the possibility that merit suspends the curse for one year, and there is the possibility that merit suspends the curse for two years, and there is the possibility that merit suspends the curse for three years. On this basis Ben Azzai says, “A man is required to teach Torah to his daughter. For if she should drink the water[,] she should know that [if nothing happens to her], merit is what suspends [the curse from taking effect].” R. Eliezer says, “Whoever teaches Torah to his daughter teaches her sexual satisfaction.”⁴¹

Rabbi Eliezer’s pronouncement—intended to keep women from learning about and using this loophole to escape punishment—is frequently repeated in modern times as evidence that Jews in late antiquity were opposed to teaching women Torah.⁴² However, numerous other passages from rabbinic literature suggest that the sages were not uniformly opposed to women’s learning. A passage from the Tosefta assumed that women studied Scripture and rabbinic literature: “Men and women who suffer from (venereal) discharge and menstruants, and women after childbirth are permitted to read from the *Torah*, the Prophets, and the Writings, and to study *Mishnah*, *midrash*, *halakhot* and *aggadot*.”⁴³ The Babylonian Talmud edited this text so that those under discussion were all male: men who suffered from a venereal discharge, male lepers, and men who had sexual relations with menstruants. This likely reflected a growing impulse in some Jewish communities to restrict women’s education in Scripture and rabbinic writings.⁴⁴

Judith Hauptman, a feminist scholar of rabbinic literature, explores the presence of women in the Talmud. Hauptman suggests that women in rabbinic families regularly engaged in Torah study—interpreted broadly to include instruction and discussions with their fathers, husbands, and brothers. Since education in Torah frequently occurred in the rabbi’s home, women could overhear and even participate in men’s discussions of halakah (Jewish law). Women

39. Bavli *Qiddushin* 29b, translated in Judith Hauptman, “A New View of Women and Torah Study in the Talmudic Period,” *JSIJ* 9 (2010): 250, <https://jewish-faculty.biu.ac.il/files/jewish-faculty/shared/hauptman.pdf>.

40. Bavli *Sotah* 22b, translated in Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Women’s Religions in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 79.

41. Kraemer, *Women’s Religions*, 79.

42. See Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 170–81.

43. Tosefta *Berakhot* 2:12, translated in Ilan, *Mine and Yours*, 60.

44. Babylonian Talmud *Berakhot* 22a, discussed in Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 181.

learned and transmitted the regulations that emerged during the Talmudic period. In fact, female education was vital for maintaining Jewish observance in the rabbinic home.⁴⁵ To support her contention, Hauptman quotes a passage from the Jerusalem Talmud in which Rabbi Simon's (3rd c. CE) unnamed sister taught him a rule she had learned from their father:

R. Shaimi asked: What is the rule for inverting a utensil over it [an egg laid on the festival, to keep it from rolling away and getting broken]? Let it be [answered from] that which R. Simon of the house of R. Yannai said: I did not hear [the following halakhah] from Father; my sister told it to me in his name. If an egg was laid on a festival, one may prop a utensil against it so that it does not roll away but one may *not* invert a utensil over it. Shmuel said: One *may* invert a utensil over it.⁴⁶

Rabbi Simon's sister, albeit unnamed, became part of the ruling's vital "chain of transmission."

Some halakic observances were passed from mother to daughter, such as separating a portion of the dough (the challah) when baking bread for the Sabbath. A woman's observance of Jewish law required more than rote memorization of regulations or unthinking imitation of her mother's actions. Rather, halakic observance required the ability to reason, apply halakic principles to new situations, and know when to consult a rabbi for a ruling. Domestic observance taught by elder females to younger women doubtlessly included oral instruction about each action's meaning. Beruriah was remembered—and variously celebrated, vilified, or suppressed—for her authoritative understanding of Torah and its application. Modern readers may conclude that other ancient Jewish women, like Beruriah the sage, learned and taught Jewish law to others.

Word, Spirit, and Power: The New Prophecy Movement

In the second century CE, a controversial Christian leader named Maximilla uttered a forceful defense of her teaching: "I am pursued like a wolf from the sheep. I am not a wolf. I am word, and spirit, and power."⁴⁷ The first portion probably referred to Jesus' warning about false prophets, who were wolves in sheep's clothing (Matt. 7:15). Maximilla's enemies may have used this verse to impugn her as a false prophet and dangerous predator. In the second portion, she countered her opponents with phrasing that appropriated Paul's response to his opponents in Corinth, claiming that his message was accompanied by "the Spirit and . . . power" (1 Cor. 2:4).⁴⁸ Identifying herself with the apostle, Maximilla adapted biblical terminology to defend her ministry.

45. Hauptman, "New View," 250–52.

46. Yerushalmi [Jerusalem Talmud] *Shabbat* 13:6, 14b, translated in Hauptman, "New View," 271.

47. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.16.17, trans. Heine, *Montanist Oracles*, 3.

48. Though later detractors misinterpreted her words, "I am word, and spirit, and power," as a claim of her own divinity, she almost certainly understood this as Christ speaking through her prophetically. Elsewhere Maximilla is recorded as saying, "Hear not me, but hear Christ." Epiphanius, *Panarion* 48.12.4, trans. Heine, *Montanist Oracles*, 5. See Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority, and the New Prophecy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 164.

Maximilla was a figure in the New Prophecy movement, named for the conviction that the Holy Spirit continued to inspire prophets following the time of the apostles. Originating in Phrygia (Asia Minor), most likely in the 150s or 160s, the New Prophecy was led by Priscilla, Maximilla, and their male colleague Montanus. Later the prophet Quintilla joined in its leadership. Mainstream Christians acknowledged that none of the New Prophecy teachings regarding Christ or the Trinity were heretical. Rather, the sect was condemned for its apocalyptic teachings, strict asceticism, and variations in practicing the Lord's Supper, in which they included a curdled cheese or yogurt drink. Particularly controversial was their affirmation of women's leadership as prophets, priests, and bishops.⁴⁹ Opponents later nicknamed them "Montanists," after the male founder.

Maximilla, Priscilla, Quintilla, and Montanus uttered sayings that were recorded, collected, and circulated in books (*biblia*) that were revered by their followers. The circulation of female-authored books was one point of contention between New Prophecy adherents and their mainstream Christian opponents. Unfortunately, these books were lost or destroyed. Only a few of their sayings survive, preserved primarily in hostile accounts of men trying to refute them. One, Epiphanius of Cyprus (310–403), wrote a book cataloging heresies. He reported that "either Quintilla or Priscilla—I cannot say precisely, but one of them"—said that Christ came to her in female form on a mountain in Phrygia. In this vision, the prophetess had likely drawn upon biblical imagery of the female figure Wisdom, as in Proverbs 8–9 and Matthew 11:19, which identifies Wisdom with Christ. The prophetess combined scriptural wisdom imagery with her interpretation of the descent of the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2). Quoting Quintilla (or Priscilla), Epiphanius wrote: "'Having assumed the form of a woman,' she says, 'Christ came to me in a bright robe and put wisdom in me, and revealed to me that this place is holy, and that it is here that Jerusalem will descend from heaven.'"⁵⁰ Epiphanius also related that New Prophecy women and their supporters used Galatians 3 to argue in favor of equality of the sexes and to support women's roles as clergy: "And women are bishops among them, and presbyters, and the other offices, as there is no difference, they say, for 'in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female' (cf. Gal 3:28)."⁵¹

New Prophecy women and their supporters used stories of the biblical prophets Miriam, Deborah, Anna, and the unnamed daughters of Philip to justify their prophetic activity.⁵² In the fourth-century *Dialogue between a Montanist and an Orthodox*, which may preserve arguments from an actual disputation, the Montanist posed a question:

Why do you also repudiate the saints Maximilla and Priscilla and say it is not permissible for a woman to prophesy? Did not Philip have four daughters who prophesied, and was not Deborah a prophetess (cf. Acts 21:9, Judg 4:4)? And does not the apostle say: "Every woman who prays or prophesies with

49. Trevett, *Montanism*, 7750.

50. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 49.1, trans. Heine, *Montanist Oracles*, 5.

51. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 49.2, trans. Heine, *Montanist Oracles*, 133.

52. See the discussion by Joy A. Schroeder, *Deborah's Daughters: Gender Politics and Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 14–17.

uncovered head . . ." (1 Cor 11:5)? If it is not possible for a woman to prophesy, neither can she pray. But if they can pray, let them also prophesy.⁵³

The orthodox character's response is instructive for historians interested in uncovering the challenges faced by Christian women—Montanist or not—who wished to author and circulate writings under their own names. The orthodox disputant argued that the "veil" required by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11 was not a literal head covering made of fabric, but Paul meant, rather, that a woman should veil herself with modesty by refraining from writing books in her own name:

We do not repudiate the prophecies of women. Even the holy Mary prophesied and said: "Henceforth all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:48). And as even you yourself said, the holy Philip had four daughters who prophesied, and Mary the sister of Aaron prophesied (cf. Exod 15:20f). But we do not permit them to speak in Churches nor to have authority over men (cf. 1 Tim 2:12), with the result that books too are written under their names. For this is what it means for women to pray and prophesy without a veil, and this, then, has brought shame on her head (cf. 1 Cor 11:5), that is, her husband, for could not the holy Mary, mother of God, have written books under her own name? But she did not, so that she might not bring shame on her head by exercising authority over men.⁵⁴

When the Montanist character asked whether the Virgin Mary was unveiled and outspoken when she prophesied that "all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:48), the orthodox character replied: "She has the evangelist [Luke] as her veil. For the gospel has not been written under her name."⁵⁵ Thus the mother of Jesus could compose words of Scripture—the Magnificat—but these words were recorded in the Gospel bearing Luke's name.⁵⁶

One of the criticisms leveled against Montanist women was that "these weak females" wrote "many books."⁵⁷ General distrust of women's writing and particular condemnation of New Prophecy books may have dissuaded other gifted women from composing works of biblical interpretation. Any woman who presumed to interpret the Bible on her own, in her own name, and who had the audacity to circulate her writings—such a person was subject to social criticism and, at times, suspicion of holding heretical sympathies.

New Prophecy writings composed by women were intentionally destroyed by ecclesiastical opponents. Yet their opponents' efforts preserved a few fragments: heresiologists combed through Montanist books for sayings to quote

53. *Dialogue between a Montanist and an Orthodox*, trans. Heine, *Montanist Oracles*, 125. Such disputations were a common genre in late antiquity. Modern readers cannot be certain that such documents are verbatim renderings of words spoken by individuals at actual debates, since works like the *Dialogue* were rhetorical constructions designed to show how heretical disputants were bested by orthodox debaters. Nevertheless, an author needed to be familiar with Montanist arguments in order to effectively refute them.

54. Heine, *Montanist Oracles*, 125.

55. Heine, *Montanist Oracles*, 125.

56. The same argument was found in the work of (Pseudo-)Didymus of Alexandria (ca. 313–ca. 398), who wrote: "But Scripture recognizes as prophetesses the four daughters of Philip, Deborah, Miriam the sister of Aaron, and the Theotokos Mary, as the Gospel says, 'From now on all women and generations will bless me.' But Scripture does not have books under their names." Didymus, *De Trinitate* 3.41 (PG 39:988).

57. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 8.19, trans. Heine, *Montanist Oracles*, 57.

and refute. Writing around 375 CE, Epiphanius reported on the shocking audacity of New Prophecy women who interpreted the biblical stories of Eve and the biblical prophetesses in novel ways in support of women's roles as clergy:

And they have Quintilla as their leader, together with Priscilla who was also with the Cataphrygians. They bear many vain testimonies, granting grace to Eve because she first ate of the tree of knowledge (cf. Gen 3:6). And they consider Moses' sister as a prophetess (cf. Exod 15:20), in support of the women appointed to the clergy among them. "But," she says, "Philip had four daughters who prophesied" (cf. Acts 21:9). And frequently in their assembly seven virgins dressed in white and carrying torches enter, coming, of course to prophesy to the people.⁵⁸

Having inherited the scriptural teaching that women should be subject to men because Eve was deceived, not Adam (1 Tim. 2:11–15), Epiphanius was horrified to learn that women perversely interpreted the Genesis story in exactly the opposite way. Through the centuries, women proffered various defenses of Eve, but none as unequivocally positive as this until the modern period.⁵⁹ Though Epiphanius claimed to have trustworthy knowledge of their activities, it is uncertain whether his report of women honoring Eve was accurate. Epiphanius may have fabricated the account to shock his readers and diminish Montanist credibility, presuming that his audience would find women's appreciation for Eve to be outlandish. Or he may have passed along a false report that he had heard from another.⁶⁰ However, his report of Montanist admiration for the prophetic daughters of Philip is corroborated by other sources.⁶¹ Thus his words might preserve at least a remnant of Montanist women's teaching and an echo of the very voices he endeavored to silence forever.

Crushing the Head of the Serpent: Perpetua's Visionary Biblical Interpretation

On March 7, 203 CE, a group of newly baptized Christian men and women were martyred alongside their catechetical teacher Saturus in an amphitheater in the North African city of Carthage. The most famous of these martyrs were Felicity, a slave, and a well-born Roman woman, Vibia Perpetua. Their story is recorded in *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*. Framed by a redactor's devotional praise of the martyrs and accompanied by a third-person narration

58. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 49.2, trans. Heine, *Montanist Oracles*, 133.

59. See Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978). Honoring Eve as a recipient of a special grace anticipated the celebration of Eve in Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* (New York: European Publishing Co., 1895–98; repr., Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 1:24–25. Some gnostic Christian writings also asserted a special *positive* knowledge available to those who ate from the primordial tree. See *The Nature of the Rulers*, in *The Nag Hammadi Library: The Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts Complete in One Volume*, ed. Marvin W. Meyer (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 187–98.

60. Epiphanius stated that his information on heresies and schisms came from hearsay, written texts, and things witnessed with his "own ears and eyes." *Panarion*, Proem 2, 2.4, translated in Young Richard Kim, *Epiphanius of Cyprus: Imagining an Orthodox World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 5.

61. *Dialogue between a Montanist and an Orthodox*, trans. Heine, *Montanist Oracles*, 125.

of their arrest and execution, the centerpiece of the *Passion* is Perpetua's first-person account of her experiences and visions as she endured life in prison, contemplated impending martyrdom, and expressed anguish over her separation from her still-nursing infant son.

More than a third of the *Passion* is written in Perpetua's voice.⁶² The ancient redactor writes that Perpetua was well-educated and composed the text herself:

Some young catechumens were arrested: Revocatus and Felicity, his fellow slave; Saturninus; and Secundulus. And among these was also Vibia Perpetua—a woman well born, liberally educated [*liberaliter instituta*], and honorably married, who had a father, mother, and two brothers, one of whom was also a catechumen. She had an infant son still at the breast and was about twenty-two years of age. From this point there follows a complete account of her martyrdom, as she left it, written in her own hand and in accordance with her own understanding.⁶³

Despite debates about the text's authorship, generally scholars agree that Perpetua wrote the prison diary, while the redactor provided an introduction and a conclusion that narrated the account of Perpetua's suffering and death. Like the prison writings of men like Ignatius of Antioch (d. ca. 67 CE) and the apostle Paul, Perpetua's diary contains vivid imagery and powerful religious reflections.⁶⁴ Classicist Danuta Shanzer calls it "the first preserved autobiographical account written by an ancient woman."⁶⁵ The redactor reveals possible New Prophecy sympathies in his opening: he says that he and his audience "acknowledge and honor the new prophecies and new visions."⁶⁶

Perpetua probably learned to read and write Latin from a *grammaticus*, a secondary-school teacher who educated her alongside her brothers in the family home.⁶⁷ Though she may have heard "at least some lines of Virgil during her time with a *grammaticus*," Perpetua's text does not reveal familiarity with classical literature or evidence of rhetorical training.⁶⁸ By contrast, the redactor, responsible for the narration and the carefully crafted devotional introduction and conclusion, shows signs of education in rhetoric and "classical models of composition."⁶⁹ Raised in a non-Christian home, Perpetua probably first encountered Scripture around the time of her conversion to Christianity through hearing it read aloud at worship and listening to biblical stories during catechetical instruction. Unlike her redactor, who quoted Scripture in Latin

62. See Thomas J. Heffernan, ed. and trans., *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 104–24.

63. Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 126.

64. Jan N. Bremmer and Marco Formisano, "Perpetua's Passions: A Brief Introduction," in *Perpetua's Passions: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the "Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis"*, ed. J. Bremmer and M. Formisano (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5–6; Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 5; Emanuela Prinzivalli, "Perpetua the Martyr," in *Roman Women*, ed. Augusto Fraschetti, trans. Linda Lappin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 119. For a survey of the debate, see Walter Ameling, "Femina Liberaliter Instituta—Some Thoughts on a Martyr's Liberal Education," in Bremmer & Formisano, *Perpetua's Passion*, 80 n. 12.

65. Danuta Shanzer, "Literature, History, Periodization, and the Pleasures of the Latin Literary History of Late Antiquity," *History Compass* 7, no. 3 (2009): 934.

66. Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 125.

67. Ameling, "Femina Liberaliter Instituta," 88.

68. Ameling, "Femina Liberaliter Instituta," 88.

69. Heffernan, *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, 8.

translation, Perpetua included no direct scriptural quotations in her visionary diary. However, commentators have identified at least thirteen scriptural allusions or images.⁷⁰

Perpetua reported a dream in which she was instructed to climb a long, narrow ladder, flanked on both sides by sharp iron weapons: "And there was a serpent of great size lying at the foot of the ladder, which would lie in wait for those who climbed and deterred them from climbing."⁷¹ The ladder symbolized the path of faithful martyrdom. The menacing serpent represented the devil (Rev. 12:9). The vision evoked the Lord's words to the serpent in the garden: "She will crush your head and you will lie in wait for her heel" (Gen. 3:15).⁷² Perpetua wrote that she herself stepped on the serpent's head as she ascended the ladder: "And I said: 'In the name of Jesus Christ, he will not hurt me.' And from beneath the ladder itself, the serpent slowly stuck out its head, as if it feared me, and I stepped on its head and climbed up, as if it were the first step."⁷³

When Perpetua reached the top of the ladder, she saw a vision of Christ that evoked the imagery of the Good Shepherd (John 10:11). Her words echoed language from the book of Revelation, in which Christ was seated on a throne, surrounded by thousands of worshipers and a multitude robed in white (Rev. 7:9–11). In Revelation 7:17, John of Patmos was told that the Lamb at the center of the throne "will be their shepherd." He described Christ as having "hairs that were white, as white wool, and as snow" (Rev. 1:14). These images seem to be incorporated into Perpetua's description of her visionary encounter with Jesus: "And I saw an enormous garden and a white-haired man sitting in the middle of it dressed in shepherd's clothes, a big man, milking sheep. And standing around were many thousands dressed in white. And he raised his head, looked at me, and said: 'You are welcome here, child.'"⁷⁴ The shepherd then gave her a mouthful of cheese made from the milk he had been drawing—perhaps an echo of a liturgy involving milk or cheese.

The image of the woman stepping on the head of the devil, who attacked her feet (Gen. 3:15), was repeated in Perpetua's most famous vision: a dream in which she entered a combat arena, stripped for battle, and became a man. During a fierce wrestling match with a vicious Egyptian who represented the devil, her opponent attempted to grab her feet as she tried to kick him in the face. Finally, miraculously lifted into the air, she knocked him out and victoriously stepped on his head.⁷⁵ Both visions predicted Perpetua's defeat of Satan through faithful martyrdom. Her visionary victory represented conquest of the devil, who sought to persuade her to deny her faith.

In Perpetua's visions, modern readers can see third-century engagement with Scripture. Her prison diary did not offer extended commentary on the Bible. Rather, in this visionary genre, the dream images from Genesis, Revelation, and other biblical books provided commentary on Perpetua's life, struggle, and martyrdom.

70. Ameling, "Femina Liberaliter Instituta," 95–96.

71. *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* 4, trans. Heffernan, 127.

72. This is translated from the *Vetus Latina* (Old Latin) text of Genesis. Perpetua may have heard a different version.

73. *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* 4, trans. Heffernan, 127.

74. *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* 4, trans. Heffernan, 127.

75. *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* 10, trans. Heffernan, 129–30.

Interpreting Scripture through Pilgrimage: Egeria's Diary

In the early 380s, a wealthy woman named Egeria traveled with her retinue to Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, and Palestine, seeking out biblical sites. She left behind a Latin diary that recounted her travels. Originating from northern Spain or perhaps Gaul, Egeria may have been a member of an ascetic community, an unmarried woman or widow who had taken a vow of celibacy; or she may have been a devout woman not under vows.⁷⁶ Her words painted a vivid picture for her intended audience, the "ladies, reverend sisters," who remained at home.⁷⁷ The diary, discovered in 1884, contains an account of the religious sites Egeria encountered, together with a description of the Christian liturgy in Jerusalem.⁷⁸

Egeria was a woman of status and privilege who offered monetary donations to the churches and monastic communities she visited. Local bishops regularly offered to be her tour guides and eagerly showed her the holy sites. They took her to places that were said (by locals) to be the settings for biblical scenes. Egeria viewed the site where Sodom and Gomorrah once stood. She visited the well where Rebecca greeted Abraham's servant and watered his camels. Egeria or members of her entourage carried copies of biblical books to study and read aloud during their travels. She apparently had a copy of the *Vetus Latina* (Old Latin), a Latin translation of the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) and the New Testament. Egeria brought along the *Onomasticon* of Eusebius (ca. 260–ca. 340), a reference book containing geographical information about biblical sites. Egeria once referred to her library back home. When a bishop gave her a manuscript of letters said to have been exchanged between Jesus and King Abgar of Edessa (reigned 13–50 CE; SE Turkey), she reported her delight at receiving a text more extensive than the copy she already owned.⁷⁹

According to biblical scholar Catherine Sider Hamilton, Egeria found "a present spiritual power in the biblical history read with an intense literalism."⁸⁰ Egeria's primary form of engagement with the biblical text was to place herself physically at each site named in Scripture. Her group's custom was to arrive at a biblical site (sometimes after an arduous foot journey), recite a prayer, have someone read aloud the applicable scriptural passage, and sing together an appropriate psalm. Sometimes the Eucharist was celebrated. Regarding her arrival at the cave on Horeb where Elijah had fled following his confrontation with Ahab (1 Kgs. 19), Egeria reported: "We offered the sacrifice [Eucharist] there, and recited a very fervent prayer, and the proper passage was read from the Book of Kings. For this was always very much our custom, that, whenever we should come to places that I had desired to visit, the proper passage from Scripture would be read."⁸¹

76. Catherine Sider Hamilton, "Egeria (fl. 380s)," in *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Marion Ann Taylor and Agnes Choi, associate editor (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 179.

77. Egeria, *Diary of a Pilgrimage* 3.7, trans. George E. Gingras (New York: Newman, 1970), 53; Egeria, *Journal de Voyage*, ed. Pierre Maraval, SC 296 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1982), 136.

78. For background on Egeria, her text, and its history, see John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Aris & Phillips, 1999). Also see Lynn H. Cohick and Amy Brown Hughes, *Christian Women in the Patristic World: Their Influence, Authority, and Legacy in the Second through the Fifth Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 127–55.

79. Egeria, *Diary*, 81.

80. Hamilton, "Egeria," 181.

81. Egeria, *Diary*, 54.

Egeria seemed most occupied with Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers—the lives of Abraham, Sarah, the other patriarchs and matriarchs, and Moses—as well as with sites associated with Christ’s passion, particularly as she described the Holy Week liturgy in Jerusalem. However, this apparent focus may simply reflect the surviving portions of her book, since the beginning and ending of her diary are lost. Egeria exhibited a keen desire to see every biblical site that she could visit. She credulously trusted every piece of information shared by her tour guides and local experts. Writing to her sisters, she confessed, in an understatement: “I am somewhat curious.”⁸²

Egeria’s careful study of the Bible is evident in the report of her visit to the shrine dedicated to Abraham’s dwelling place in Haran, Mesopotamia (Gen. 11:31). There she engaged a local bishop in extended conversation about a lacuna that she identified in the book of Genesis—the arrival of Isaac’s in-laws, who are mentioned in Genesis 24.

Since the bishop of this place is very learned in Scripture, I asked him, saying: “I beg you, my lord, to tell me what I wish to hear.” And he said: “Ask what you wish, daughter, and I will tell you if I can.” Then I said to him: “I know from Holy Scripture that the holy man Abraham came here with his father, and his wife Sarah, and Lot, his brother’s son. However, I have not read when Nachor and Bathuel came here; I only know this, that afterwards the servant of Abraham came to Haran to seek in marriage for Isaac, his master Abraham’s son, Rebecca, the daughter of Bathuel, son of Nachor.” The saintly bishop then said to me: “It is indeed written in Genesis, as you say, daughter, that the holy man Abraham came here with his family. The canonical Scriptures, however, do not say when Nachor with his family and Bathuel came here. But it is clear that they also came here afterwards; furthermore, their tombs are here, about a thousand feet from the city. For the Scriptures indeed testify that the servant of the holy man Abraham came here to take away the holy woman Rebecca; and later the holy man Jacob came here when he took the daughters of Laban the Syrian.”⁸³

The bishop’s mention of Laban’s daughters immediately prompted another question from Egeria, the location of the well where Jacob met Rachel, followed by the bishop’s offer to accompany her to yet another biblical site.⁸⁴

At each location, Egeria absorbed all the details she could. While standing on Mount Sinai gazing toward the valley below, her guides pointed out the places where the Israelites created the golden calf, where Moses broke the tables of the law, where the Israelites received manna and quail, and where numerous other events occurred. Egeria referred her sisters to the biblical text to fill in any details she omitted:

And so we were shown everything written in the holy books of Moses that was done there in that valley which lies below the mountain of God, the holy Mount Sinai. It was too much, however, to write down each one individually, because so many details could not be retained; besides, when Your Charity reads the holy books of Moses, she will perceive, carefully written, all that

82. Egeria, *Diary*, 74.

83. Egeria, *Diary*, 83–84.

84. Egeria, *Diary*, 84.

was done there. This is the valley where the Passover was celebrated, one year after the children of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, for they tarried in that valley for some time, while the holy Moses twice climbed the mountain of God and came down again.⁸⁵

Later, as they walked toward Mount Nebo, a priest offered her the option of viewing yet another biblical site along the way: "If you wish to see the water which flowed from the rock, the water which Moses gave to the children of Israel when they were thirsty, you can see it, if you wish to take the trouble of turning off the road at the sixth mile."⁸⁶ Of course she wanted to see it! "When he had said this, we were very eager to go, and we immediately turned off the road and followed the priest who was guiding us."⁸⁷

This remarkable diary attests to an extraordinary woman's learning, devotion, and love of Scripture. Biblical texts became more vivid to Egeria as she viewed the sites and as she spoke with the spiritual leaders who dwelt in those locales. In turn, the landscape came alive through her reading of the biblical passages associated with the sites and through her encounter with the holy people who were her conversation partners:

Though I must always give thanks to God for all things, I shall not speak about the many favors which He deigned to confer upon me in spite of my unworthiness and lack of merit, in allowing me to travel through all these places, which I did not deserve. Yet I cannot sufficiently thank all those holy [people] who so willingly consented to receive my humble person in their cells and above all to guide me through all the places which I was forever seeking out, following Holy Scripture.⁸⁸

Proba and Eudocia: Word-Stitching Biblical Stories

Two elite Christian women, Proba (ca. 320–ca. 370) and Empress Eudocia (ca. 400–460), composed epic poetic retellings of biblical events. Educated men in late antiquity sometimes demonstrated their poetic skill by creating compositions "stitched together" with lines or half-lines from the epic verses of the Greek poet Homer (late 8th–early 7th c. BCE) or Latin poet Vergil (70–19 BCE). The resulting poem was called a cento (patchwork quilt) since "a centonist collects disparate scraps and strands from a source text and stitches them into a new artistic whole."⁸⁹ A well-crafted cento displayed the poet's deep familiarity with the classical source material and was regarded as an artistic work in its own right. Cultured audiences were expected to recognize the original Homeric or Vergilian context of each line and appreciate the resonances that echoed from the source material into the new work.

85. Egeria, *Diary*, 57.

86. Egeria, *Diary*, 66.

87. Egeria, *Diary*, 170.

88. Egeria, *Diary*, 58. Gingras translates *sanctis* as "holy men." Since Egeria reports interactions with female monastics, we altered Gingras's translation to "holy people."

89. M. D. Usher, *Homeric Stitchings: The Homeric Centos of the Empress Eudocia* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 2.

The author of the *Cento Vergilianus*, or *Vergilian Cento*, referred to herself as “Proba, vates.”⁹⁰ *Vates* means both “prophet” and “bard.” Historians identify her as Faltonia Betitia Proba, a married woman from an illustrious Roman family.⁹¹ In her preface, Proba characterized her earlier works (now lost) on pagan and military subjects as treating “trivial themes.” She announced that she was now turning her efforts to biblical topics.⁹² The resulting poem, which retells episodes from Genesis 1–4 and the Gospel of Matthew, might sound strange to modern ears. For instance, using lines from Vergil’s epic *Aeneid* and his pastoral poetry, the *Georgics*, to describe the events of Genesis 1, Proba narrated the creation of light, the separation of light and darkness, and the formation of the stars:

Then God all powerful, to whom belongs
Supreme dominion of the universe,
Moved murky air apart, dispelled the shades,
Gave half the world to light and half to gloom.
All constellations wheeling in the silent sky
He marked, surveying here and there with watchful eyes.⁹³

Created from a rib “plucked apart from the well-knit joints of youthful Adam’s side,” Eve is a “wondrous gift” that “shone in brilliant light.”⁹⁴ Proba added narrative details, reporting that Adam joined hands with Eve (reminiscent of Roman marriage rituals) and embraced her.⁹⁵ The serpent that approached Eve was given an extended speech (20 lines) and dares her to eat:

“Tell me,” it said, “O maid—my home is in
The dim-lit woods; on slopes of river banks
I dwell, and meadows freshened by streams—
What cowardice has come upon your daring?
Strewn everywhere lie fruits, each beneath its tree.”⁹⁶

Proba followed early Christian tradition by assigning responsibility for the fall to Eve. She elaborated on the woman’s role in the disaster in Eden. Adam’s wife was “hapless” (*infelix*) and “vowed to future ruin.”⁹⁷ After eating the forbidden fruit:

She rose to greater madness; wife, alas,
She thrust in wretched Adam’s way the fruit
From the forbidden tree, and moved
His mind with unexpected charm.⁹⁸

90. Faltonia Betitia Proba, *Cento Vergilianus*, line 12, ed. Alessia Fassina and Carlo M. Lucarini (Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 6. Quotations from Proba’s poem cite the verse lines from Fassina and Lucarini’s critical edition. Translations are taken from Faltonia Betitia Proba, *The Golden Bough, the Oaken Cross: The Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba*, trans. Elizabeth A. Clark and Diane F. Hatch, American Academy of Religion Texts and Translations 5 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981).

91. M. Eleanor Irwin, “Proba, Faltonia Betitia (ca. 320–ca. 370),” in M. Taylor and Choi, *Handbook*, 412.

92. Proba, *Cento*, lines 47–55.

93. Proba, *Cento*, lines 64–68.

94. Proba, *Cento*, lines 128–30.

95. Proba, *Cento*, line 135.

96. Proba, *Cento*, lines 183–86.

97. Proba, *Cento*, line 200.

98. Proba, *Cento*, lines 203–5.

Proba arguably heightened Eve's responsibility for the fall by using lines from episodes where Vergil characterized women as villainesses, such as Clytemnestra's murder of her husband, Agamemnon.⁹⁹ Proba's intended audience would have recognized the allusions. However, Proba nowhere mentioned the subjection of Eve to Adam or the subjection of women to men (Gen. 3:16). Commentators have found this omission noteworthy, especially since the *Aeneid* "abounds in scenes in which a person or group is subjugated by another, and Proba would have had no problem finding appropriate words in Virgil's epic with which to render the curse on Eve."¹⁰⁰

In retelling Matthew's version of Jesus' birth and infancy, Proba heightened the Virgin Mary's role. Though Joseph was the primary character in Matthew 2, Proba reframed the story so that Mary was the prescient individual. Aware of Herod's impending violence, the Virgin Mary arranged for her young son's safety by sending him into hiding.¹⁰¹ In her study of Proba's cento, Sigrid Schottenius Cullhed, a scholar of comparative literature, argued that this alteration of the narrative—omission of Joseph's role and crediting Mary with the active role in protecting Jesus—caused Mary's portrayal to be particularly heroic.¹⁰²

Some commentators claimed that Proba wrote her cento specifically to educate Christian children so they could study Vergilian literature without encountering unseemly pagan subject matter.¹⁰³ One early twentieth-century scholar hypothesized that she wrote it for her *own* children.¹⁰⁴ However, this view may be rooted in nineteenth- and twentieth-century assumptions that, as a woman, Proba was more concerned with children's education than with creating a literary production designed for a wider audience. In fact, in late antiquity, instruction of children was a male occupation. At one point, Proba addressed her readers and listeners with lines from Vergil: "Mothers and men, / youths and maids unwed, be silent, / All, and turn attentive minds to me."¹⁰⁵ Thus it is likely that Proba had a widespread readership in mind as she envisioned the publication of her poem.

Proba's cento survived in numerous manuscripts and enjoyed great popularity in the Middle Ages.¹⁰⁶ Artwork that accompanied her poems sometimes depicted her among the Sibyls, famous prophetesses of Greek and Roman legend.¹⁰⁷ However, one of her contemporaries, Jerome, was generally critical of centonists for trying to Christianize the pagan poets. He mentioned a certain "chatty old woman," almost certainly Proba, and mocked her use of a line from Vergil to describe the crucifixion: "Affixed, he remained there and continued to stand."¹⁰⁸ Christian scholar Isidore of Seville's (ca. 560–636) commendation

99. Clark and Hatch, *Golden Bough*, 155.

100. Clark and Hatch, *Golden Bough*, 154.

101. Proba, *Cento*, lines 359–63, cited by Sigrid Schottenius Cullhed in *Proba the Prophet: The Christian Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba*, Mnemosyne Supplements 378 (Boston: Brill, 2015), 165.

102. Cullhed, *Proba the Prophet*, 163–68.

103. Irwin, "Faltonia Betitia Proba," 412–13.

104. A. G. Amatucci, *Storia della letteratura Latina* (Bari: G. Laterza, 1929), 146–47. See Clark and Hatch's critique of this hypothesis in *Golden Bough*, 197 n. 33.

105. Proba, *Cento*, lines 54–55; Clark and Hatch, *Golden Bough*, 21.

106. For the extensive list of manuscripts, see Fassina and Lucarini's preface to Proba, *Cento Vergilianus*, xii–cv.

107. Cullhed, *Proba the Prophet*, 24.

108. Jerome, *Epistle* 53.7, cited in Clark and Hatch, *Golden Bough*, 104–5.

of Proba was ambivalent. In his biographical collection *De viris illustribus* (*Concerning Illustrious Men*), he referred to Proba as the “sole woman named among the churchmen,” included because of her efforts to glorify Christ in verse. Isidore said he did not think highly of the quality of the cento itself, “but we praise its ingenuity.”¹⁰⁹

Another female centonist, Aelia Eudocia Augusta, used Homer’s words in a Greek verse retelling of the biblical story. Eudocia’s father, Leontius, was a non-Christian philosopher who held a prominent endowed teaching position in rhetoric in Athens. Born either in Antioch or in Athens (ca. 400), she was originally named Athenais (Athenian), a tribute to Leontius’s love of Greek culture.¹¹⁰ Well-versed in Homer’s epics, which she knew by heart, she most likely received her literary education from Leontius. After her father’s death (ca. 420), the scholarly young woman traveled to Constantinople. Members of the royal court arranged her introduction to the Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius II (401–50), whom she married in 421. Athenais was baptized prior to marriage and took the name Aelia Eudocia (benevolence). Theodosius gave her the title Augusta, an honorific conferred upon favored Roman empresses. The couple produced two daughters but no male heir.¹¹¹

Eudocia met Melania the Younger when Melania visited Constantinople in 437–38. Encouraged by Melania, Eudocia made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.¹¹² This imperial journey to the Holy Land (438–39) and the empress’s stay with Melania at the Mount of Olives were highlighted in Melania’s biography. Gerontius wrote that the two women “were scarcely able to be separated from one another, for they were strongly bonded together in spiritual love.”¹¹³ In the early 440s, Eudocia fell into disfavor with her husband, probably for political reasons. She moved permanently to Jerusalem in 443. A later account claiming that Theodosius accused Eudocia of adultery is probably baseless.¹¹⁴

In Jerusalem, Eudocia engaged in philanthropic and literary activities. She composed metrical Greek paraphrases of the first eight books of the Old Testament and the books of the prophets Daniel and Zechariah. Unfortunately, these are no longer extant, but their existence is known to us from Photius (ca. 810–ca. 895), Patriarch of Constantinople, who wrote: “The reader . . . has no need of the originals because the meaning is always preserved precisely without expansion or abridgement and the wording too, wherever possible, preserves a close similarity.”¹¹⁵ Other works include an account of the martyrdom of Cyprian “the magician” (d. 304) in a lengthy poem containing biblical references. When Cyprian (who converted to Christianity later in the story) summoned the devil to solicit unholy assistance for a rapacious male client who wanted to sexually assault a virgin vowed to Christ, the devil appeared and listed his own violent credentials:

109. Isidore of Seville, *De viris illustribus* 22.18 (PL 83:1093).

110. Kenneth G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 112–18.

111. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, 178.

112. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, 83–84.

113. Gerontius, *Life of Melania* 59 (SC 90:244–46), trans. Clark, 71.

114. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses*, 176–94.

115. Photius, *The Bibliotheca of Photius: A Selection*, trans. N. G. Wilson (London: Duckworth, 1994), 174.

I forcibly cajoled Eve, the mother of the race endowed with speech,
 And I robbed Adam of much-cheering paradise.
 And I myself moved the brother-slaying hand of Cain.
 I soaked the earth with blood.¹¹⁶

Eudocia's masterpiece, *Homerocentones* (*Homeric Centos*), nearly 2,400 lines in length, was the empress's expansion and correction of an earlier work completed by the fourth-century bishop Patricius, about whom virtually nothing is known.¹¹⁷ At the outset of *Homerocentones*, Eudocia reported that Patricius had quoted Homer incorrectly and had left the poem "half-finished."¹¹⁸ Comparing manuscripts of different recensions of the text, commentator M. D. Usher argues that, in addition to correcting Patricius's work, Eudocia contributed nearly three-quarters of the poem's lines.¹¹⁹ *Homerocentones* briefly treated the creation and fall, but most of the text retold events from the life of Christ.

Eudocia's narration of the angel's annunciation to the Virgin Mary (Luke 1:26–38) added information not found in the biblical text. Mary was engaged in spinning when the angel appeared to her, a detail also found in apocryphal legends. Eudocia vividly described the scene:

He entered an elaborate room—there was the girl,
 Sitting on a couch, a footstool supporting her feet
 as she spun yarn into thread, a wonder to see.¹²⁰

Eudocia uses surprising—even startling—language to discuss Mary's virginity: "She was unbroken: a man had not yet brought her under his yoke."¹²¹ The line came from scenes of sacrifice in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, where worshippers Odysseus, Diomed, and Nestor vowed to Athena: "I will sacrifice to you a broad-faced cow, one year of age, / unbroken, whom a man has not yet brought under his yoke."¹²² Further assertion of Mary's virginity was adapted from Agamemnon's oath (*Iliad* 19.262–64) that he had not sexually abused the captive slave woman Briseis, whom he had stolen from Achilles. Eudocia wrote that Mary's parents "had given her to a dear husband, who took her in good faith, / neither using her for his bed, nor for anything else; / she remained untouched, uncaressed in his tents."¹²³

Homeric battle scenes provided material for New Testament stories. Mary's lament at the death of Jesus evoked elegies for fallen Greek heroes.¹²⁴ The woman with the flow of blood (Mark 5:25–34) addressed Jesus while using words that, in the *Iliad*, described wounded warriors! "You see I have this terrible wound: my blood does not / coagulate, but keeps flowing steadily and trickling down."¹²⁵

116. Eudocia, *The Martyrdom of St. Cyprian*, book 1, lines 37–40, translated in I. M. Plant, *Women Writers of Ancient Greece and Rome: An Anthology* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 200.

117. M. Eleanor Irwin, "Eudocia Augusta, Aelia (ca. 400–460)," in M. Taylor and Choi, *Handbook*, 194.

118. Eudocia, *Homerocentones*, Prologue lines 5–8, cited in Usher, *Homeric Stitchings*, 19–20.

119. Usher, *Homeric Stitchings*, 22.

120. Eudocia, *Homerocentones*, lines 209–11, translated in Usher, *Homeric Stitchings*, 91.

121. Eudocia, *Homerocentones*, line 212; Usher, *Homeric Stitchings*, 69.

122. Homer, *Iliad* 10.292–933; and *Odyssey* 3.382–83; Usher, *Homeric Stitchings*, 69.

123. Eudocia, *Homerocentones*, lines 234–36; Usher, *Homeric Stitchings*, 91.

124. Usher, *Homeric Stitchings*, 140.

125. Eudocia, *Homerocentones*, lines 1008–9; Usher, *Homeric Stitchings*, 66.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, critics frequently disparaged Eudocia's *Homero-centones* for unoriginality and perceived misuses of Homer's poems—pulling apart his carefully arranged lines and repurposing them to assemble an inferior literary product.¹²⁶ More recently she has been accused of “misreading Jesus”—echoing the accusations that Jerome leveled against Proba for her Vergilian centonization of the biblical story.¹²⁷ However, as many modern viewers now recognize patchwork quilts and other textile arts as worthy forms of aesthetic expression (virtually the only medium available to many women through the centuries), so, too, have recent appraisers of Proba and Eudocia's “stitchings” expressed admiration for the ingenuity, creativity, literary talent, and exegetical insight required to fashion the Vergilian and Homeric centos.

Paula and Marcella: Scholarly Women in Jerome's Circle

In the late fourth century, a circle of studious ascetic women dwelling in Rome received instruction from Jerome. He wrote a letter that praised the biblical language skills of Paula the Elder (347–404), a wealthy Roman woman recently deceased. (She is traditionally called “the Elder” to distinguish her from her granddaughter by the same name.) Jerome writes of the elder Paula: “She wished to learn Hebrew—which I learned imperfectly in my youth at the cost of tremendous effort and exertion and which by means of tireless study I make a point not to abandon, lest it abandon me—and she mastered it so thoroughly that she could sing the Psalms in Hebrew and enunciate her words without the faintest trace of a Latin accent.”¹²⁸

Jerome offered a similar tribute to the elite widow Marcella (ca. 327–410), a senator's daughter. According to Jerome, Marcella was brilliant and learned, but she exemplified feminine modesty by downplaying her skills in biblical interpretation. To protect the delicate egos of male clergy who came to her for rulings on the meaning of challenging biblical passages, she gave credit to Jerome for her own exegetical insights. While he praised her humility, Jerome took credit for Marcella's popularity as a biblical expert, asserting that people flocked to Marcella to benefit secondhand from his erudition. He did not consider the possibility that people consulted Marcella for her own erudition. Jerome wrote:

At that time I had some repute as a student of the Scriptures, and so she never met me without asking me some question about them. . . . This only will I say; all that I had gathered together by long study, and by constant meditation made part of my nature, she first sipped, then learned, and finally took for her own. Consequently, after my departure from Rome, if any argument arose concerning the testimony of the Scriptures, it was to her verdict that appeal was made. She was extremely prudent and always followed the rules of what

126. Usher, *Homeric Stitchings*, 1–3.

127. Brian P. Sowers, “Retelling and Misreading Jesus: Eudocia's Homeric Cento,” in *Breaking Boundaries: Female Biblical Interpreters Who Challenged the Status Quo*, ed. Nancy Calvert-Koyzis and Heather Weir, LHBOTS 524 (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 14–33.

128. Jerome, *Epitaph on Saint Paula* 26.3, translated in *Jerome's Epitaph on Paula: A Commentary on the “Epitaphium Sanctae Paulae,”* ed. Andrew Cain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 89.

philosophers call *to prepon*, propriety of conduct. Therefore, even when her answers to questions were her own, she said they came not from her but from me or someone else, admitting herself to be a pupil even when she was teaching—for she knew that the apostle said: “I do not allow a woman to teach”—so that she might not seem to do a wrong to the male sex, and sometimes even to priests, when they asked questions on obscure and doubtful points.¹²⁹

Sometime in the middle of the 380s, Paula traveled with Jerome and her daughter Eustochium to Egypt and the Holy Land. She used her resources to establish a double monastery for monks and nuns in Bethlehem next to the Cave of the Nativity.¹³⁰ Jerome urged Marcella to join them in Bethlehem, but she remained in Rome. Marcella and Paula were generous patrons, to whom Jerome dedicated several of his biblical commentaries. Paula's monetary donations underwrote much of Jerome's scholarly work, including his Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, a project that took two decades and was completed around 405.¹³¹

Historians know about these women not from their own writings but from the witness of the men who knew them. Jerome carefully saved copies of his own letters and collected them into books, self-consciously imitating the great Roman senators and orators of bygone times. However, although the collected letters included epistles from illustrious men, the women's numerous letters to Jerome were not preserved. Thus, Paula and Marcella's contributions can be reconstructed only in a tentative way.

Readers must be aware of Jerome's own rhetorical purposes in praising the women in culturally acceptable ways while also elevating his own status. In his nineteen extant letters to Marcella, he portrayed her as constantly interrupting his studies to ask him about Hebrew vocabulary, meeting with him individually when he was in Rome, and sending him letters after he moved to Bethlehem. In Letter 29, Jerome wrote:

You are engaged in reading and you write nothing to me except what befuddles me and forces me to read the Bible. After posing a most challenging question yesterday, you now have asked me to write back immediately with my opinion. As if I occupied the Pharisees' seat of authority, such that whenever there is a quarrel about Hebrew words I am called upon as the judge and jury.¹³²

Classicist Andrew Cain observes that “by putting forth Marcella, a respected figure in Roman ascetic circles, as a staunch Hebraist and patron of his Scriptural programme, Jerome could demonstrate that his expertise was not only relevant but also in demand among influential Christians in Rome.”¹³³ According to Jerome, Marcella asked him about the meaning of Hebrew words untranslated in the Latin text: *selah*, *ephod*, *teraphim*, *amen*, and *alleluia*.¹³⁴ He responded

129. Jerome, Letter 127.7, in *Select Letters*, trans. F. A. Wright, LCL 262 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 455.

130. Catherine Sider Hamilton, “Paula (347–404),” in M. Taylor and Choi, *Handbook*, 400.

131. Cain, *Jerome's Epitaph on Paula*, 34–35.

132. Jerome, Letter 29.1, translated in Andrew Cain, *The Letters of Jerome: Asceticism, Biblical Exegesis, and the Construction of Christian Authority in Late Antiquity*, OECIS (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 80.

133. Cain, *Letters of Jerome*, 84.

134. Cain, *Letters of Jerome*, 80.

with extensive word studies on Hebrew vocabulary. Some of her New Testament questions went unanswered.¹³⁵

Jerome's letters to Marcella may preserve phrases or echoes of her words to him. Letter 59 (395/396 CE), Jerome's response to Marcella's five questions on the New Testament, suggests that she challenged his interpretation of Matthew 25. Jerome wrote: "In your second question, you say that you read, as you perused my writings, that the sheep that stand on the right and the goats that stand on the left (Matthew 25) are the Christians and the gentiles [i.e., non-Christians], and you ask whether they are not, rather, the good and wicked people."¹³⁶ Jerome said that he did not recall making that claim anywhere, but perhaps he dictated such an answer quickly, and even then he would not be incorrect. He then evaded giving a direct response to her question by referring her to his treatise *Against Jovinian*, a text that briefly treated Matthew 25 but did not actually answer her query.¹³⁷

Another letter to Marcella, written in response to her questions about the Montanist faith, criticized the "demented women Priscilla and Maximilla."¹³⁸ Details from this letter suggest that New Prophecy adherents in Rome may have tried to recruit Marcella and that she was interested in learning about their teachings. Jerome, writing from Jerusalem, endeavored to keep her safe from their influence. Pointing out discrepancies between the historical Marcella and the version of her presented via the letters of Jerome, Cain writes: "Jerome's literary compartmentalization of her in the *Ad Marcellam epistularum liber* [*Book of letters to Marcella*] was a bold move to assert his intellectual and spiritual proprietorship over a woman who in real life had her own mind and was anything but a meek and submissive devotee."¹³⁹

Using Jerome's letters to reconstruct Paula's biblical interpretation presents similar challenges. There can be little doubt that Paula learned Hebrew and memorized substantial portions of Scripture. Jerome mentioned these details in the encomium (eulogy) he addressed to Paula's daughter Eustochium. Since the rhetorical purpose of encomiums is to praise deceased individuals, Jerome could have exaggerated his friend's virtues. Yet, as a letter written to Paula's daughter, it also needed to ring true.

Ancient Christian commentators spoke of various "senses" of Scripture. The "literal sense" included matters of vocabulary, philology, geography, and the historical setting. The "spiritual" sense included allegories and moral lessons drawn from the scriptural passage. Simultaneously highlighting Paula's feminine silence and his own biblical expertise, Jerome reported that Paula preferred the spiritual sense:

No mind was more teachable than hers. She was slow to speak but swift to listen, being mindful of that precept: "Hear, O Israel, and be silent." She knew

135. Cain, *Letters of Jerome*, 84.

136. Jerome, Letter 59.2 (PL 22:587).

137. Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum* 2.18–24 (PL 23:236–334). In this passage, Jerome defended the idea that celibates received a greater heavenly reward than married people. He attacked Jovinian's (d. 403) claim that the Bible only identified two classes of people: the good people (sheep), who went to heaven; and the bad people (goats), who were damned.

138. Jerome, Letter 41.4 (PL 22:476).

139. Cain, *Letters of Jerome*, 94–95.

Scripture by heart, and although she loved its literal meaning and called it the foundation of truth, she still preferred its spiritual understanding, and with this roof she covered the edifice of her soul. Indeed, she coerced me into giving her, along with her daughter, a guided reading of the Old and New Testaments.¹⁴⁰

Paula reverently visited numerous biblical sites, encountering the holy places with such intense literalism that she even licked the ground at the sepulchre where Jesus was said to have lain.¹⁴¹ Biblical sites also held moral lessons. When she looked down upon the territory said to be the former site of Sodom and Gomorrah, she recalled Lot's cave, the site where his daughters made him inebriated and took advantage of him sexually (Gen. 19:30–38). According to Jerome, Paula used that occasion to admonish the women in her company to beware of the moral consequences of drinking wine.¹⁴²

According to Jerome, Paula's arrival at Bethlehem prompted a particularly powerful response as she imagined the biblical events and quoted the relevant passages:

From there she entered the cave of the Savior and beheld the virgin's sacred inn and the stall where the ox knew its owner and the donkey its master's crib, thus fulfilling what is written in the same prophet: "Blessed is he who sows upon the waters, where the ox and donkey tread." I heard her swear that she could see with the eyes of faith the infant wrapped in swaddling clothes crying in his crib; the Magi worshipping him as God; the star shining down from on high; the virgin mother; the attentive foster-father; the shepherds coming by night both to see the Word which had come to pass and to affirm right then and there the beginning of John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word" and "the Word became flesh"; the slaughtered infants; Herod in his rage; and Joseph and Mary fleeing to Egypt. Shedding tears mixed with joy, she said: "Hail, Bethlehem, house of bread, where the Bread that comes down from heaven was born."¹⁴³

Paula's discourse on Bethlehem continued in this vein. Regarding "the lengthy embedded speech" that Jerome attributed to his female companion, Cain argues, "We may safely assume that it is essentially his own handiwork."¹⁴⁴

When one filters Jerome's letters and considers his rhetorical purposes, the reader receives a picture of two privileged and highly intelligent Roman women—Marcella and Paula—who were able to read at least some Greek and Hebrew. It is safe to conclude that they had memorized many passages of Scripture (especially the Psalms), were interested in the biblical text, and did, in fact, ask Jerome many questions. Because Jerome's letters were rhetorically constructed to bolster his own image and authority, and to highlight the importance of the Christian study of Hebrew (a controversial activity at the time), the extant epistles are a window into the interpretive life of two Roman women, but the image is refracted through Jerome's lens. As Catherine Sider Hamilton says regarding Marcella:

140. Jerome, *Epitaph* 26.1–2, trans. Cain, *Jerome's Epitaph on Paula*, 87.

141. Hamilton, "Paula," in M. Taylor and Choi, *Handbook*, 400.

142. Jerome, *Epitaph* 11.5, trans. Cain, *Jerome's Epitaph on Paula*, 59.

143. Jerome, *Epitaph* 10.2–3, trans. Cain, *Jerome's Epitaph on Paula*, 55.

144. Cain, *Jerome's Epitaph on Paula*, 252.

"[Her] acute mind and enormous intellectual energy are accessible to readers now only 'through a glass darkly.'"¹⁴⁵ Yet, the letters preserve traces of remarkable women devoted to the study and interpretation of Scripture.

Monuments, Patronage, and Artistic Commissioning as Biblical Interpretation

In Rome, many third- and fourth-century Christians, like their non-Christian neighbors, buried their dead in catacombs, networks of underground tunnels in the outskirts of the city. Countless individual burial niches, hewn out of the soft volcanic rock, lined the passageways. Wealthy individuals commissioned chapels and large burial chambers for their family members. Frequently, burial chambers of Christians were decorated with frescoes illustrating biblical images, scenes of feasting, and depictions of the faithful departed. Historian Nicola Denzey argues persuasively that many of Rome's chapels and decorated catacomb chambers were commissioned by women.¹⁴⁶ The biblical scenes they selected—some of them stock images chosen from catacomb painters' handbooks and some apparently original and unique to specific burial chambers—offer modern viewers insight into these women's knowledge and interpretation of biblical stories.¹⁴⁷

Funerary frescoes commissioned by women were also—or perhaps *especially*—a form of self-representation. A third-century chamber in the Catacombs of Priscilla depicts a veiled woman, probably the deceased, with hands upraised in prayer. To her right, she is depicted again, holding a scroll while standing before a seated bishop. Several art historians have suggested that the scroll she holds contains the Scriptures and that this scene portrays her catechetical instruction. According to Denzey, the figure of the woman shows "that *she can read*, and that her act of public reading was even endorsed by a bishop at a moment in her life she found significant enough to record on the walls of her grave."¹⁴⁸ In the catacombs of Domitilla, a Roman woman Veneranda (d. 356) is shown near a book and a basket of scrolls.¹⁴⁹

In ancient times, artistic production entailed creative interaction between the patron and artist. This included conversations regarding selection and placement of imagery, viewing sample sketches from the artist's workbook, and sometimes instruction to the painter or sculptor to copy another artist's work. Biblical images in the chamber of the veiled woman signal hope in the resurrection. The Good Shepherd is shown in paradise, surrounded by peacocks and carrying a lamb on his shoulders. There are also scenes of biblical deliverance associated with resurrection: the near sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22:9), the three men in the fiery furnace (Dan. 3:23–27), and the prophet Jonah emerging from the mouth of a sea monster (Jonah 2:10).¹⁵⁰

145. Hamilton, "Marcella," 346.

146. Nicola Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women* (Boston: Beacon, 2007), xii–xvii.

147. Denzey, *Bone Gatherers*, 41.

148. Denzey, *Bone Gatherers*, 85.

149. Denzey, *Bone Gatherers*, 127.

150. Denzey, *Bone Gatherers*, 77.

A remarkable piece of iconographic biblical interpretation is found in a burial chamber commissioned sometime between 350 and 370 by an unnamed pagan widow for her young Christian daughter. The mother, whose allegiance to the goddess Ceres is apparent from imagery in her own adjoining chamber, decorated her daughter's chamber with Christian scenes: Noah's ark, Moses parting the Red Sea, Daniel in the lions' den, Jesus feeding the five thousand, and the raising of Lazarus.¹⁵¹ Denzey argues that the placement and juxtaposition of Christian and pagan images "reflects not only coherence but subtle intention, intelligence, and one woman's desire to articulate the values that mattered most deeply to her family."¹⁵² Denzey suggests that, in the daughter's chamber, "the large image of Jesus raising Lazarus, for instance, seems provocatively counterposed against the image of Hercules leading Alcestis to her husband in Hades" on the corresponding wall in the matron's chamber.¹⁵³ The depiction of Jesus multiplying the loaves to feed the five thousand resonates with the abundant grain imagery present in the images of Ceres, worshiped by the matron who commissioned the paintings. Although the Christian scenes were likely selected from the painter's handbook, the placement of the imagery within the burial complex suggests that the matron had some sense of what those biblical scenes had meant to her daughter.¹⁵⁴ Thus one of the most striking extant examples of ancient pictorial biblical interpretation was planned and commissioned by a pagan woman.

In a culture where elite men and women displayed their wealth and generosity by donating public buildings, some wealthy women designed the artwork that adorned church interiors. Historical accounts report instances of women's active involvement and direction of the artistic process. Gregory of Tours (ca. 538–94) chronicled the piety of the wife of the bishop Namatius (d. ca. 462). The unnamed woman sponsored a basilica in the suburbs of Paris to honor St. Stephen. Having commissioned frescos inspired by her reading "stories of events of long ago," she sat in the church with the history book on her lap, keeping watch over the work of the artists.¹⁵⁵ The Frankish queen Clothild (475–544), a patroness who studied biblical and historical events, selected imagery to be included in the frescoes adorning porticoes at the basilica for the Church of the Holy Apostles in Paris; she also provided careful oversight and supervision of the project. The artwork no longer survives, but an anonymous chronicler reports that Clothild selected "images of Patriarchs and Prophets, Martyrs and Confessors to the faith in ancient times drawn from pages of history books."¹⁵⁶

Tombstones and other monuments provide glimpses into the interpretive world of non-elite women. Katherine Bain's study of monuments commissioned by women shows that freedwomen, slaves, and other non-elite women were among those who had enough means to provide for their own burial and

151. Denzey, *Bone Gatherers*, 38.

152. Denzey, *Bone Gatherers*, 41.

153. Denzey, *Bone Gatherers*, 52.

154. Denzey, *Bone Gatherers*, 42.

155. Gregory of Tours, *Historiae* 2.17, quoted in Lisa M. Bitel, *Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 82.

156. *Vita Genovefae virginis Parisiensis* 56, translated in Bitel, *Landscape with Two Saints*, 81.

erected monuments to make public statements to passersby.¹⁵⁷ Although husbands frequently commemorated their wives on funerary monuments, there are also numerous cases of women who commissioned tombstones for themselves, exercising control over their posthumous self-representations, sometimes describing themselves in the third person. On a tombstone inscription from fourth-century Jerusalem, the deacon Sophia was presented to posterity as a second Phoebe (Rom. 16:1), perhaps a reference to her role as benefactor, as well as biblical justification for her office: “Here lies the servant and bride of Christ, Sophia, deacon, the second Phoebe, who fell asleep in peace on the twenty-first of the month of March during the eleventh indiction.”¹⁵⁸ Another deaconess, Athanasia, commissioned her own tombstone in Delphi, Greece, using the story of Judas (Matt. 27:5; Acts 1:18) as an ominous curse and threat to warn potential tomb breakers:

The most pious deaconess Athanasia, who led a blameless life in decorum, was installed as deaconess by the most holy bishop Pantamianos. She has placed this monument. Here lie her mortal remains. If anyone else dares to open the tomb, where the deaconess has been buried, may that one suffer the fate of Judas, the betrayer of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁵⁹

Echoes and Fragments: Possibilities and Limits for Retrieving a Lost Heritage

During the first centuries of the Common Era, Jewish and Christian men produced hundreds of commentaries, sermons, and other works of biblical interpretation that have been preserved in handwritten manuscripts and printed editions.¹⁶⁰ In contrast, the tiny number of extant works by women is shocking. The relative absence of women’s writings reflects the tragic lack of opportunities for ancient women to study Scripture and produce writings that interpreted the Bible. Yet, despite gaps in our knowledge, the assembled evidence suggests that numerous ancient women vigorously engaged in Scripture study and interpretation. Though most of these women’s works have been lost, a historically informed scholarly imagination may help readers see patterns in the extant fragments and listen for echoes of these lost voices.

157. Katherine Bain, *Women’s Socioeconomic Status and Religious Leadership in Asia Minor in the First Two Centuries C.E.* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014).

158. Translated in Ute Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 159. Eisen suggests that Sophia presented herself as parallel to Phoebe in benefaction as well as diaconal office. An indiction is a fifteen-year tax cycle used by the Roman Empire.

159. Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 177. This was a conventional curse used on Christian tombstones.

160. See Charles Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis: The Bible in Ancient Christianity* (Boston: Brill, 2006), 27–44, for a partial listing of male-authored works available in original languages and in translation. The *Corpus Christianorum*: Series Latina (Turnhout: Brepols, 1953–) has over 200 volumes of Latin works by patristic authors. *Corpus Christianorum*: Series Graeca (Turnhout: Brepols, 1977–) includes more than 80 volumes. *Sources chrétiennes* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1943–) published over 400 volumes of Latin and Greek works. Not all are specifically identified as works of biblical interpretation, but they illustrate the productivity of male authors. Various editions and translations of Jewish works from late antiquity include 37 tractates of the Babylonian Talmud and 63 tractates of the Mishnah. Jacob Neusner’s revised English translation of the *Babylonian Talmud* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2011) consists of 22 volumes.