

Thesis Proposal
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MA Bible (2027)

Proposed Title

Stories of Women: Exploring the Meaning and Significance of Christ's Inclusion of Women in His Earthly Ministry

Thesis Description, including a clear Thesis Statement

Stories, especially true stories told well, inspire us to wonder at the shape of reality,¹ teach us about the world, influence our moral logic, and mark us with fears and hopes that alter our behavior, and, maybe, even our personalities and possibilities.² Stories engage our imagination and help us understand the existence and meaning of concepts that underpin our lives. They provide the narratives that shape our understanding of how we do, can, should, and might hope to walk in the world.³ In a discussion about stories and the opportunities they provide us, 20th century theologian Eleanore Stump said “a story gives a person some of what he would have had if he had [personally interacted] with the characters in the story while they were conscious and interacting with each other, without actually making him[self] a part of the story....”⁴ Christian thinker and author C. S. Lewis summarized how we translate the stories we're told into our understanding of ourselves and of the world in which we live. He said, “[Stories] do what no theorem can quite do. [While they] may not be like ‘real life’ in the superficial sense: ...[they] set...before us an image of what reality may well be like.”⁵

It therefore matters not only *which* stories we are told, but also *how* they are told and that we hear them at all. The interpretative lens of the church, the ecclesial algorithm that feeds us the stories we consume, and which therefore have the best opportunity to shape our faith and how we understand ourselves within and outside the context of church, has skewed toward men. Jesus included women in his earthly ministry, including at pivotal points such as the resurrection or the religious and geopolitical accomplishment represented by conversion of the Samaritan people. Nonetheless, the lectionary readings and related preaching and teaching have failed to accurately portray the women in his ministry or to lift them up as examples of faith and role models. Indeed, the women at the heart of his earthly ministry have often been diminished with labels of sexual sin or in other ways. In this paper, I explore the significance Christ's inclusion of women in his earthly ministry through contemporaneous cultural and theological lenses. This exploration will use Mary Magdalene as a focal point, but include discussion also of other women.

¹ John-Mark L. Maraballe, *Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters* (Sophia Institute Press, 2019), 96.

² Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make us Human* (Houghton Mifflin, 2013), 148.

³ Gottshall, *The Storytelling Animal*, 56.

⁴ Eleanore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Clarendon Press, 2013), 78.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, “On Stories,” in *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature* (Harcourt, 1982), 15.

Purpose:

The intention is twofold. First, to provide teaching and preaching material for use by lay ministers and clergy suggesting ways to expand awareness and understanding of both the role of women in Jesus' ministry and also what his purpose of including them may have been. [Second, the provide frame a discussion within the Church regarding the importance of these things and whether and how liturgy could or ought to be changed to reflect Jesus' message in these regards.]

Question for Advisor: is the second purpose (liturgical change) too much?

Intended Audience:

Ordained ministers having congregational teaching and preaching responsibilities. Lay ministers with responsibility for subsidiary programs of formation, such as youth and adult ministries. [North American Academy of Liturgy and advocacy groups such as FutureChurch with responsibility for liturgical change or advocating for it.]

Learning Goals:

- To explore the theological and cultural significance of Jesus for including women in his earthly ministry.
- To develop readily usable materials for lay and ordained use in programs of formation concerning Jesus' purpose and the roles of women in the New Testament.
- To expand understanding and provide imagery and examples of women's leadership.
- [To foster discussion of liturgical change based on biblical implication.]

Preliminary Outline.

Introduction: Importance of the Stories

[Chapter 1: Historical Perspective: Old Testament Stories of God's Revelations to Women

- a. God and Eve
- b. God's Covenant with Hagar
- c. Miriam at the Tent of Meeting
- d. Historic Treatment of Women's Stories]

Chapter 2: Mary Magdalene

- a. The Story the Church Told
- b. The Story the Gospel's Tell

Chapter 3: Woman at the Well

- a. The Story the Church Told
- b. The Story the Gospel's Tell

Chapter 4: Impact of the Stories

Conclusion: Teaching, Preaching, [and Liturgical Change]

Question for advisor: Is Old Testament Historical Perspective too much?

Proposed Schedule for the Work:

Research for this work will begin in the Summer of 2026 with visits to sites and religious communities associated with Mary Magdalene in France (and, possibly, Turkey). The bulk of the research will be completed onsite at VTS in the Fall of 2026 with regular consultations with my advisor, particularly regarding structure and organization with a view toward utility with and for target audience. First formal draft to be completed by the end of February 2027 and presented to reader no later than mid-March 2027. Completion of final by April 15, 2027.

Foundational Bibliography.

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Further to be identified:

Writings of early church fathers such as Ireneaus, Augustine, Origen, and others, including additional resources from the Eastern/Greek Orthodox tradition, which reflect early or alternative perspectives/history on women disciples.