

legends and legacies of biblical women



Credit: Giraudon/Art Resource, N.Y.

Georges de La Tour (1593–1652). *The Penitent Magdalen*.  
The Louvre, Paris.

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## challenging the legacies of EVE and MARY

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*By Jean Sheldon*



**W**e have all heard about the legacy of Eve. She is the one to blame for all our problems, the weakling who could not withstand the serpent's lies and suggestions. Adam, no doubt, would have stood up to temptation if he had been the one approached by the serpent. But Eve, created last and therefore the least, could not. Despite the fact that she was called a "helpmeet," a term used elsewhere in the Old Testament only to apply to God and not to men, her legacy was the curse.

Because of Eve, all women are considered foolish, mindless, and easily deceived. They are the ones who must suffer pain and domination. When a friend of mine was about to have her first son, some women gathered around her and told her she was wrong to accept an epidural because of Eve's curse: "You shall bear children in pain" (Gen. 3:16).<sup>1</sup>

Of course, Eve is the temptress, the seducer, the manipulator. That means all her daughters are as well. Eve lives on in all of us, and I would like to suggest that we share her shame. I would like to suggest, too, that we have not really read the text.

God cursed neither Adam nor Eve. The only two things he cursed were the ground and the serpent. When we read the first part of Genesis 3 and God's proclamation to Adam and Eve, we really should read the second part, not just what he said to the woman, but also his words to the man. I would like to recommend that men, especially male farmers, should be deprived of tractors, because they shall eat bread by the sweat of their brows (Gen. 3:19). At least men should not have air-conditioned tractors complete with televisions and cell phones.

If we continue in this vein, it is good for men to return to dust, and we should welcome and celebrate funerals. Death comes to all humanity, and so does domination. Just as the man was expected to dominate the woman, so the ground would dominate Adam and finally receive him again. Sin turned upside down—reversed—the kind of creation God originally made.

I would like to revisit the legacy of Eve: to retell the story about a woman whose trust had never been violated, or broken; a woman who was vulnerable, inquisitive, free, and perfectly loved by her Heavenly Father. (After all, it is a law that we love because he first loved us.) She ventured on ground he warned her against and engaged in conversation with the prime abuser of all creation, the fallen angel encased in the serpent.

Basically, the serpent moved her from the warning that God had given her as a loving parent to the notion that it was a command. She picked up that notion and took it further; trying to make it better, she made it worse. In the process, the serpent convinced her that God was an abusive parent and that the only way out was to believe she had power equal to his. If she ate the fruit, something external could control her and make her more powerful so she would be equal to God. Then he couldn't abuse her, because she would have power.





She bought into that notion, and as a result her entire world changed. Her perceptions of reality, her picture of God, and how she could relate to other human beings all changed. We see in the verses after her fall that she carries the victimization to her spouse as she manipulates him. Then both of them, when they hear the sound of God coming into the woods, become frightened. The Bible says they were frightened because they perceived they were naked. It was only a perception; they were already naked before. The problem was the way they perceived their nakedness; it has to do with the seeing.

The verb “to see” is carried throughout many of the Genesis stories as a primary verb. It seems to be the theme. The eyes of Adam and Eve were opened because they saw God in a different light, and they were afraid. Like any abused children, they ran from him in terror, which led to further victimization: Adam blamed Eve.

You can see why God would say that Eve’s desire would be for her husband and that he will rule over her—he already had. That arrangement was not anything new. The game started in the conversation God had with them.

Because Eve became vulnerable to the serpent—to his deception and abuse—she became victimized and vulnerable to further abuse. She would be dominated. She would bear children in pain, but there was more pain than just childbirth. The story of Cain and Abel reveals the outworking of a cycle of abuse as one brother kills another. Genesis records the cycle of abuse as it continues from generation to generation until the earth is filled with violence. The human imagination and thoughts become evil continually.

I would like to suggest that the story does not end there. The real legacy of Eve is not encased in her fall, but rather is found in Genesis 3:15. It was to womankind that God gave the one who would break the cycle of abuse for eternity. That is really Eve’s legacy. God took the first to fall and entrusted to her the greatest treasure the world has ever received. God is not the dominator of women, but their restorer.

I recently counted all women in the Old Testament and organized them into three categories: recipients



Photo: Dover, Inc.

Mary Magdalen at Jesus' feet.

of salvation, instruments of salvation (any time they rescued anyone from any kind of danger), and participants of evil. Roughly two-thirds were saviors in some way. That is impressive. This proportion means that the primary role of women in the Old Testament is one of bringing salvation. The overall image of women in the Old Testament is intended to be that of a savior. Think of God taking the one on whom we blame all our trouble and saying, “I am going to turn you into someone who will help rescue humans.”

There is another woman of the Bible whose story and legacy, I believe, also deserves closer attention: Mary Magdalene. Mary has a sense of appearing and vanishing at certain points in the Gospels. She does not always appear to be named. I will take the risk that she may have been involved more often than it appears, just for the sake of trying to map out her life. In the process, I will give a lot of imaginative details that I cannot prove, but that answer a lot of questions that might otherwise be raised.<sup>2</sup>

This is one of my questions: How is it that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived in a house together? From my studies about Jerusalem in the time of Jesus, this seems very strange. Are these grown adults? Are they young people? What is their age and why are they living in a house together alone? Young women of that time were often betrothed as early as the age of twelve. Their fathers, who were their masters, arranged their marriages to other masters, their husbands, whom each daughter would call, “my lord.” It seems strange that Mary and Martha were not married, neither was Lazarus. Where does he fit in? I suspect that he was younger than these two women.



Based on what I have read in the *Desire of Ages*, pieced together with the story in the Gospels and other research, it seems to me that something terrible had happened in the lives of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus at a very young age. They once had a happy loving home, but something happened—maybe illness—that took away their parents and left them orphans.

Uncle Simon took them in. He lived in Jerusalem, about two miles from Bethany, where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived, and became their guardian. Simon was a Pharisee, and Pharisees were known for their ardent support of law. They were the middle-of-the-road conservatives in the church; they also tended to be abusive. Remember what Jesus said about the

their ways they would accept her into their family.

She tried very hard to live up to everything she learned, but it was not enough to fill the void in her life. After drifting out of the Church and through several marriages, she finally ended up in the hospital, in a coma, with a high fever, ranting and raving.

Shortly after midnight one morning, she finally opened her eyes to see a man standing by her bed, smiling gently at her. He looked at her and called her first “Mary” and then “Rebecca,” her name. Later, she realized he was Jesus. He told her that during the night he had cast seven demons out of her life one by one. “They tried not to hear Me. They argued that you had freely given yourself to them. But I know the struggles

### It was to womankind that God gave the one who would break the cycle of abuse for eternity.

Pharisees, how they laid heavy burdens on the people’s backs and would not lift a finger to help them? (Matt. 23:4). That is abuse. We know that studies show some of the highest incidents of abuse lurk in conservative Christian families. Simon probably took over the care of these children more out of duty than love.

Perhaps that is when the nightmares began for Mary, and possibly Martha. Night after night, Mary had to put up with this visitor to her bedroom, and like all molesters of children, he blamed her as the guilty one. She was too beautiful, too seductive, too attractive. Mary probably had an extremely affectionate heart. She was a dreamer who liked to sit and think. She was naturally very affectionate, open, and trusting. Bit by bit, Simon destroyed her trust, her dignity, her personhood—the very last thing she had. She had already lost her parents; now she was bereft of her personhood.

Imagine Mary’s experience to be something like the story LaVonne Neff has written about in the book *A Heart of Flesh*.<sup>3</sup> Neff tells about a Jewish girl named Rebecca, who grew up in New York with physically and emotionally abusive father and brothers. She finally got married in order to escape her hard life. She married a very loving man but could not handle his love, so she threw him out of her life and went to a very large city.

There she found she could make lots of money selling her body, and for many years she became wealthy engaging in high-class prostitution. Eventually, she lived in Arizona, where downhearted and desperately needing love and affection she found some Adventists. She learned that if she obeyed their rules and believed

of your heart, and I am making you My daughter. Follow Me,” he said.<sup>4</sup> The woman became a new person, with a new mission, goal, and purpose in life.

In sharing her story, the woman told Neff about how the demons had entered her mind. The first one convinced her that she was a thing. Because of the abuse she had suffered as a child, the demon entered her by devaluing her as a person, by destroying who she was, trashing her, and making her feel totally worthless. That’s Mary.

Mary came to devalue herself. Simon may have told her she was no good for any man because she was not a virgin. Maybe she decided to do the only thing she knew she was good at to escape his domination. She went north to Magdela, a town of international commerce, and there she found lots of customers.

For years, she brought in the money, served the men with her body, and occasionally visited Martha and Lazarus. On one of these visits, Simon stopped by and said he had a customer for her. He smirked when he suggested that the customer would bring her lots of money. Not sensing anything unusual, she saw the customer, but he did not seem interested in what she offered.

Sometime in the wee hours of the morning there was a heavy knock on the door, some men rushed in, surrounded them, and grabbed her. She was forced to put something on quickly, then they dragged her out the door toward the temple. When she realized where they were headed, she knew she had been set up.





Jesus had recently returned from the Mount of Olives. Now he was sitting on the temple steps teaching the people. Mary's accusers brought her through the gates to Jesus. Of course, Mary had probably heard something about Jesus, but she had never met him.

He was a humble-looking man. According to the rules, she was not supposed to look at any man, and a rabbi was not to look at her. She waited, wondering what would happen next. Strangely, the man did not stand up to pronounce the judgment, and the men with whom she had come pressed around her. "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" (John 8:4-6). She had assumed she was headed to the Sanhedrin, where the members would have a meeting. Most often, prostitutes caught in adultery were stoned or burned.

She knew this was Simon's ultimate act of cruelty. First, he had destroyed her personhood, then he had taught her this trade, and finally he had set her up with a client for his own cruel end, thus reducing her to less than zero.

She stood with bowed head. Perhaps she did not even have a veil on her face as she stared at the ground. In response to questions, this man did not say a word. He simply bent down and began to write in the dust. She did not know what he was writing, because she had never learned to read. Simon believed in the rabbinical saying that it is better to teach a daughter lechery than letters.

She stood, waiting. By then, she had been so destroyed she was numb. The men kept yelling at Jesus, trying to get him to answer. He continued to write in the dirt.

Finally, the oldest one, the most pompous of them all, pushed forward to look over Jesus' shoulder and see what he was writing. Red rose up from his neck and moved slowly to his face. Silence settled on the group. Jesus looked up and said, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). Then he resumed writing. Suddenly, the man with the red face disappeared. One by one, the other men left until Mary was left alone with Jesus.

I once thought this was a scene of judgment, with Jesus standing, Mary at his feet and the crowd



Stephanie Gifford Reeder. *Eve*. 2001.

surrounding them. However, the Gospel of John portrays something different. While Jesus bent over, he was still seated and Mary stood before him. That picture has to be very clear: Jesus was not looking down at her in some kind of masculine condescension. Rather, Jesus was looking up at her. Then Jesus, the God of the universe, asked her a question, a teasing one, I think. "Woman, where are they?" (John 8:10).

The men who had brought Mary had called her "this woman" (John 8:4). Jesus simply said "woman" (John 8:10), which is the same way he addressed his mother. At that moment she looked into his eyes, a daring thing for a woman. It was his eyes that drew her. She had seen other's eyes; they had broken down her defenses and destroyed her trust. Jesus' eyes drew out her self-control and showed trustworthiness.

Other men's eyes had ravished her inner purity. Jesus' eyes appealed to her highest moral values and worth. Other men's eyes had demeaned and degraded her, and treated her like a plaything. Jesus' eyes restored her honor, integrity, and dignity. Other men's eyes had manipulated her, forced her, demanded and controlled her, and vilified her. Jesus' eyes loved her unconditionally and set her free to be her truest self. Other men's eyes had ripped her and destroyed her soul. Jesus' eyes began to make her whole.

That was only the beginning. My understanding is that Jesus spent nights of prayer in tears for Mary to free her from the demons. I wonder why it took so long. After all, he was always casting out demons or



making disease go away with a word. Why did it take so long to free Mary?

The only answer I can find is that those demons were imbedded in her, diminishing and destroying her self-image and self-worth. For Jesus to convince her that she was a person of worth he had to go through nights of agony to convince her that she was valuable to God. I do not think Mary knew instantly that Jesus was God. It took his prayers to heal her broken heart. His tears began to undo the lies she had believed about herself. There is no other woman in the Bible who shares the evil legacy of Eve as much as this abused victim. She was still no one even after Jesus set her free.

**He took this woman who had been crumpled like a piece of paper and thrown into the trash, and lifted her up to a level with himself.**

One of the last acts of Jesus' ministry was to go to Simon's house for a feast. I have often wondered how Mary related to Simon after Jesus set her free. How could she stand to be in the same room at this party? Yet she slipped in quietly, trying not to be noticed.

She had heard that Jesus had predicted his own death, and she actually believed him. No one else did. She began to pour an expensive perfume on Jesus' feet because she could not wait until he was dead to anoint his body. The aroma reached Simon and he began to mutter that if Jesus knew what kind of woman Mary was he would not let her touch him. The irony is that Simon had made her who she was. However, very often in such situations, the woman is blamed.

What Jesus said in those moments after Simon's accusation restored Mary. "Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me," said Jesus (Matt. 26:10). This comment undid Simon's remarks about her beauty being too seductive for him to control himself. "By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (Matt. 26:13). Those were the most powerful words Jesus ever spoke. There is only one other instance when he established a memorial like that: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19).

In this story, Jesus took a woman trashed by the world, by the people who represented God, by the people who were her guardians and who were supposed to protect her. He took this woman who had been crumpled like a piece of paper and thrown into the trash, and lifted

her up to a level with himself. That is what will be told throughout the world in remembrance of her. This woman—not the male disciples (with one exception)—made it to the cross and stayed there until Jesus died.

Interestingly, this disciple was the most sensitive and caring of the lot. One might ask when we look at the final weeks of Jesus' life who his closest disciple was. Jesus met Mary again at the garden tomb, and there Jesus completes Mary's restoration.

It appears that Mary got there first while the other women followed shortly. The other women stayed at the tomb long enough to find out that Jesus had risen.



Photo: Dover, Inc.

They, too, were told to tell the other disciples, a commission that seemed preposterous to the women.

Mary and Martha's house.

The Gospel of Mark says they were terrified. They probably thought they were seeing things and had a lot of self-doubt. Mark reports that they would not go and tell the disciples. I think they left and went home in fear and trembling; they did not intend to tell the disciples. Mary told Peter and John, who went into a frenzy because the tomb was empty—that part they sort of believed. Then Mary returned to the garden and stayed there.

Who was Jesus' closest disciple? When Jesus met Mary in the garden, he only had to call her by name for her to recognize him. When he later met the other disciples, Jesus had to use all kinds of supernatural signs before they would accept his true identity.

In Mary's recognition of Jesus, I believe she held him as though she would never let go. "You are not going to get away from me again, I am not going to find that tomb empty," she may have said. "In fact, the tomb can stay empty, but you are never going to leave me. I am not going to let you die again." Then Jesus did one last thing for Mary that not only set her free, but also should set us free: He broke the final abuser, death, and gave her the good news of the resurrection.





When we began our story in Genesis 3, we noted that the ultimate abuser was the ground and that it was cursed. All of us are dominated by the earth, by death, and ultimately we return to dust. Jesus broke that abuser, death, and gave Mary, probably the person most abused of any to whom he ministered, the privilege of announcing the victory. In some early Christian circles, Mary was later considered an apostles to the apostles—the one sent.

Think of what a preposterous thing Jesus had done. These apostles had been given the keys to the Kingdom as it were; they were the leaders of the church, the General Conference committee. And, yet, they hid in terror behind closed doors. You would think Jesus would have gone through those doors a little sooner and confronted them.

He didn't. Instead, he sent the one who waited at the tomb, the one who was his closest disciple, the only one who only needed to have her name said to recognize him, and he commissioned her to tell the brothers the implications of his words, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and Your God" (John 20:17).

Mary now knew her Heavenly Father as the opposite of Uncle Simon. She believed that Jesus would die and that he would rise again. She was probably the only disciple who really grasped what he predicted.

What must have gone through her mind? Once she had no credibility, and the only power she had was because of her body; now she was told to go to the apostles and tell them the good news. She apparently

wanted help and went to the other women, rounded them up, and said, "Would you please join me. Maybe they will believe us." "Some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." "Oh how foolish you are," Jesus said (Luke 24:22-25).

All of us know that blind prejudice—whether it involves race, gender, ethnic background, religion, or whatever—is all a part of this directory of abuse to which we fall victims. Prejudice tends to blind us to the evidence, to make us look silly when we find out we are wrong.

I believe that in these stories of Jesus' ministries to Mary he took her from where Simon had put her and lifted her slowly up to the level of the apostles. She was the one who got to go up to the General Conference gathering and tell them that the last abuser, death, had been vanquished.

Today, we stand in the garden tomb with Jesus. Today, Jesus calls us—no matter who we are, no matter where we have been, regardless of our past reputations, regardless of our race or gender—to be his sent-out ones to fulfill the legacy of Eve and tell the good news to the world that God is not an abuser, but that has conquered abuse.

## Notes and References

1. Translation is my own. All other texts are quoted from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible
2. When I created this fictionalized composite of the various women in the Gospels who at times have been considered by Bible readers to be the Mary whose siblings were Martha and Lazarus, I knew I was working with fiction, not scholarship. I did it in order to deal with issues of abuse within a single sermon that related to the fall. My imaginative interpretation reflects the kinds of scenarios that no doubt took place in Jerusalem during the time of Jesus; in addition, it answers a number of questions these stories raise. When I prepared the sermon, I was aware of other interpretations, less traditional and more feminist, that are offered by current scholarship. In a scholarly paper, I would discuss these, but would really prefer to look to my New Testament colleagues for such a treatment.
3. LaVonne Neff, *A Heart of Flesh* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1973).
4. *Ibid.*, 67.

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## DANUBE RIVER CRUISE

June 25-July 10, 2002

Dr. Merlene Ogden will lead a group on a Danube River cruise, from Budapest, Hungary, to Nuremburg, Germany, passing enroute over the Main-Danube Canal. The trip will include sightseeing stops in Vienna, Melk, Passau, and Regensburg, as well as a three-day pre-cruise visit to Budapest and a four-day stay in Prague after the cruise. The price includes airfare from New York (with reasonable add-on fares from other cities) and charges for full cruise and all sightseeing, plus transportation, hotels, and two meals a day for land segments. Price: \$3,500

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