

HPRS5907

Assessment 3

**Have Gender Studies had a
significant impact on the way we read
the Bible?**

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The purpose of this essay is to examine how gender studies have impacted the way in which the Bible is now read and understood. The Bible version which will be used throughout will be the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE). The key concepts of gender studies explored in relation to the texts within the Bible will be equality, femininity, masculinity, matriarchy, patriarchy, social and societal norms and culture, and the overall intersectionality of how gender forms and directs experiences. There are many examples of gender specific and driven experiences in the Bible, which differ in their consideration in comparison to how they would be interpreted through the lens of a modern standard. Examples used will be taken from the New Testament and will include texts which describe Mary and Joseph, Phoebe of Cenchreae and Paul's description of her in his letters, and Mary Magdalene. Some gender inequalities within the Bible, when viewed from a modern perspective are quite obvious, whereas others are subtly woven into texts in such a way that it is not apparent upon first read; whether due to the translation adopting a specific and intended subterfuge, in an attempt to produce a more acceptable read for a modern age, or simply being a result of less significance being placed upon certain gender differences in a way which by today's standards may be considered ignorant, is arguable. The hypothesis for this essay is that gender studies have impacted the way in which the Bible is read and understood.

The way in which the Bible is read and understood is based upon existing knowledge, experience, and acceptance of certain things. From a phenomenological perspective, as discussed by Carl Rogers, people tend to behave and understand others based upon their ideal of self and familiarity of their surroundings and experiences.¹ We are aware that how we view things today, may be very different from the historical perspective, however, we may still be unconsciously biased in a number of directions for a variety of reasons. J.Maxwell Miller suggests, that when reading the Bible, '... complete objectivity is a goal never reached'.² There may be differences in viewpoints when considering things like religious background – do we accept certain things because it has been indoctrinated? Does a specific faith perceive an account in a different way to other faiths? Does an existing viewpoint change as a result of new experiences and knowledge? What role does gender perspective play in understanding, and who decides what is correct or not? Eurika Circe cites Nissinen, who suggests that Biblical interpretation is influenced by the way in which the ancient Near East socially constructed gender, adding another consideration to today's gender perspective in comparison to that of the Bible.³ This appears to be supported by an explanation of sex and gender by Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza,

The social relations that give rise to gender differences are socioculturally constructed as relations of domination and are not simply biological givens. In other words, the world is determined by relations of domination. Sex/gender is a part of such relations of ruling,

¹ Carl Rogers, *Client-Centered Therapy: Its Current Practice, Implications and Theory*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1951)p.298-315.

²J. Maxwell Miller, in Stephen R. Haynes, Steven L. McKenzie, eds., *To Each Its Own Meaning, Revised and Expanded: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*, (Westminster John Knox Press:Kentucky, 1999), p.18.

³ Eurika Circe, ed., *Hall of Theological Courage: More Than 100 Pioneers in Theological Thought 3*, (Hamburg: BoD, 2025), p.1260.

which also ground other divisions such as class or race.⁴

It would be extremely interesting to have the opinion of someone who knows nothing of religion, knows none of the Biblical stories, and nothing about the changing perspectives of gender over time, to read the account of Mary and Joseph and offer a viewpoint based solely on their current modern day perspective. The dynamic between Mary and Joseph in relation to the birth of Jesus is an interesting one, which would have been viewed very differently if there was no involvement of a 'higher power'. When looking at accounts of the birth, for example in films, the portrayal often focuses primarily on acceptance that God had chosen Mary as the vessel in which he miraculously implanted the holy seed. We are also shown mostly that Joseph accepts Mary's account of the pregnancy, remaining a dutiful husband, displaying an absence of the patriarchal norm of the time.⁵

Interestingly, feminist theology suggests that, 'When combined with the notion of mother hood (in the figure of the virgin-mother) the paradoxical weight of this symbol can represent all too obvious difficulties for women, since no real woman can live up to it.'⁶ When considered from a modern perspective, this immaculate conception would seem to be looking less at a gender specific experience, with more of the focus being exegetical,⁷ a symbolism of faith and miracle, removing the concerns held within a feminist theory of un-attainable comparison. If the consideration regarding the story of Mary and Joseph in relation to the immaculate conception is intended to symbolise God's power and intent, it would not seem right to deliberate Mary in terms of gender, however, when read from a basis of modern day experience, we may look at the story and easily make an assumption that Mary was hiding an indiscretion or affair from her prospective husband, and that she presented the story of this immaculate conception to Joseph as a means to escape repercussions. What does this then say about the character of Joseph in his acceptance of Mary's explanation for the pregnancy when viewed through a modern day lens?

Peter-Ben Smit suggests that the best way to critically view masculinity, is in its relational form, such as within marriage,⁸ viewing the male individual from the aspects of the relationship rather than his external perceived personality. Joseph's place within the story of the immaculate conception viewed from a religious perspective provides him with an escape from being viewed as overly accepting or submissive to his wife, when in Matt. 1:18-25, an angel of the Lord explains that Mary has been chosen to be the mother of Christ, and that he should indeed marry her. A modern day, non-religious criticism of this may be that Joseph told of this dream in order to 'save face' as he had considered divorcing Mary initially.⁹ How this account is considered may also vary dependent upon the gender of the person viewing it. Rosalinda Alfaro-Lefevre discusses male versus female tendencies in relation to critical thinking,

⁴ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, 2nd edition, (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p.39.

⁵ Jonathan Sacks, How Perfect Were the Matriarchs and Patriarchs? *The Rabbi Sacks Legacy*, (2025) <<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation>> [accessed 20 December 2025].

⁶ Lisa Isherwood & Dorothea McEwan, eds., *The A-Z of Feminist Theology: Religious Studies: Religion, Sexuality and Gender*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2016), p.128.

⁷ Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Text and Exegetical Culture*, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), p.97.

⁸ Peter-Ben Smit, *Masculinity and the Bible: Survey, Models and Perspectives*, (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2017), p.3.

⁹ Curtis Mitch, Edward Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture*, (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2010), p.22.

describing females as being typically considered intuitive, creative and accepting, whereas males are typically portrayed as logical, focused and methodical thinkers.¹⁰ Critical thinking involves discovering truths, which in relation to the Bible, can be different for those of faith and those who do not have faith.

Consistent with what appears to be a shift in relation to how woman were considered in the Old Testament, the account of Phoebe of Cenchreae from the New Testament, and how Paul describes her in his letters, has some similarities with a modern day gender theory, especially in relation to mixed genders. The way in which Paul describes Phoebe in Rom.16:1-2, portrays a friendship outside of the expected male/female dynamic, and instead describes her in words which in the Greek are masculine, plural titles.¹¹ This is not necessarily an example of intersectionality as might be initially viewed, as it was known that both men and women could hold the titles described by Paul, such as 'diakonoi' or benefactor (later attributed to deacon). The reverence Paul appears to have for Phoebe seems more in line with modern perspectives, and not in keeping with its time, which may be considered an anachronistic inconsistency.¹² In 1 Cor. 7:3, Paul writes, 'The husband should give to his wife what is due her and likewise the wife to her husband', which seems to suggest another consideration for equality between the sexes. This is in contradiction to what has historically since been the experience of women striving for leadership roles within the church. Feminist theology describes the 'invisibility of women' and the 'lack of representation in liturgical leadership',¹³ which did not seem to be the case for Phoebe. Exceptions to the lack of female leadership roles within the church have occurred, such as Amanda Berry Smith, who became a Holiness preacher, Catherine Booth as a revivalist preacher, and Frances Willard who was a social reform preacher. All however, belonged to niche and specific doctrines within religion.¹⁴

As an example of gender inequality, Mary Magdalene's story in relation to the resurrection is notable. Her account of Jesus' rising was initially discounted, but even when vindicated, she was overshadowed by the accounts of males. As described by Jane Schaberg, 'Mary Magdalene is incorporated but left behind'.¹⁵ Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan, describe Mary Magdalene as being '...misrepresented under patriarchy, as have countless other women'. They also describe how the focus of accounts in relation to her, have been those with a negative connotation, such as Jesus' casting out of seven demons on account of her sexual sins.¹⁶ In Luke 8:1-3 it appears that he purposefully portrays her in a negative way, in comparison the

¹⁰ Rosalinda Alfaro-Lefevre, *Critical Thinking, Clinical Reasoning, and Clinical Judgement: A Practical Approach*, 6th edition, (Pennsylvania: Elsevier Inc., 2017), p.28.

¹¹ From Heads of House Churches to Presbyters, (2013) *National Catholic Reporter*, 49 (6), p.10.

¹² Pieter F. Craffert, Jesus' Resurrection in a Social-Scientific Perspective: Is There Anything New to be Said? *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 7 (2009) 126–151 p.130.

¹³ Lisa Isherwood & Dorothea McEwan, eds., *The A-Z of Feminist Theology: Religious Studies: Religion, Sexuality and Gender*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2016), p.172.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.144.

¹⁵ Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament*, (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2004), p.236.

¹⁶ Lisa Isherwood & Dorothea McEwan, eds., *The A-Z of Feminist Theology: Religious Studies: Religion, Sexuality and Gender*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2016), p.129.

other Gospels, leaving the reader wondering why, even though their experiences appear to be the same, Luke maintains this view. Unfortunately, during the sixth century, Pope Gregory refers to Mary Magdalene as a prostitute, which remains the title by which most people consider her still.¹⁷ This unfounded title imposed upon her by Pope Gregory, is an example of how the stigma surrounding gender oriented professions has decreased over time, with the possibility for today's readers of the Bible, having a more open and understanding consideration for characters such as her.

In today's age, we seem to like to 'dig into' and discover hidden truths, made accessible by the evolution in technology, and in such, there is easier access to other religious documents such as the Apocrypha. The Gospel of Mary is included in these writings, and whereas previously, as a society, we may have felt it necessary to adhere to the male dominated direction of religious text, we are now able, partly due to gender equalities, to explore that which was once deemed 'unsuitable' or 'false'. With the freedom to explore such texts, some have come to consider much of the Biblical writings of Mary Magdalene as 'patriarchal myth', generating new and exciting ways of understanding accounts such as hers. Siobhán Jolley describes how Mary Magdalene has a long standing association with music, and became an example for female sexuality, being written into musical plays such as, 'Parsifal' by Wagner, Adamo's 'The Gospel of Mary Magdalene', 'Jesus Christ Superstar' and 'Magdalene'.¹⁸ Would Mary Magdalene, if born in today's generation, be viewed as a religious leader, and not ignored and forgotten, treated with respect and reverence?

The hypothesis that gender studies does significantly affect the way in which the Bible is read appears to be supported by many of the examples provided. The research conducted heavily focused upon a feminist perspective due to the overwhelming majority of resources on the topic concentrating on a feminine unfairness in relation to the Bible, in addition to a possible unconscious bias on behalf of its female author. The sense of equality, societal norms, and to a lesser extent the intersectionality in relation to gender have been explored to establish whether these are cause for modern day considerations when understanding the Bible texts. There were areas which were not fully explored such as the role of hermeneutic bias', and a traditionalist complementarian exploration, which would be an interesting addition to the research.

¹⁷ Ann Graham Brock, Benjamin H. Dunning, ed., 'Mary Magdalene', *The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality*, Oxford Handbooks (2019), online edn., Oxford Academic, 4 Oct. 2019, <<https://doi-org.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190213398.013.20>> [accessed 12 January 2026].

¹⁸ . Siobhán Jolley, A Broken Record? A Feminist Exploration of Mary Magdalene in Music, (2024), in Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Mary Magdalene*, (online edn., Oxford Academic, 22 May 2024 -), <<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197669907.013.30>> [accessed 13 January 2026].

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