

Women in the Lectionary

by Ruth Fox, OSB

At the conclusion of a four-hour presentation I recently gave on "Women of the Bible," one of the participants exclaimed, "I never knew Jesus had women disciples!" She was puzzled as to why she had never heard this before, since she had been a devout, church-going Catholic for all her 35 years. She heard the Sunday scripture readings and listened to homilies week after week, yet her admission confirmed once again that the revisions of the lectionary mandated by the Second Vatican Council suffer a serious flaw.

The revision of the lectionary was mandated by the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*: "The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word" (#51). In 1969, the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship promulgated a new order of readings for use at Mass. From this directive, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the United States authorized the publication of a new lectionary for use in our churches effective Palm Sunday, 1970.

Thus many more books and passages of the Bible were made available to Catholics through the scripture readings at Sunday and daily Mass. Homilies based on the readings were to illustrate the relevance of these passages to the daily Christian life, and for more than 25 years, pastors, liturgists and Catholics in the pews have been rejoicing at this increased exposure to the word of God. The widely-held assumption has been that the lectionary faithfully presents the essence of the Bible, with the omission of only a few troubling or gory passages.

This satisfying assumption has recently been controverted by shocking evidence to the contrary. A careful analysis of the lectionary reveals that a disproportionate number of passages about the women of the Bible have been omitted. Women's books, women's experiences and women's accomplishments have been largely overlooked in the assigned scripture readings that are being proclaimed in our churches on Sundays and weekdays. In this article I will point out some of the significant biblical passages about women that are omitted altogether, are relegated to weekdays, where only a small number of churchgoers will hear them, or are designated as optional. I hope to illustrate how some of the lectionary's readings are used to reinforce what some believe to be the weaknesses or proper roles of women. Then I will make a cursory review of the imbalance of the saints recognized in the lectionary. Finally, I will offer some suggestions for liturgists and presiders to rectify the deficiencies.

First Testament Women

A survey of the lectionary reveals that the account of the two brave midwives, **Shiphrah and Puah** of the Book of Exodus, is omitted entirely from the lectionary. The weekday reading of Exodus 1:8-22 (lectionary #389, Monday of the Fifteenth Week in Ordinary Time, Year I) skips from verse 14 to verse 22, thus excising the story of these valiant women who put their own lives at risk by defying the pharaoh's law of death in order to uphold God's law of life.

Deborah, named a prophet and judge of Israel and recognized as a mother of Israel, also is passed over in the lectionary. As prophet and judge, Deborah advised her people, planned a military strategy against the Canaanites, appointed a general and then led the victorious battle. Deborah's song of victory in Judges 5:1-31 is considered to be one of the most ancient extant compositions of the Bible, but it is not used in the lectionary. Although Gideon, Jotham, and Jephthah from the Book of Judges find their way into the weekday lectionary, Deborah is left standing outside the gate.

The **Book of Ruth** gains only two weekday readings (#423, Friday of the Twentieth Week in Ordinary Time, Year I, and #424, Saturday of the Twentieth Week in Ordinary Time, Year I). The first is the famous "Wherever you go" passage that shows her devotion to her mother-in-law, and the second is the passage that exalts her bearing of a son for her husband Boaz.

Huldah the prophet, who made history in 2 Kings 22, is excised from weekday reading #373 (Wednesday of the Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time, Year II). This woman, a seventh century BCE contemporary of Jeremiah and one of the few women or men literally labelled a prophet, was consulted by King Josiah, the reformer. When an old scroll (now thought to probably have been the original form of Deuteronomy) was found in the temple by the priest, Hilkiah, the king ordered, "Go, consult the LORD for me, for the people, for all Judah, about the stipulations of this book that has been found...." (2 Kings 22:13) The royal delegation took the scroll not to Jeremiah but to Huldah, who verified the authenticity of the scroll and, as a prophet, spoke God's warnings to the king. The verses referring to Huldah (verses 15-19) are neatly sliced out of the middle of the lectionary passage (2 Kings 22:8-13; 23:1-3) .

Esther, a great heroine in a time of oppression, is proclaimed only in a Lenten weekday reading (#228) that records her prayer appealing to God for strength. No account of the bravery with which she saved her people from annihilation is given anywhere in the lectionary. Three other passages from the Book of Esther are found in the lectionary (in the Common of Saints, #737; and in Masses for Various Occasions, #821, #876), but not only might these passages never be used in the parish, all three are accounts of the prayer of Esther's uncle, Mordecai.

Judith, another heroine who jeopardizes her life for her people, is recalled in just two passages: Judith 13:18, 19, 20 (lectionary #709) is an optional responsorial psalm for the Common of the Blessed Virgin ("You are the highest honor of our race"), and lectionary #737, in the Common of Saints (Judith 8:2- 8), praises the recluse Judith's asceticism and physical beauty; it is recommended for proclamation on the memorials of saints who were widows. Judith's initiative, determination and great courage in saving her nation are nowhere presented in the lectionary.

The heroism of the Maccabee brothers is recounted on the Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time (#157), but the passage stops short of the tribute paid to **their mother**, who encouraged their bravery. Although the mother's valor is recognized in the Bible as "most admirable and worthy of everlasting remembrance" (2 Maccabees 7:20), she is actually remembered by the church only on Wednesday of the Thirty-third Week in Ordinary Time (#499) and only in Year II!

The sons and their brave mother are again separated in the Common of Martyrs (lectionary #713.2 and #713.3 deal with the sons, while #713.4 deals with the mother).

Second Testament Women

Two of the most obvious exclusions of women from Second Testament scriptures are found in different readings from the daily lectionary. In the continuous reading from Romans, verses one and two of chapter 16 are omitted from lectionary #490 (Saturday of the Thirty-first Week in Ordinary Time, Year I): "I commend to you our sister **Phoebe**, who is a deaconess [the Greek word is "deacon;" the revised NAB uses "minister"] of the church of Cenchrae. Please welcome her in the Lord, as saints should. If she needs help in anything, give it to her, for she herself has been of help to many, including myself." Thus churchgoers will never hear in our liturgy of Phoebe, a woman who was a deacon. Another overt omission of a verse about women's spiritual influence is made in 2 Timothy 1:1-12, which is assigned to Wednesday of the 9th Week in Ordinary Time, Year II. Lectionary #355 neatly excises verses 4 and 5, including: "I find myself thinking of your sincere faith--faith which first belonged to your grandmother **Lois** and to your mother **Eunice**."

There are also noteworthy omissions of women from the assigned gospel passages. It seems incredible that **the Magnificat**, the beautiful and revolutionary song of Mary in Luke 1:46 - 56, is never proclaimed on a Sunday; it is found on a weekday before Christmas (#199) and on two feast days of Mary, the Visitation (#572) and the Assumption (#622). But by not assigning it to a Sunday, the lectionary seems willing to risk that not many Catholics will hear this marvelous song of praise attributed to Mary.

The Gospel of Luke is the only one that narrates Jesus' **healing of a woman** who had been crippled for eighteen years (Luke 13:10-17); yet this pericope is assigned to Saturday of the Twenty-ninth Week in Ordinary Time (#479). Although Jesus recognizes her with the unusual status of "daughter of Abraham," this touching story of her faith and Jesus' breaking of the Sabbath law in the synagogue to heal a woman is not proclaimed on any Sunday.

It is well known that Jesus' women disciples, led by **Mary Magdalene**, according to all the gospels were the first witnesses to the resurrection. Easter Sunday's gospel in the U.S. lectionary (#43), however, stops just at the point of the beautiful story of Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene in the garden and his important commission to her: "Go to my brothers and tell them..." (John 20:17; the newer Canadian lectionary rectifies this problem by adding verses 10--18.) In fact, this appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene does not rate any Sunday of the Easter season but is assigned to Easter Tuesday (#262) and is used again on the saint's memorial (always a weekday, never a Sunday) in July (#603). Peter and John's race to the tomb in John 20:1 -9 (#43), though, is retold every Easter Sunday, and Jesus' appearance to Thomas in John 20:19-31 (#44) is read on the Second Sunday of Easter every year.

While it is only natural that the gospels for the Sundays of Easter should proclaim the appearances of the risen Lord, the gospels assigned to the fourth through the seventh Sundays

of Easter use excerpts from the prayer of Christ at the Last Supper, ignoring Christ's appearance to and dialogue with Mary Magdalene in John 20:11-18 for Sunday proclamation. Similarly, the gospel for Easter Monday (#261) gives Matthew's account of **the women finding Christ risen**(Matthew 28:8-15). Whereas Matthew 28:1-10 is read at the Easter Vigil in Year A, Matthew 28:8-15 would make an excellent follow-up Sunday gospel--but is relegated to Monday. The first reading for each of the Sundays of Easter is taken from the Acts of the Apostles. The selections focus on the sermons and activities of Peter, Paul, Barnabas and Stephen. The women leaders found in the Acts of the Apostles--**Tabitha, Lydia and Priscilla**--are given second place in the weekday readings of the Easter Season.

Making Women Optional

Throughout the lectionary, some of the assigned gospel passages that are quite lengthy have optional cutoff points to make the readings shorter and supposedly more acceptable to the Sunday assembly. The presider is authorized to read the whole passage or to cut it short. Several of these passages set aside by parentheses as optional and expendable relate the experiences of women.

February 2, the feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, is assigned the passage from Luke 2:22-40. When Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the Temple, they were met by Simeon and **the prophet Anna**, both of whom recognized the infant as the Savior. In the lectionary (#524), the verses about the prophet Anna may be omitted. This same gospel is read on the Sunday after Christmas in Year B (#17), but both Simeon and Anna are considered optional here. The prophet Anna might never appear to witness to Jesus in our churches.

Jesus' healing of a **woman with a hemorrhage** is significant for Jesus' disregard for the taboos against women (speaking to a woman in public, being touched by a woman or being made unclean by the touch of a bleeding woman). Yet this miracle with all its implications can be sliced out of the gospel (Mark 5:21-43) in the optional short reading for the Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time in Year B (#99). If the presider decides not to read it in Year B, it is never heard by the Sunday assembly. Matthew's and Mark's complete versions of this story may be heard on a weekday (Tuesday of the Fourth Week in Ordinary Time, every year, #324; and Monday of the 14th Week in Ordinary Time, every year, #383), but Luke's version is omitted altogether in Year C.

The Gospel of Matthew is used for the passion reading on Palm Sunday, Year A (#38). Although this passion account begins with the **anointing of Jesus on the head by a woman**, the lectionary omits these verses (26:6-13). The optional short version of this reading also concludes just before the mention of **the faithful women** who had followed Jesus to Jerusalem from Galilee. The gospel reading for Wednesday of Holy Week (#260) begins again with Matthew 26:14, repeating the story from Sunday of the betrayal by Judas and excluding again the anointing by a woman.

For Year B, the Palm Sunday passion reading is from Mark (#38). Only the optional long version includes the anointing of Jesus on the head by a woman and the witness of the **women at the cross**. Thus the role of Jesus' women disciples is again excluded for those who might hear only the short version.

In the Gospel of John, the anointing of Jesus is performed by **Mary of Bethany** at a banquet served by her sister **Martha**. This version of the anointing story (John 12: 1-8) is read only on a weekday, on Monday of Holy Week (#258). It is not included in the reading of the passion on Good Friday, which is taken from the Gospel of John.

One might ask: Is any account of the anointing of Jesus by a woman familiar to Catholics? Of course, the sinful and penitent woman of Luke 7:36 - 50, who washes Jesus' feet with her tears, is presented on the Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time in Year C (#94) and every year on Thursday of the Twenty-fourth Week in Ordinary Time (#446); but the lectionary does not give us the same familiarity with Mark's and Matthew's versions, in which a woman--not identified as a sinner--assumes the role of a prophet in anointing Jesus on the head. It is to this woman that Jesus promised (in vain?), "I assure you, wherever the good news is proclaimed throughout the world, what she did will be spoken of as her memorial." (Matthew 26:13).

Luke's gospel also includes a passage (8:1-3) that notes some of Jesus' women disciples: **Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and others** who go unnamed. These three short verses are attached to Luke 7:36-50 when it is read on the Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time in Year C (#94). But why? By association with the woman in Luke 7:37, are the women named in Luke 8:2-4 also assumed to be sinful? These verses are marked as optional, but if they are omitted, Joanna and Susanna may go unknown except for a weekday mention (Friday of the Twenty-fourth Week in Ordinary Time, every year, #447).

One of the few feminine images of God in the gospels, "the reign of God is like yeast which a woman took...", (Matthew 13:33) is optional on the only Sunday it appears (the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A, #107). Matthew's and Luke's parables with this image plus the parable of the mustard seed are found on weekdays (Monday of the Seventeenth Week in Ordinary Time, lectionary #401, and Tuesday of the Thirtieth Week in Ordinary Time, lectionary #480). Probably only few Sunday homilies present the image of a bakerwoman God to balance the image of the farmer God.

When women are not overlooked or rendered optional in the lectionary, sometimes passages containing positive references to them are left out while those containing negative references are retained. Take, for example, Exodus 15:20-21, in which Miriam (sister of Moses and Aaron) is identified as a prophet and leads a liturgy of thanksgiving after the crossing of the sea; this passage is omitted from the lectionary. These verses could easily have been attached to the Easter Vigil reading (#42) that exalts the role of Moses, particularly in light of modern scholarship that has pretty much proven that the older scriptural tradition is that of Miriam leading the liturgy of thanksgiving. The account of Moses leading the song of victory was added later, borrowing from the **Miriam** story. Miriam's weaker side, however, is revealed later, in the

story of her envy and punishment with leprosy (Numbers 12:1-13) in a weekday reading (Tuesday of the 18th Week in Ordinary Time, Year I, #408).

Another disturbing tendency is the editing of texts according to **gender stereotypes**. One of the most convincing examples of this is the editing of Proverbs 31 for the Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A (#158). The lectionary omits verses 14-18 and 21-29, which praise the woman's initiative, business acumen, dignity and wisdom: "Like merchant ships she secures her provisions from afar....She picks out a field to purchase; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard. She is girt about with strength....She makes garments and sells them....She is clothed with strength and dignity." The lectionary does, however, include the passages that praise the woman for serving her husband and being his "unfailing prize." The gospel for this same day is Matthew 25:14-30, which is about the three servants who are given silver pieces. Only with the reading of the complete passage of the industrious woman will listeners be able to find a connection to the industrious male servant of the gospel.

The tragedy of the sacrifice of the **daughter of Jephthah** is read on Thursday of the Twentieth Week in Ordinary Time, Year I (#422). Her father, having made a rash vow to sacrifice "whoever comes out of the doors of my house to me when I return in triumph" (Judges 11:31), felt obligated to fulfill his brazen promise. The lectionary augments the tragedy by succeeding this reading with the response "Here am I, Lord; I come to do your will" and Psalm 40. Does this imply that God approved of Jephthah's impulsive vow or that parents have unlimited, life-threatening authority over their children? Victims of violence should surely never be expected to sing "Here am I, Lord" on the table of sacrifice. Those who sing this song may well ask, Where is the God who rescued the son Isaac from his father but did not rescue the daughter from her father?

On Holy Family Sunday, the Sunday after Christmas, one would hope to find readings portraying the family of Mary, Joseph and Jesus as a model for contemporary families. The first reading from Sirach does refer to respect for mothers as well as fathers (Sirach 3:4, see lectionary #17), but the responsorial psalm that follows, Psalm 128, is addressed to men and reflects the psalmist's view of the ideal role of women: "Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the recesses of your home." The second reading clearly puts the family relationships in similar perspective: "You who are wives, be submissive to your husbands" (Colossians 3:18). Credit must be given to the U.S. bishops, who requested and received permission from the Vatican in June, 1992, to omit that verse and the following three verses from public reading. A similar permission was requested and received to shorten Ephesians 5:21 -32 to omit "Wives should be submissive to their husbands..." on the Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B (lectionary #123), on Tuesday of the Thirtieth Week in Ordinary Time, Year II (lectionary #480), and at weddings (lectionary #775). One wonders if liturgists and pastors are aware of these permissions: See the Newsletter of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, June, 1992.

The first reading on Pentecost Sunday (#64) is Acts 2:1-11. The opening verse as given in the Bible (NAB) reads: "When the day of pentecost came, it found them gathered in one place" (emphasis added). Those who were gathered are named in Acts 1 as the eleven and "some

women in their company, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers." In the lectionary, the opening sentence is interpreted and modified to read "When the day of Pentecost came it found the brethren gathered in one place" (emphasis added). Although "brethren" theoretically may be an inclusive noun, it is not heard as such in this selection. Have homilists revealed that Mary and other women received the Holy Spirit on Pentecost along with the men?

The Calendar of Saints

An important part of our Catholic liturgical experience is the remembrance and celebration of the holy men and women who have been faithful to Christ unto death. From the time of the early martyrs, liturgical tradition has brought the saints to our attention for veneration, inspiration and encouragement. The 1970 lectionary, of course, follows the revised calendar. But the revised sanctoral cycle has an unbalanced ratio of 144 male saints to 28 female saints. (The U.S. bishops have since added 10 men and 7 women to the roster.) The month of June alone brings 19 men before the church for veneration, and no women! Days in the sanctoral cycle are ranked in the descending order of solemnity, feast, memorial and optional memorial. Celebrations in honor of Mary, Joseph, John the Baptist, Peter and Paul are given the status of solemnities. Feasts also are assigned to these five again, as well as to 14 more men. The highest rank in the calendar that any woman besides Mary has achieved is that of memorial. Even though Mary Magdalene has been recognized through the centuries as "apostle to the apostles" (see John Paul II, "On The Dignity and Vocation of Women," # 16), she ranks below the Twelve in the liturgy.

Further study of the lectionary reveals that 42 male saints have at least one proper reading assigned for their day, while only 8 female saints (not counting Mary) have a special reading. Of these, only Mary Magdalene, Theresa of the Child Jesus and Anne (who shares a memorial with Joachim) are assigned a proper first reading and gospel. Memorials without proper readings may use readings from the appropriate set of "common" readings (Common of Martyrs, Common of Saints and so on). However, for days ranked below feasts--which include all the memorials of women--liturgical guidelines recommend the use of the daily continuous readings from the lectionary.

Memorials of both men and women saints use both the Common of Martyrs and the Common of Saints. But only memorials of men use the Common of Pastors and the Common of Doctors. Furthermore, only memorials of women are assigned to the Common of Virgins, even though many of the male saints are in fact virgins, too (i.e. celibate or vowed religious).

The memorials of the only two women ever named "doctors" of the church--Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila--each do have proper first readings, but the gospel is chosen not from the Common of Doctors but from the Common of Virgins (for both Catherine and Teresa) or the Common of Saints/ Religious (for Teresa)!

Women and men who are looking for spiritual nourishment from the stories of our ancestors, both male and female, are finding that the diet is very meager at the table of the liturgy.
Invaluable Manifestations

The rationale used for choosing the scripture texts for the lectionary is found in the introduction to the lectionary, especially in #7 and #8. Omitted passages are those of lesser importance; they contain serious literary, critical or exegetical problems; they will not be understood by the faithful; they are not essential to the meaning of the text; they have lesser spiritual value; they have little pastoral worth; and they contain truly difficult questions. Certainly all of us would agree that not all passages of the Bible are suitable for public reading in the liturgy; and an analysis of the lectionary similar to mine would reveal that many stories of men also are omitted. But given the already limited focus on women in the Bible, it would seem that lectionary editors would begin to choose to be more inclusive of women - if they wished the liturgy to speak to women. But it is not just a matter of speaking to women. Just as men are held up as spiritual models for women (how many sermons have we heard on the faith of Peter?), so, too, men's spirituality is enriched and aided with feminine patterns of holiness.

Since Vatican II we have been reminded again and again that "the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the fountain from which all her power flows" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, # 10). The liturgy is meant to be a source of holiness and a celebration of union with God for all God's people. If liturgy is to be authentic, then, it must speak to the experience of women as well as men. Because "sacred scripture is of paramount importance in the celebration of the Liturgy" (CSL #24), the scripture readings should represent the totality of salvation history and human experience. Because the homily is to be drawn mainly from the scripture readings, it follows that if the readings overlook women or present negative stereotypes, homilies will also. The full history of God's intervention in the lives of women and men needs to be made known if the celebration of the liturgy is to "pertain to the whole body of the church." (CSL #26).

Pope John Paul II has himself called for the recognition and appreciation of the historical gifts of women: "The church asks at the same time that these invaluable 'manifestations of the Spirit,' which with great generosity are poured forth upon the 'daughters' of the eternal Jerusalem, may be attentively recognized and appreciated so that they may return for the common good of the church and of humanity, especially in our times." (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women #31).

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Practical suggestions for liturgists and presiders

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accompanying the article, "Women in the Bible and the Lectionary"

A revised lectionary was recently approved by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and sent to Rome for confirmation. However, the Vatican has withdrawn its initial confirmation of one translation (the New Revised Standard version) and has ordered a reworking of another (the Revised New American Bible) because of the use of inclusive language. My understanding is that there were no substantial changes in the selections of readings in this forthcoming lectionary, so we can anticipate little change in the content even when or if the revision is approved. There are, however, some actions that presiders and liturgists can take to use the lectionary to its maximum potential and correct some of the deficiencies noted above.

1. Choose to read the long versions of the gospel whenever a short version is provided. If that will seem to make Mass too long, perhaps something else could be shortened, such as the homily.
2. At the beginning of Mass, the commentator or presider could call attention to verses that have been omitted from the lectionary readings. This information also could be supplied in the bulletin.
3. Preach on the full biblical text, paying special attention to the omitted verses.
4. Include the omitted verses in the assigned reading, either by retyping the full passage and inserting it in the lectionary or by reading the complete passage from the Bible itself -- the Bible was used for proclamation before the lectionary ever came into being. (For more on the legality of adding verses to the lections, watch for the forthcoming book from canonist John Huels, *More Disputed Questions on the Liturgy* to be published this fall by Liturgy Training Publications.)
5. Use scripture passages about women that are neglected by the lectionary on other occasions in parish life -- on evenings of formation or reflection, or for the commissioning of ministers, for example. For catechists, Anna the prophet, Priscilla and Aquila, Lydia, Lois and Eunice; for musicians, Miriam or Judith leading the singing with tambourines; for lectors, Huldah, the prophet; for ministers of hospitality, the women who welcome prophets in 1 Kings 17 or 2 Kings 4; for ministers of communion, Martha's confession in John 11.
6. Use the Magnificat or portions of Esther's and Judith's prayers to open or close parish meetings until people come to learn them by heart.
7. For communal anointings of the sick, add an extra reading from Mark or Matthew on the woman anointing Jesus on the head to prepare him for his passion; or refer to it in the homily.
8. At funeral vigils for women, use the full reading from Proverbs 31.

9. For pro-life rallies, use Exodus 1:8-22, including the omitted verses 14 - 21 on the midwives.

10. Celebrate all the optional memorials of women saints throughout the year.

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