



Mary Magdalene Goes to the Synod

Expanding the Lectionary to Include Our Foremothers in Faith

Academic Resources

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Women in the Bible and the Lectionary

by Ruth Fox, OSB (1996)

Updated with 2024 lectionary references

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 1:8-14, 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 - Ru 1:1, 3-6, 14b-16, 22- Friday of the Twentieth Week in Ordinary Time, Year I, and #424 - Ruth 2:1-3, 8-11; 4:13-17, 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 (#227 - Est C:12, 14-16, 23-25) 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 (#156), 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 - 2 Macc 7:1, 20-31) and only in Year I! 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 (#198) 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 (#42), 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 (#42), though, is retold every Easter Sunday, and Jesus' appearance to Thomas in John 20:19-31 (#43-A; 44-B; 45-C) 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 (#98). 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 (#259) 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: 1-11) is read only on a weekday, on Monday of Holy Week (#257). 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 (#93) 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 (#93). 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, #106). 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 baker woman 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 (#41ABC) 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 (#157). 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** (#17ABC), 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** (#63) 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

by Ruth Fox, OSB | 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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The Lectionary: A Canon within the Canon

Regina Boisclair

Introduction

Christian worship in general and Catholic liturgy in particular makes use of the Bible in diverse ways. The liturgical year recalls the biblical history of salvation; liturgical rituals renew, enrich, and interpret the biblical witness; words and phrases in the rites and many hymns reproduce or paraphrase biblical passages. As Gerard Sloyan notes, "From the opening sign of the cross (see Mt 28:19) to the final dismissal (see Ps 29:11b; Jdt 8:35), the participants are invited to live in the world of the Bible as one people with its people."¹ The most sustained use of the Bible, however, is the reading of biblical passages. For Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, and many Protestants, these readings are predetermined in tables, lists of preselected passages from the Bible appointed to specific occasions on the church calendar. The Catholic Church calls these tables an "ordo" or lectionary. Catholics also use the word "lectionary" to identify volumes that print the passages in their assigned sequence in order to facilitate public reading. This article concerns the tables, not the printed volumes.

The Second Vatican Council called for a revision of a lectionary that had been used in the Roman Rite since 1570. *The Constitution on the Liturgy* (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) called for "a more ample, more varied and more suitable reading from sacred scripture" (35:1). The Council Fathers intended that "the treasure of the Bible be opened up more lavishly so that a richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word. In this way a more representative part of the sacred scripture will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 51). The Council considered that in the

proclamation of texts, understood as the Word of God, "Christ is present since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the church" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7).

The Revised Lectionary of the Roman Missal for Sundays and Solemnities was promulgated in 1969 and modestly revised in 1981. It became mandatory for use in Roman Catholic worship worldwide on the first Sunday of Advent in 1971. This lectionary had three major innovations: (1) it replaced an annual cycle of readings with a three-year table, (2) it provided for three biblical selections together with a psalm or canticle in place of a Gospel passage that had been preceded by a brief segment from an epistle, and (3) it appointed regular readings from the Old Testament that were rarely included in the 1570 ordo. The three-year lectionary for Sundays and Solemnities was accompanied by a two-year table of selections for weekdays, with proper or common readings for Saints' days, as well as selections for sacramental, votive, and various other occasions. A complete weekday lectionary for Mass was an innovation; the 1570 lectionary assigned readings for Solemnities, Holy Week, some Saints' days and the sacraments, otherwise the Sunday readings were repeated throughout the week. Both the new Sunday and weekday lectionaries follow the same liturgical calendar, although they are independent one from the other.

The three-year Sunday lectionary is a highly popular change. This lectionary not only vastly increased the number of biblical texts proclaimed in public worship, but also inaugurated a new appreciation of sacred Scripture among Catholics. In addition, it had an unanticipated ecumenical influence; various Anglican and Protestant churches quickly adopted the three-year Catholic lectionary and adapted it for their own use. The denominational lectionaries changed some of the first and second readings but retained nearly all the Gospel

1. Gerard Sloyan, "Overview of the Lectionary for Mass: Introduction," in *The Bible Documents: A Parish Resource* (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 2001), 72–73.

selections on the same occasions as the Catholic lectionary as an expression of Christian unity. Today, all the original denominational lectionaries have been effectively replaced by the 1992 *Revised Common Lectionary*. The three-year Sunday lectionary is considered "Catholicism's greatest gift to Protestant preaching."²

Amid enormous conflicts that followed the changes in Catholic liturgy after Vatican II, the lectionary never became the focus of opposition. Questions concerning the new lectionary focus primarily on ways it might be improved. What follows sketches the history of lectionaries, discusses the formulation of the present lectionaries, and identifies issues of concern. Lectionaries by their very nature establish a canon within the canon of interpretations of the Bible that distinguish liturgical readings from biblical texts.

Lectionary History

While we cannot determine if Jesus' reading from Is 61:1–2, reported in Lk 4:17–20, was assigned by a lectionary, "a list of continuous readings of the Torah for Sabbaths, festivals, and also Mondays and Thursdays was fixed a century before Christ."³ The Mishnah (ca. 200 CE) assumes that the public reading of Torah and the Prophets was an ancient practice (*Megillah* 3.4–6) and reports that the passages concerning events being commemorated were appointed for the observance of fasts and feasts such as Passover, Hanukkah, and Purim.⁴ Apart from specific readings chosen for feasts or fasts, Torah portions are continuous—the next assigned reading picks up exactly where the last left off so that today the whole Torah is proclaimed over the course of one year. The second reading (the Haftarah portion) from the Prophets was and is selected to correspond thematically to that of the Torah.

There is no evidence that gatherings of the earliest Jesus movement read from the Scriptures while they continued to worship at the Temple or attend synagogues. There is no doubt, however, that once Jewish Christians left or were expelled from the synagogue, some began to include the practice of reading from the Scriptures in Christian worship. "The extent to which the church took over the synagogue system . . . is unclear, except for Ex 12 which was used at the Jewish Passover and the Christian Pascha."⁵

In the second century Justin reports that readings were proclaimed "as long as time allows" (*Apology* 1.67). In the third century individuals were ordained to the office of reader. The fourth century *Apostolic Constitutions* (8.5.11) identified a five-reading sequence "of the law and the prophets, of our epistles and the Acts, as well as the Gospels." By the fifth century, both Rome and Constantinople reduced the readings to three; sometime in the sixth century, Rome began to proclaim only two readings. The first reading came to be called the "Epistle" even when the selection was from the Old Testament, the Acts of the Apostles, or the book of Revelation, since most were from an epistle.⁶ Rome's was not the only Latin liturgical tradition in the West. While the Celtic, Hispanic, and Ambrosian rites followed the Roman practice of two readings, the Gallican system retained three.⁷

Liturgical readings devised for the whole year emerged between the fourth and seventh centuries. The most ancient extant Christian lectionary codex is an Armenian lectionary that is dated between 405 and 417. A number of complete or partial lists of Western lectionaries survive from the sixth through the eleventh centuries. Before the Council of Trent no specific lectionary was mandated for the Western Church. The *Würzburg Comes*, the *Episto-*

2. James White, *Christian Worship in Transition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 139.

3. John Reumann, "A History of Lectionaries from the Synagogue in Nazareth to Post-Vatican II, *Interpretation* 31 (1977), 116–30, at 119.

4. Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 320–21.

5. Reginald Fuller, "Lectionaries," in *A Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. J. G. Davies (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 211.

6. F. E. Warren, *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Antelucene Church*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1912), 257–83.

7. Gerard Sloyan, "Some Suggestions for a Biblical Three-Year Lectionary," *Worship* (1963), 521–35, at 527.

lary of Alcuin, and the *Comes Murbacensis* are important examples of medieval practice.

The origin of the lectionary for the 1570 *Missale Romanum* is unknown. Since similar lectionaries were adopted by Lutheran and Anglican reformers, this ordo predated the Council of Trent (1545–1563) and was used throughout Europe. This lectionary assigns a one-year cycle of suitable Gospel readings to the solemnities and seasons; the many Sundays after Epiphany and Pentecost (now called the Sundays of the Year or Ordinary Time) introduced accounts from Jesus' ministry taken from the Gospel that seemed to present the most complete version of the story. Some "epistles" read before these Gospels were chosen to suit the occasion; a few seem suggested by the Gospel selection; most appear to be remnants of an earlier system of semi-continuous readings that has no discernable connection either to the Gospels or to the occasion. Use of this lectionary in the 1962 edition of the *Missale Romanum* has been recently revived for celebrations of the Extraordinary Form of the Mass; it provides for the proclamation of a very limited amount of the biblical witness.

The Vatican II Revision

Work on implementing the changes mandated by *The Constitution on the Liturgy* began in 1964 when Pope Paul VI established the Council for the Implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, which came to be called The Consilium. The work was divided among fourteen study groups. Study Group One was charged with revising the calendar; Study Group Eleven was charged with devising the lectionary. It took three years to prepare resources, consult international exegetical, liturgical, catechetical and pastoral scholars, hold discussions, and devise preliminary schemas for the revised calendar.

The compilers clearly understood that the creation of a lectionary for Sundays and Solemnities was primary, and those passages that were considered the most important would be assigned to these occasions. The foundational principle of this effort describes the intent of biblical passages assigned to Sundays and Solemnities:

"The mystery of Christ and the history of salvation" must be presented in the readings such that the new system of readings must contain the whole nucleus of the apostolic preaching about Jesus as "Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36) who fulfilled the Scriptures by his life, his preaching and above all, his paschal mystery and who gives life to the Church until his glorious return.⁸

The first major decision was to abandon the Tridentine Lectionary so that there would be internal coherence to a multi-year system. At the same time there was a concern to preserve historical lectionary selections, arrangements, and assignments, whenever possible. Charts of more than fifty lectionary systems, ancient and modern, occidental and oriental, Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and Protestant, were assembled to identify past traditions so that these could be honored.

The most significant decisions were to adopt a three-year cycle for Sundays, to assign each year to a Synoptic Gospel (Year A= Matthew; Year B=Mark; Year C=Luke), and to appoint passages from John every year during Lent and Easter—as was common in the past—as well as to supplement Mark's short Gospel in Year B. The Gospel selections that were assigned for Sundays and Solemnities range between sixty and sixty-five percent of each Gospel.

Another major decision was to appoint three readings with a psalm or canticle to each Sunday and Solemnity, although the general instructions in the introduction allow for bishops' conferences to choose to use only two readings "for pastoral reasons."⁹

The first readings are from the Old Testament, excepting for the Sundays of Easter when the First Readings from Acts maintain an ancient practice. Most Old Testament selections were assigned for some perceived correspondence, usually typological, to the Gospel. However, during the first five Sundays of Lent, the Old Testament lessons review highlights of Israel's salvation history (Year A 1, creation and fall; 2, the call of Abraham; 3, God pro-

8. Annibale Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy 1948–1975*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 410.

9. Sloyan, "Introduction," 79.

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vides water from the desert rock; 4, Samuel anoints David; 5, God's promise of restoration after exile; Year B 1, the covenant with Noah; 2, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac; 3, God's gift of the Decalogue; 4, exile and restoration; 5, the promise of a new covenant; Year C 1, Moses recounts Israel's history from Abraham's wanderings to Israel's deliverance; 2, God's covenant with Abraham; 3, God reveals his name to Moses; 4, Israel enters the land; 5, God promises a new Exodus). A psalm or canticle was chosen to link with and respond to the first reading.

During Advent, Christmas, and Lent the three selections with a psalm or canticle foster themes of each season. Gospel selections are either a traditional reading for that season or chosen to support and supplement the seasonal theme(s). For instance, during the Easter Season not only are the first readings from Acts of the Apostles, but the second readings are semi-continuous selections from 1 Peter, Revelation, or 1 John, since these books were assigned during Easter in ancient lectionaries. On the Sundays of the Year (Ordinary Time) semi-continuous selections from the Gospel of the year were appointed with a corresponding Old Testament passage and psalm. For the second readings during Ordinary Time the compilers devised a separate cycle of semi-continuous selections from the epistles (Year A: 1 Cor 1–4, Rom, Phil, 1 Thes; Year B: 1 Cor 6–11, 2 Cor, Eph, Jas, Heb 2–10; Year C: 1 Cor 12–15, Gal, Col, Heb 11–12, Phlm, 1 Tm, 2 Tm, 2 Thes).

Advent anticipates Christ's second coming while we prepare to celebrate the memorial of his first. The first readings are passages understood as messianic prophecies. The Gospel for the first Sunday is a selection from Jesus' eschatological discourse from the Gospel of the year; the second and third Sunday feature accounts of the Baptist; on the fourth and final Sunday the Gospels recount the episodes from Matthew or Luke that occur before Jesus' birth.

During the Christmas, Lent, and Easter seasons, the selections follow the ancient practices of featuring John's Gospel. However, the Gospels assigned for the first two Sundays of Lent are the account of Jesus' temptation and transfiguration from the Gospel of the year. At

first the readings assigned to Lent in Year A were intended for all three years. While the compilers subsequently added other readings for Years B and C, the readings for Year A are so tied into the Rite of Christian Initiation that parishes engaged in preparing adults for baptism at Easter use Year A every year.

The weekday lectionary provides enrichment for those who attend daily Mass. It contains many passages that are not in the Sunday readings. While the weekday table is called a two-year lectionary, all readings for the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Holy Week, and Easter and the Gospels for the Weekdays of the Year (Ordinary Time) are assigned to the identical occasion for both years. Only the first readings for Ordinary Time differ for each of the two years.

Like the Sunday readings, weekday selections emphasize the themes of the season: anticipation during Advent, celebration of the Incarnation during Christmas, penance and baptism during Lent. During Easter the daily lectionary continues the Sunday readings from Acts and after recounting the various Resurrection appearances in the Gospels during the week following Easter, weekday Gospels feature semi-continuous selections from Jesus' final discourse from Jn 13–17.

Weekdays of the Year (Ordinary Time) are semi-continuous selections from the Synoptic Gospels (weeks 1–9: Mk 1–12; weeks 10–21: Mt 5–25; weeks 22–34: Lk 4–21) ending with Jesus' eschatological discourse according to Luke. During Ordinary Time there are two years of selections for the first readings from both Testaments. In a two-year period only Obadiah, Zephaniah, and Judith are not represented in at least one weekday lection. Over the course of two years, those who attend daily Mass hear a representative selection from almost every book of the Bible.

Concerns

The fact that the three-year Sunday lectionary includes, excludes, or limits certain passages concerns some biblical and liturgical scholars. Noting how Vatican II intended a Sunday lectionary to be "more ample, more varied and more suitable" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 35),

the Pontifical Biblical Commission observed “in its present state, it only partially fulfills this goal.”¹⁰ Biblical scholars note that the lectionaries tend to present a Gospel harmony more than a re-presentation of the distinctive thrust of each evangelist. Liturgical scholars tend to dislike the fact that the second readings follow a separate sequence of semi-continuous selections from the epistles during the Sundays of the Year (Ordinary Time); any affinity between the epistle and the other readings of Ordinary Time is serendipitous. Today, many have observed that because many selections are so abbreviated, they lose the essential message of the sacred author. However, the three most prominent concerns involve readings that foster a teaching of contempt toward Jews and Judaism; the omission of stories of the women and female images from the biblical world; and the nature of the selections from the Old Testament.

Misperception of Jews

A number of passages in the New Testament express the pain and polemic of the Jesus movement as it separated from emerging Rabbinic Judaism. There is an unbroken trajectory between the animus of New Testament authors toward Jews who rejected Christian insights in the second half of the first century and the subsequent nineteen centuries of animosity on the part of Christians toward Judaism.

Matthew 27:25, “His blood be upon us and upon our children,” has lent support to the idea that Jews of all generations were and are culpable for the death of Jesus. While this one line in the long Gospel proclaimed once in three years on Palm Sunday in Year A could be lost to an assembly (or taken correctly to apply to everyone), several readings from Acts appointed to the Sundays of Easter repeatedly assert that the Jews killed Jesus. The speeches of Peter assigned as the first reading for Easter Sunday every year (Acts 10:34, 37–43), twice again in Years A and B (A: Acts 2:14, 22–28; 2:14, 36–41; B: Acts 3:1–15, 17–19; 4:8–12),

and once again in Year C (Acts 5:27b–32, 40b–41), accuse Jews of killing Jesus. The accusation is underscored by the Church calendar since Christ’s death as prelude to the Resurrection is part of the focus of the Easter Season.¹¹

Nostra Aetate, issued in 1965 by Vatican II, states, “What happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today.”¹² Liturgical readings that reiterate traditional teachings of contempt allow anti-Judaism to smolder like an underground fire with the potential to flare. Too many churchgoing Christians still believe the Jews killed Jesus when in fact he was crucified under the order of a Roman procurator by Roman soldiers.

The solution here would be to follow lectionary guidelines that allow the elimination of segments of the text that present pastoral problems.¹³ It is unfortunate that this problem was not resolved by the compilers, who acknowledge they chose to omit verses on pastoral grounds.¹⁴ Admittedly some of the discussions of this issue relate to the reality that eliminating these verses would be expurgating the Bible and suggest that this problem be explained in the homily that follows Gospel readings. The fact is, however, that the lectionaries are already selections and the homilies that follow the readings most often need to address other issues. A discussion of the problem of New Testament anti-Judaic polemics is more appropriate in Bible studies when questions can be asked and where it is possible to extend clarifications.

Missing Women

The Catholic Sunday Lectionary tends to omit passages that introduce women, eliminate women from approved shorter readings, hide women in long lections, and emphasize and reinforce patriarchal premises. From the Old

10. Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” in *Biblical Documents: A Parish Resource* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 24.

11. Regina A. Boisclair, “Conflicting Messages: Sunday Lections/Official Catholic Teachings,” in *Scripture and Theology: Proceedings of the College Theology Society 2001*, ed. Carol Dempsey and William Loewe (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 166–68.

12. 4:13.

13. Sloyan, “Introduction,” 76.

14. *Ibid.*, 77.

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Testament, four readings include Eve, two mention Sarah, one identifies Hagar, two introduce the widow of Zarephath, one features the Shunammite woman, and another mentions Hannah. Eleven selections introduce only six women as participants in the story of Israel over a period of three years. Selections call attention to dozens of male heroes and holy men, but Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, Tamar, Shiprah, Puah, Moses' mother, Zipporah, Miriam, Rahab, Deborah, Jael, Naomi, Ruth, Abigail, Bathsheba, Huldah, Judith, and Esther are never mentioned.

Worshipping assemblies do hear the female imagery associated with Lady Wisdom at least three times each year (C Trinity, Prv 8:22–31; B 20th, Prv 9:1–6; A 32nd, Wis 6:12–16; B 28th, Wis 7:7–11; ABC 2nd after Christmas, Sir 24:1–12; ABC Easter Vigil, Bar 3:9–15, 32–4:4); but other female images for God are only heard twice and both are introduced in the same year. Isaiah 49:15, “Can a mother forget her infant” (C 8th Sunday) and Is 66:13, “as a mother comforts her child” (C 14th Sunday) are overwhelmed when images of God as King, Lord of Hosts, and Father are pervasive. What is proclaimed suggests that women are derivative of men (B 27th Sunday, Gn 2:18–24), disposable by men (C 16th Sunday, Gn 18:1–10a), and dangerous to everyone (A 1 Lent, Gn 2:7–9, 3:1–7).¹⁵

Many women who were important in the early church were omitted from the Sunday lectionary. Mary the mother of Jesus and Chloe are named in passing, but Mary the mother of John Mark, Rhoda, Tabitha, Lydia, Prisca, the four prophet daughters of Philip, Phoebe, Mary of Rome, Junia, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis, the mother of Rufus, Julia, the sister of Nereus, Euodia, Syntyche, Apphia, Nympha, Eunice, Lois, and Claudia are never mentioned.

Gospel stories that feature Jesus' male disciples in a favorable light are apt to be included from more than one Gospel. Excepting the accounts at the empty tomb, none of the

accounts that feature an encounter between Jesus and one or more women are included more than once. Luke's story of Jesus healing a woman he identifies as a “daughter of Abraham” (who likely suffered from osteoporosis) in Lk 13:10–17 is the only miracle story not appointed as a Sunday Gospel. Many Gospel passages that include women are abbreviated, hidden, or eliminated. The story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman (A Lent 3, Jn 4:5–42) offers an approved shorter reading (Jn 4:5–15, 19b–26, 39a, 40–42) that eliminates the report that she evangelized her town.

In Mk 14:3–9 an anonymous woman from Bethany anoints Jesus' head—a symbolic Christological confession. This story is reproduced in Mt 26:6–13. In Lk 7:36–50 a sinful woman in Galilee washes Jesus and anoints Jesus' feet. In Jn 12:1–8, Mary of Bethany washes Jesus' feet. Affinities among the four accounts are evident and well recognized. The Sunday lectionary features Luke's story of the sinful woman, but neither John's accounts of Mary of Bethany's loving act nor Matthew's report of an anonymous woman's Christological confession are found in a Sunday Gospel. Mark's account is assigned to Palm Sunday in Year B but this story is hidden by the long Passion Narrative or eliminated from the shorter Gospel reading.

While all Christians are sinners and should model their lives on the repentant woman from Luke, the Sunday lectionary that balances good and sinful features of men eliminates or hides these stories in which the women exemplify ideals other than repentance. Marjorie Procter-Smith, commenting on the omission of these passages, is convinced that this story is emblematic of the fact that an androcentric hermeneutic unconsciously influenced both the selection and the way the collections of three readings were put together.¹⁶ The lectionary appears to exemplify the admonition: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have

15. Eileen Schuller, “Women in the Lectionary,” *National Bulletin on Liturgy* 27, no. 137 (1994), 108–14, at 110–11.

16. Marjorie Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 125–26.

authority over a man. She must be quiet" (1 Tm 2:12).¹⁷

Misrepresenting the Old Testament

Since all but the Lenten readings from the Old Testament were chosen by some form of correspondence, usually typological, to a Gospel passage, the Old Testament selections fail to offer a true representation of these canonical texts. The compilers claim that the "entire Old Testament is presupposed in the Lord's preaching, his actions and his passion."¹⁸ While this premise is assumed by New Testament authors and true to Christian faith, today scholars recognize that the principle of correspondence does not fully represent both Testaments and the Old Testament witness particularly suffers as a result.

If one were to follow the premise that selections are intended to introduce the most important parts of the Bible in the readings for Sundays and Solemnities, one might conclude that the most important parts of the Old Testament are those that correspond to the New. This is not just disputable, it is incorrect. Important accounts are missing. Significant accounts in the story of Israel and the Wisdom tradition that do not link to a Gospel passage are not heard. For example, Sunday selections fail to include an account of the flood and Noah's ark, to mention but one astonishing omission. Individual selections are frequently far too short to do much more than to set a stage for the Gospel. When passages only foreshadow what was fulfilled in Christ, the important story of God's benevolence to Israel is never heard.¹⁹

17. Regina A. Boisclair, "Amnesia in the Catholic Sunday Lectionary: Women—Silenced from the Memories of Salvation History," in *Women and Theology: Proceedings of the College Theology Society*, 1994, ed. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Phyllis H. Kaminski (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 128.

18. Bugnini, *Reform of the Liturgy*, 411.

19. Eileen Schuller, "Some Criteria for the Choice of Scripture Texts in the Roman Lectionary," in *Shaping English Liturgy*, ed. by P. Finn and J. Schellman, (Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1990), 385–404, at 390–92.

Conclusion

The Bible re-presents ancient traditions that in their present canonical form are received as sacred Scripture by the churches. Lectionaries, which are the product of the churches, represent these sacred texts. James Sanders calls the whole effort of revising and preserving ancient traditions the "canonical process" and considers the contemporary lectionaries the most recent example of the same process.²⁰

A lectionary is in effect a canon within the canon. It is a canon shaped by collections of selected readings assigned to the context of observances on the church calendar. Since selection excludes as well as includes, collection distorts as well as highlights, and context overlooks as well as memorializes, each of these features has interpretive effects that have the capacity either to underscore or alter the meaning of the biblical message. These effects are "set into" lectionaries by the selections, "provided by" lectionaries by their collections and contexts, and "heard from" lections by worshiping assemblies who come with pre-existing attitudes and beliefs that will influence how and what they hear when the lections are proclaimed.²¹

However, while lectionary readings are not the same as the canonical texts, they are designed to foster what might be rightly understood as a liturgical process whereby believing Christians enter into these stories and respond with an affirmation of faith. Their influence also extends beyond the limits of public worship since many catechetical programs, parochial Bible studies, and popular guides for spiritual growth follow their selections. They are the only Bible that is heard, read, preached, and studied by a substantial number of churchgoing Christians. ■

20. James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canon Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 78.

21. Boisclair, "Amnesia in the Catholic Sunday Lectionary," xxiii.



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General Editor
Carolyn Osiek, RSCJ

Associate Editor, Old Testament

Leslie J. Hoppe, OFM

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Francis Cardinal George, OMI
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President, USCCB

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Recovering Our Foremothers in Faith

Missing from the Lectionary

A quick guide

A careful analysis of the lectionary reveals 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.

~ Sr. Ruth Fox, OSB

The Catholic Sunday Lectionary tends to omit passages that introduce women, eliminate women from approved shorter readings, hide women in long lections, and emphasize and reinforce patriarchal premises.

~ Dr. Regina Boisclair

The non-inclusion of many of the passages in which women are named and where women take an active or a leadership role, as well as, the tendency to omit sections about women when a short version of a reading is given as an alternative mean that, for our Sunday Catholic, many of the rich biblical resources about the role of women in the Old Testament and especially in the early Christian communities are still simply unknown.

~ Sr. Eileen Schuller, OSU

If women's stories are omitted from the readings, they are not likely to appear in homilies.

~ Professor Emerita Katherine Tilman

The following list is a sampling of our foremothers in faith who are omitted, made optional, or relegated to weekdays where few Catholics hear their stories.

First (Old) Testament Women Never Heard in the Lectionary

Shiphrah & Puah	Zipporah	Rahab
Huldah	Jael	Abigail
Deborah	Rachel	Bathsheba
The Mother of Moses	Leah	
Rebekah	Tamar	

Second (New) Testament Women Never Heard in the Lectionary

Phoebe	Julia	Four prophetic daughters
Prisca	Nereus's sister Romans	of Philip
Mary	Olympas	Euodia
Junia	Lois and Eunice	Syntyche
Persis	Mary, the mother of John	Apphia
Tryphaena	Mark	Nympha
Tryphosa	Rhoda	Claudia
Rufus's mother	Tabitha	

The omission from the lectionary of the story of **Phoebe** who is named a deacon in Paul's letter to the Romans (16:1-2) should be of concern. This is all the more true as the Church, synod participants, and study groups discern the future of the diaconate for women

First Testament Women Never Heard on Sunday

Ruth and Naomi

These two women gain only 2 weekday readings every other year (I, 423, 424).

Esther

A great heroine in a time of oppression, gets only 1 weekday reading (I & II, 227)
3 more passages from the Book of Esther can be read in the Common of Saints and for masses for various occasions, but they are all accounts of the prayer of Esther's uncle, Mordecai.

Judith

A heroine who risks her life for her people. She receives only 2 passages in the Common of the Blessed Virgin and in the Common of Saints (709, 737). Still her great courage is never presented, only her asceticism and physical beauty.

The Mother of the Maccabees

The heroism of the Maccabee brothers is recounted on the 32nd Sunday (Yr. C, 156) but the passage stops short of paying tribute to their mother "most admirable and worthy of everlasting remembrance (Maccabees 7:20). The mother is remembered on a weekday and only in Yr. 1 (499) and in the Common of Martyrs (713.4) while the stories of her sons are told twice (713.2, 713.3)

Miriam

We never hear the story of Miriam who is identified in Exodus 15:20-21 as a prophet and the sister of Moses and Aaron. She leads a liturgy of thanksgiving after the crossing of the sea, but this passage is omitted from the lectionary. These verses could easily have been attached to the Easter Vigil reading (#41ABC) 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).

Second Testament Women Never Heard on Sunday

Mary Magdalene's Witness to the Resurrection

All the Gospels attest to the fact that Mary Magdalene and other women disciples were the first witnesses to the Resurrection.

Easter Sunday's account (John 20: 1 – 18) of Mary Magdalene's commission by Jesus and her subsequent proclamation of the Resurrection is **NEVER** heard on Easter Sunday or any Sunday. Instead, it is relegated to a weekdays, Easter Monday (Yrs. 1 & 2, 251) and Tuesday (Yrs. 1 & 2, 262), when few Catholics hear it; and on her feast day (603).

Yet

Peter and John's race to the tomb is retold every Easter (John 20: 1-9).

Their decision to go back home is never recalled (John 20:10).

Christ's appearance to Thomas in John 20:19-31 is read on the Second Sunday of Easter every year.

Mary's Magnificat

The revolutionary song of Mary in Luke 1:46 – 56 is never heard on a Sunday. It is found on a weekday (Yrs. 1 & 2, 198) and on the Feasts of the Visitation (572) and Assumption (622).

Woman Crippled for 18 years

The Gospel of Luke is the only one that narrates Jesus' healing of a woman who has been crippled for 18 years (Lk. 13:10-17). Yet, this pericope is assigned to a Saturday (Yrs. 1 & 2, 479) although Jesus recognizes her unusual status as the "Daughter of Abraham." This story of breaking man's law to follow God's law to heal is never heard on a Sunday.

Paul's Female Co-workers in Romans 16

Paul introduces 10 women, 7 who are identified with active roles. The stories of three of those women, Priscilla, Mary, Junia) are never heard on Sunday, but on a weekday (Yr. 1, 490) The other seven women are NEVER heard on any day.

Lydia in Acts 16: 11 – 15

Lydia, the first convert in Europe, who accepted Paul's message and was baptized along with her whole household is never proclaimed on a Sunday. Instead it is relegated to a weekday (Yrs. 1 & 2, 291).

The Syrophenician woman

Jesus focused his mission on his sister and brother Jews. When approached by a Syrophenician woman -- a Gentile -- for help, he insults her (Mark 7: 24-30). Her strong steady response opens Jesus's eyes and heart and helps him understand God's mission, God's salvific plan was larger than his what he had envisioned. This extraordinary story is relegated to a weekday (Yrs. 1 & 2, 332) and never heard on a Sunday.

Women Made Optional

Woman with Hemorrhage

Jesus heals this woman disregarding the taboos against women (speaking to a woman in public or being touched by an unclean (bleeding) woman.) Yet, this miracle with all its implications can be sliced out of the Gospel (March 5:21 – 43) in the optional shorter reading for the Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary time (Yr. B, 99)

Anna

On the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, the assigned passage from Luke is 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). Yet, the verses about the prophet **Anna** may be omitted.

Anointing woman

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 (#259) 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: 1-11) is read only on a weekday, on Monday of Holy Week (#257). It is not included in the reading of the passion on Good Friday, which is taken from the Gospel of John.

Negative or Gender Stereotypes of Women Presented

Woman praised solely for serving her husband

One of the most convincing examples of this kind of stereotyping is the editing of Proverbs 31 for the Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A (#157). 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 Daughter of Jephthah

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?"

Holy Family Sunday, Women Exhorted to Be Submissive

On Holy Family Sunday (#17ABC), 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). But, because they are in the lectionary, many priests and liturgists still choose to read them. They should be removed from the lectionary rather than made an option. (See the Newsletter of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, June 1992).

The Importance of Including Women's Stories

Including a greater number of women's stories in our Sunday readings is critical to the synod's goal of creating greater roles and space for women's wisdom, faith, leadership, and ministry.

While the readings certainly include educational components, the primary purpose of proclaiming them is not to convey information, but to draw us into the stories and teachings of our faith and the mysteries they reveal. During the proclamation of God's Word, we engage in deep, communal listening to the stories of God's love and to his expectations for his people through history. We listen to the teachings and ministry of Jesus, and to stories about the effects of Christian faith. These stories are intended to enter our minds and hearts and to invite our response. Active participation calls us to this work of listening and internalizing the mystery and message of these texts (Boisclair).