

Women in Christian Traditions

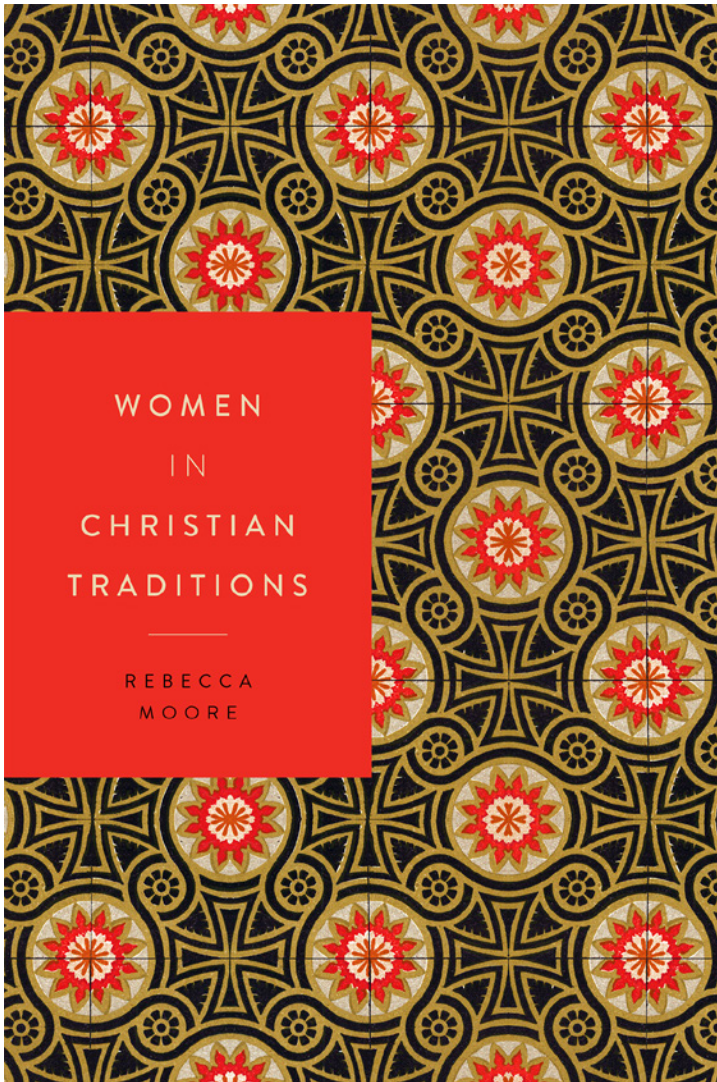
BY REBECCA MOORE

Instructor's Guide

Women in Christian Traditions offers a concise and accessible examination of the roles women have played in the construction and practice of Christian traditions, revealing the enormous debt that this major world religion owes to its female followers. It recovers forgotten and obscured moments in church history to provide a richer and fuller understanding of Christianity.

This text provides an overview of the complete sweep of Christian history through the lens of feminist scholarship. Yet it also departs from some of the assumptions of that scholarship, raising questions that challenge our thinking about how women have shaped beliefs and practices during two thousand years of church history. Did the emphasis on virginity in the early church empower Christian women? Did the emphasis on marriage during the Reformations of the sixteenth century improve their status? Must all churches ordain women to the pastorate? These questions and others have important implications for women in Christianity in particular, and for women in religion in general, since they go to the heart of the human condition.

This work examines themes, movements, and events in their historical contexts and locates churchwomen within the broader developments that have been pivotal in the evolution of Christianity. From the earliest disciples to the latest theologians, from the missionaries to the martyrs, women have been instrumental in keeping the faith alive. Women in Christian Traditions shows how they did so.



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INTRODUCTION: Why Study Women in Christian Traditions? — 2

CHAPTER 1: In the Beginning...Eve — 3

CHAPTER 2: The Women Disciples in the Kingdom of God — 4

CHAPTER 3: Women and the Conversion of an Empire — 5

CHAPTER 4: Saints, Seers, and Scholars in the Middle Ages — 6

CHAPTER 5: Women Reformed, Women Resistant — 7

CHAPTER 6: Spirit-Filled Women in the Nineteenth Century — 8

CHAPTER 7: Churchwomen on the Margins and in the Mainstream — 9

CONCLUSION: The Church of Martha and Mary — 11

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES — 12

INTRODUCTION

Why Study Women in Christian Traditions

Before the rise of the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s little attention was paid to women's influence in constructing Christian life and practice. A number of key thinkers contributed to the rise of a coherent feminist theology, however, including African American, Latina, Chicana, Asian, African, and other women who challenged the hegemony of white feminism by locating religious thinking within lived experience. These theologians charted a new course for the consideration of women in Christianity by including female saints, seers, and scholars of the past and present in their theological and historical reflections. Three main perspectives exist in feminist theologies today. The reformist school believes that women can achieve gender equality in Christianity without completely overhauling present structures. The reconstructionist school believes that Christian institutions need radical change, not just reform. The rejectionist, or revolutionary, school believes that Christianity is hopelessly patriarchal and can never be redeemed. While a backlash against some adaptations occurred, a new generation of theologians is returning to core Christian doctrines and reading them through feminist lenses. By further examining the way that women have helped to fashion Christian traditions we see the enormous debt this world religion has to its female practitioners.

The introduction serves as the foundation for important themes and issues addressed throughout the book. They include:

1. The variety of beliefs and practices churchwomen pursued, both historically and today
2. The ways that feminist interpretations of history tell a story that challenges conventional representations of women
3. The means by which women opposed patriarchal religious institutions throughout history
4. The key individuals who have played significant roles in reformulating scholarly assessments of women in Christian traditions
5. The racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity present in Christianity
6. The debates and divisions over prescribed gender roles that seem to limit women's full humanity
7. The example of the New Testament sisters Martha and Mary, and how they serve as models for Christian action

CHAPTER 1

In the Beginning . . . Eve

The first three chapters of the biblical book of Genesis have significantly shaped Christian teachings. There are two creation stories in Genesis. In the first account, men and women are created simultaneously, in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27). In the second account, a woman is fashioned from the rib of a non-gendered human in order to be that human's helper or partner (Gen 2:4-25). A third story appears in Genesis 3, in which a serpent persuades the first woman (not yet named Eve) to eat fruit from the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This last story functions etiologically, explaining why snakes don't have legs, why women have pain in pregnancy and are dominated by their husbands, and why men have to work for a living. This story of the Garden of Eden is important to Christians for two reasons. First, it establishes a soteriological need for the coming of Jesus Christ to correct the problems caused by the first humans. Second, it has been used to provide the justification for the subordination of women. These first three chapters in Genesis provide the paradigm by which Christians will understand gender relations, which can be classified as gender equality (Gen 1), gender complementarity (Gen 2), and gender polarity (Gen 3). While the New Testament record about Eve is rather mixed, later Christians blame Eve and Eve's daughters—all women—for sin, disobedience, temptation, and even the death of Jesus.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How does the book of Genesis contribute to gender equality? How does it contribute to gender inequality?
- What ideas arise in later Christianity that have their roots in these first three chapters of Genesis?
- In Genesis 1, the high point of creation occurs with the last things created. Can we apply this logic to Genesis 2, with woman being the high point of creation there as well, since she was created at the end of the whole process? Why or why not?
- Read the third chapter of Genesis, and then decide who comes across better: the woman, the man, or the serpent?
- Some Christians argue from Genesis 2 that men and women are equal, but have separate spheres of influence. Since we live in a secular society, are there any secular arguments that might be made in this regard? Or are gender differences socially constructed?

CHAPTER 2

The Women Disciples in the Kingdom of God

The four Gospels depict women as actors and agents of their own destinies, recipients of healing, models of faith, and characters in Jesus' parables about the coming kingdom of God. Jesus has numerous encounters with women throughout the gospels. For example, Martha and Mary, two sisters who appear in several gospels, are the first to declare that Jesus is the messiah (John 11:27) and the first to predict his impending execution (John 12:7). In Luke's gospel, however, Martha appears to be a careworn homemaker, while Mary is content to sit and listen to Jesus speak. Women also serve as exemplary figures in the parables of Jesus, in which he compares the kingdom of heaven to work typically done by women. Two key disciples of Jesus are his mother, Mary of Nazareth, and Mary of Magdala. Like other goddesses in the ancient world, the Virgin Mary did not need a man to procreate, but over the centuries, the valorization of her virginity turned her into a sexless being. Her *Magnificat*, the hymn that predicts a great reversal of the rich and the poor, has made her an object of devotion, however, symbolizing divine compassion for millions. Mary Magdalene, in contrast, is earthy, and believed by some to have been the wife of Jesus. All four gospels attest to her presence at the empty tomb, and John's gospel states that Jesus appeared to Mary first at the resurrection. She was a significant figure in the Gnostic Gospels and in Gnostic Christianity. Yet a conflation of two chapters in the Gospel of Luke caused later interpreters to think she was a reformed prostitute, a slander that existed for centuries. The Second Vatican Council restored Mary to her place as "apostle to the apostles," and feminist theologians recovered her as an example of an authentic evangelist, speaking out when she was disbelieved.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are the ways in which Jesus interacts with women, as described in the four gospels?
- What is the significance of the disciples Martha and Mary?
- Why did Jesus use examples of women and women's work in his parables?
- How, and why, did the Virgin Mary come to have such exalted status among Catholic and Orthodox Christians?
- Is it possible that Mary Magdalene was Jesus' wife? What would be the evidence for such a view? The evidence against such a view?
- What do you think are the reasons that Christians historically have emphasized the twelve male disciples, when the Gospels clearly show Jesus had many disciples, including women who financially supported his movement and traveled along with him?

CHAPTER 3

Women and the Conversion of an Empire

The first four centuries of Christianity saw the expansion and the contraction of women's leadership of the early church. The apostle Paul has rather a mixed reputation among feminists: on the one hand, he made clear statements of gender equality and included women ministers and coworkers in his movements; on the other hand, he says that the husband has authority over the wife and suggests that celibacy is preferable to marriage. The New Testament book of Acts describes a number of women leaders in the early Christian church, including Lydia, Tabitha, and Priscilla, or Prisca. Translation errors have deliberately misstated the actual offices that women held, and one error turned a woman, Junia, into a man, Junias. The basic unit of organization in the Pauline churches was the home, the sphere which women controlled. As the church became more hierarchical, women were pushed out of leadership, although two church offices remained for them. Widows were ordained to live a life of prayer and service, while deaconesses prepared women catechumens for baptism and church membership. Christian martyrs also included a number of women, since they could achieve the equality with men in death that was denied them in life. Once the persecutions ended a cult of virginity arose. If one could not die for the faith, one could become a "spiritual athlete" who performed severe austerities and self-denial. Asceticism virtually destroyed all that was feminine or womanly in the ones who chose that path, virtually turning some female saints into men. Women were further edged out of church leadership once the Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in the early fourth century. House churches were no longer necessary for imperial Christianity. Despite these restrictions, the leadership of women at the domestic level probably created more Christian converts than did the writings of the major church theologians of that era.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What is the apostle Paul's record on women?
- How did martyrdom affect women? Who were some important female martyrs?
- Why would the legalization of Christianity signal the end of women's leadership in the church?
- Do you agree that women probably made more converts at the domestic level than prominent theologians did? Why or why not?
- How should we deal with the problem of mistranslation in sacred texts? What approaches can you suggest?
- Did martyrdom, chastity, or virginity raise women's status in Christianity? Why or why not, in your opinion?

CHAPTER 4

Saints, Seers, and Scholars in the Middle Ages

Christianity spread throughout the Mediterranean world into Africa, Asia, and Europe. It divided along geo-political lines, between the Greek-speaking Eastern Roman Empire—also known as Byzantium—and the Latin-speaking Western Roman Empire. Church government, practice, and even theology differed to a certain extent. The women of the Orthodox, or Eastern Orthodox, churches differed from their Western counterparts in their levels of literacy, education, and activism. Nevertheless, a number of empresses and wealthy women shaped Byzantine Christianity by building churches, convents, and communities, and by resolving the iconoclastic controversy. In contrast to their sisters in the East, churchwomen in the West had an active intellectual life. Roman missionaries had reached the British Isles, and there Celtic Christianity emerged, under the joint leadership of women and men. Female missionaries then traveled to the continent to evangelize pagan Europe and lay women contributed to church life in many different ways. It was clear that professed religious life offered many opportunities for women, particularly wealthy women, and gave them some freedom from male domination. The abbess, for example, was ordained just as other clergy, and performed many tasks considered today to belong solely to priests. But all of this changed with a number of reforms that excluded women from education, from religious life, and from religious office. Despite these limitations, women continued to challenge existing norms, wresting money, property, and power from male religious and secular leaders. The most significant group to arise in this period was the Beguines, an independent laywomen's association in which groups of women voluntarily agreed to live and work together, but could later leave the group to marry. Another development that affected women religious was the humanization of Jesus, which accompanied the emergence of a clear doctrine of transubstantiation. Mystics related to Jesus as females: as mother to baby Jesus; as spouse and lover; as sharer in his final sufferings. Many nuns underwent severe fasting and self-mortification in their identification with Jesus. A great outpouring of mystical literature resulted from their experiences.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What is significant about churchwomen in Byzantium? What are their contributions to subsequent developments in Christianity?
- What were some of the distinguishing features of Christianity in the British Isles?
- What were the three reforms that set back women's participation in religious life in Europe?
- Who are the Beguines? Why are they important? Do you think something like beguinages might work today for young single females?
- What were the effects of the growing belief in Jesus' humanity (as opposed to his divinity, which was well established)?
- What do you think about the "nuptial" imagery that Christian mystics used to discuss their relationship with Jesus?

CHAPTER 5

Women Reformed, Women Resistant

Geographical and theological differences prompted the rise of different reformations in Christianity, radically transforming the status of women. The antipathy of Lutheran and Calvinist reformers to the celibate life led to the valorization of marriage. Women were then confined to Kinder, Küche, Kirche (children, kitchen, and church) and banished from the world of business they had once dominated in some fields. Religious vocations were eliminated with the closure of hundreds of monasteries and convents. Some radical reformers destroyed anything that resembled Catholicism: statues, organs, stained glass windows. Other radicals created communities set apart from the world in order to live what they felt was the pure Christian life. Groups like the Moravians and Quakers seemed to offer a type of gender egalitarianism, even allowing women to preach to mixed groups. In England, Queen Elizabeth I helped to create the Anglicanism that exists today, while in France Jeanne d'Albret, Queen of Navarre, was acknowledged leader of the French Protestants. Religious differences were not generally tolerated, however, and the persecution of dissidents led to the execution of heretics and of women who were seen as witches working with the Devil. Thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of women were put to death during the witch hunts. The rise of rationalism in the Enlightenment may have helped to end the terror, but it did not immediately raise the status of women. It took female intellectuals writing about the need and desire for education among women to challenge prevailing misogyny. The Catholic Reformation, for instance, saw an upsurge in female scholars, as well as in the establishment of a number of new, activist religious orders for women. Lay sisters worked among the poor in Europe, and in the New World of North, Central, and South America. This era set the stage for more revolutionary changes to come.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How did the various reformations transform the status of women? What were the improvements? What were the setbacks?
- What are the hallmarks of egalitarian religious movements, such as the Moravians or the Quakers?
- How and why does persecution of heretics seem to inevitably lead to persecution of women?
- What arguments do women intellectuals make in support of the education of women? The equality of women?
- How do the new secular orders of women differ from their medieval cloistered counterparts?
- How would you assess the impact of religious changes upon gender equality? Use the Reformations as your case study.

CHAPTER 6

Spirit-Filled Women in the Nineteenth Century

The authority of the Holy Spirit over that of reason, scripture, or tradition, gave women the power and legitimacy to challenge societal norms on religious grounds. Industrialization was altering gender roles, and a cult of “True Womanhood” attempted to place women on a pedestal: out of reach and out of trouble. The missionary impulse begun in the sixteenth century continued well into the nineteenth, with Catholic sisters educating women throughout the New World. In addition, religious revivals occurring in America fostered a surge in women’s participation in religious life at all levels, including preaching and teaching. The desire to become holy, and to become perfect in love, furthered women’s leadership roles, particularly in Methodist Christianity, and produced a “Holiness Movement” that eventually spawned several new Christian denominations. Nineteenth-century revivalism prompted an outpouring of activism in the area of foreign missions, where women launched their own female-led boards of missions because they were excluded by men’s groups. Educators and medical missionaries traveled across Asia and Africa, primarily helping women and children. African American women felt especially called to the mission field, seeing their return to Africa as part of the providence of God. In the domestic mission field, women directed social service programs such as rescue homes for prostitutes and orphanages for children. One of the largest women’s reform efforts was the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), which saw alcohol consumption by men as the cause of a host of social ills. Social reform efforts, inspired in part by the WCTU, were initiated by Japanese and South Asian churchwomen. Women also founded new branches of Christianity, some of which exist to this day: the Salvation Army, the Church of Christ, Scientist, Seventh-day Adventism, and the Foursquare Church. Finally, female evangelists, especially African Americans, were instrumental in spreading Pentecostalism throughout the world, dramatically changing the future of Christianity.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Which source of authority do you think provides women the strongest arguments for gender equality: scripture, tradition, reason, or experience (of the Holy Spirit)?
- What were the advantages and disadvantages of the missionary enterprise for the people being missionized?
- The social analysis of the WCTU was that alcohol caused poverty: do you agree?
- Is it necessary for women to set up parallel organizations and institutions when they are excluded by men from “mainstream” organizations and institutions? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach?
- Were the religions founded, or co-founded by women, in the nineteenth century substantially different from Christianity today?
- What does it mean for Christianity to assert that there is a feminine side to God?

CHAPTER 7

Churchwomen on the Margins and in the Mainstream

The twentieth century saw momentum grow toward gender equality, in a radical shift toward inclusion of women at all levels of church leadership. A conservative reaction, however, attempted to restore complementary gender roles to women. Women sought justice for the poor and amelioration of their problems as reformers in the Social Gospel movement. They made up the backbone of the Civil Rights movement, fighting racial oppression in the US through activism, organizing, and leadership, relying on the Bible as their moral and spiritual compass. The quest for equality in the churches was manifested as a drive for ordination to priestly or pastoral orders. Ordination meant not only preaching and teaching, but also administering sacraments such as baptism and communion. A number of trailblazers were ordained in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but it wasn't until the mid-1960s that most Protestant denominations ordained women to the pastorate. The two largest branches of Christianity that do not ordain women remain the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church, although feminist activists in both branches agitated for ordination throughout the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Fundamentalist Protestants also refused to hire women clergy in their churches. Conservative churchwomen believed that secular feminists were destroying the nuclear family by denigrating and abandoning women's natural calling as homemakers and mothers. These women saw themselves surrendering to God's will in their lives, rather than submitting to the dictates of their husbands. Conservative personal ethics also marked the churchwomen at work throughout Asia and the Southern Hemisphere, but their progressive social ethics set them apart. Women in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Liberia show the different ways in which women are challenging patriarchy and changing their worlds. A new generation of feminist theologians in the US and Europe, influenced by contacts with their sisters abroad, are examining church teachings in light of the Christian encounter with globalization and the extreme disparities between the rich and the poor.

CHAPTER 7

Churchwomen on the Margins and in the Mainstream

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What does it mean for African American churchwomen to “testify” and to “witness”?
- What was the experience of women seeking ordination in the nineteenth century? How did this experience differ from that of women seeking ordination in the twentieth century?
- What steps have women in Orthodox Christianity and Roman Catholic Christianity taken toward ordination?
- Do you think that the ordination of women is the defining issue in Christianity today? What would be some other significant issues?
- What are the objections that conservative Christians have to secular and theological feminism?
- What are the unique or distinct approaches to gender equality among non-Western Christians?
- How are contemporary Christian feminists re-visiting traditional Christian doctrines?

CONCLUSION

The Church of Martha and Mary

Churchwomen appropriated the New Testament sisters Martha and Mary to justify women's ordination, to model women's ministry, and to exemplify Christian action. The historical record shows that Christian women refused to be defined by sexuality and reproduction. Instead, they participated in the life of the church in a variety of capacities, making Christianity what it is today.

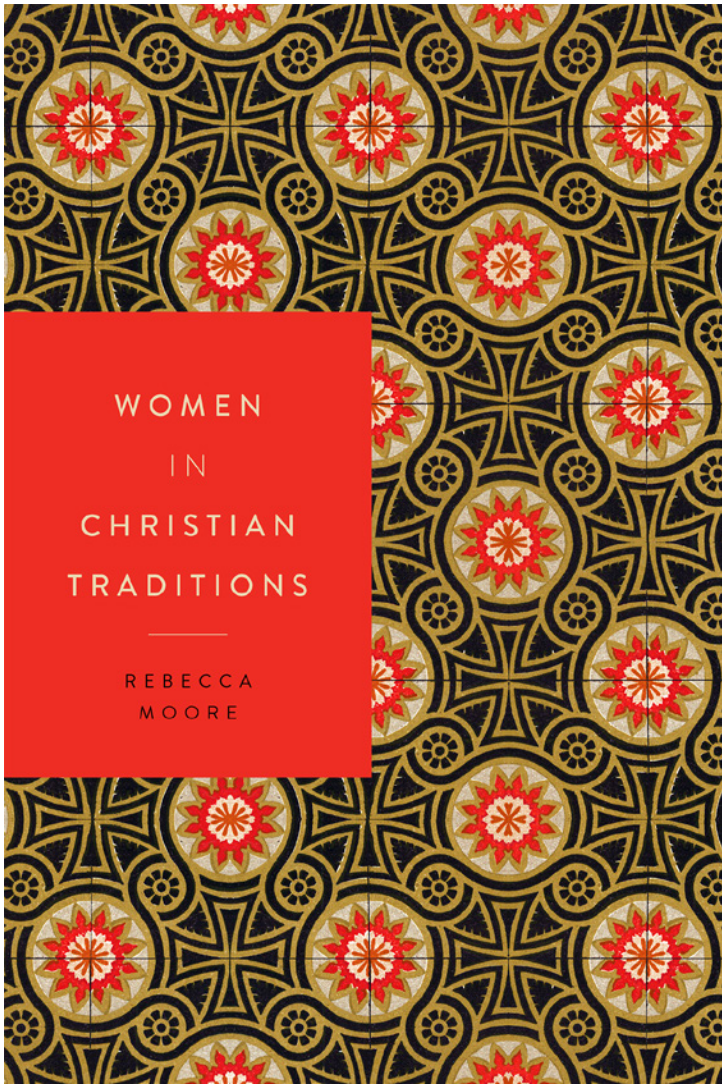
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What does it mean exactly to describe Christians as Marthas and Marys?
- Can men be Martha or Mary? Why or why not?
- Imagine what Christianity would be like today without the input or influence of women. What would it be like? How would it be different?

Women in Christian Traditions

Additional Resources

*This bibliography accompanies the book *Women in Christian Traditions*. It lists sources used in the text itself along with additional resources and items that have been published in print or online since the book came out in 2015. The resources are arranged in chapter order. (Online resources last accessed 6 August 2020.)*



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Religion | Gender & Women's Studies

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION — 14

CHAPTER 1 — 18

CHAPTER 2 — 20

CHAPTER 3 — 26

CHAPTER 4 — 31

CHAPTER 5 — 37

CHAPTER 6 — 42

CHAPTER 7 — 51

CONCLUSION — 60

INTRODUCTION

Why Study Women in Christian Traditions

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CHAPTER 1

In the Beginning . . . Eve

Important biblical texts include Genesis 1–3; Matthew 19:1–12; Romans 5:12, 19; 1 Corinthians 11:1–12, 15:21–22; and 1 Timothy 2:8–15.

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CHAPTER 2

The Women Disciples in the Kingdom of God

Important biblical texts include the four canonical gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—as well as non-canonical gospels, such as the Gnostic Gospels of Thomas, Mary, Philip and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas. Apocryphal texts such as the Proto-Gospel of James also present legends about Mary of Nazareth that appeared early in Christian history.

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CHAPTER 3

Women and the Conversion of an Empire

Important biblical texts include the authentic New Testament letters of Paul (e.g., Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, etc.), as well as those that are disputed (e.g., the Pastoral Letters). The New Testament book of Acts of the Apostles also describes women's roles in the first-century church.

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CHAPTER 4

Saints, Seers, and Scholars in the Middle Ages

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CHAPTER 5

Women Reformed, Women Unrepentant

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CHAPTER 6

Spirit-Filled Women in the Nineteenth Century

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CHAPTER 7

Churchwomen on the Margins and in the Mainstream

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