Women of the Bible: Our Family in Christ

Christ pulls Eve by the wrist from Hades in the Church's Resurrection icon. Adam is in the grasp of our Savior's other hand. This image recalls that Eve, with Adam, is one of us, a relative in our family of faith, who with us is rescued from death by Christ. Eve, "the mother of all living," [Genesis 3:20] was the first women in the family tree of the faith we hold. Many women of the Bible played key roles as ancestors and intercessors in our salvation history. But Eve's story marked the beginning.

Trouble in Paradise: Eve

From the beginning, God's creation was good, and on the sixth day, He crowned His work, forming two creatures in His own image, the first human beings, Adam and Eve. The garden he gave to them was beautiful. They dwelt peaceably with beasts and birds in a paradise of everything they needed. They had a place to live, plants for food, and grand job description from God: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen 1:27- 28). Our first parents were free to cultivate the earth, to care for creatures, and to name and know all they saw.

God also issued a warning. Among the many blessings he bestowed, one was off-limits: "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen 2:27). This tree bore "evil" in its name, evil amid Paradise. Not every creature was on God's team. Already, a snake lurked among them, a fallen creature who approached Eve with ill intent: to corrupt human dominion over God's creation.

Eve was distracted by this creature who had already turned from God, the serpent, "more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made" (Genesis 3:1). Addressing Eve, the snake questioned the details of God's command, and Eve engaged the tempter, repeating the Lord's words, which the serpent refuted in a pretty lie: "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3: 4-5). Eve's heart was swayed, and she desired the fruit. She ate it and shared it with Adam and found herself separated from God and banished from Paradise. By falling prey to a subtle trick of the serpent, Eve and Adam lost the clothing of God's glory and the free bounty of His flourishing garden (Gen 3:1-22). They became aware of their nakedness, and all creation groaned (Romans 8:22).

We make a point to remember humankind's fall from Paradise, lamenting with Eve and Adam during the first service of Great Lent, Forgiveness Vespers: "Woe to me! My open mindedness has left me naked and confused! No longer will I enjoy thy delights, O Paradise; no longer can I see my Lord, my God and Creator. … I beg Thee, O compassionate Lord: Have mercy on me who have fallen!" (Triodion, Tone 6).

Be fruitful & multiply: bitterness & consolation

Outside the garden, death reigned. Thorns grew among good plants and childbirth involved pain and risk to life. Amid this bitter hardship, Eve found consolation when she bore her first son, Cain, saying, "'I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord'" (Gen 4:1 ESV). She then had a second son, Abel.

After Cain with jealous rage murdered his brother Abel, Eve in sorrow again acknowledged God's gift of new life at the birth of her third son, Seth: "God has appointed for me another offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him'" (Gen 4:25 ESV).

Generations passed. Increasingly, humans forgot God's ways and lived only for their own desires. Vengeance and rivalry, neglect and dissipation ruled the earth, until God sent a great flood to wipe out the outrageous accumulation of evil. But God protected one family, that of the righteous Noah. When the flood receded, God blessed Noah's family and repeated the mandate he had given to Adam and Eve: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Genesis 9:1).

In the generations that followed, children were considered the greatest of God's blessings, a sign of his favor. Women who were able to conceive and bear healthy children brought honor to themselves and their families. Those who could not, it was thought, were disfavored by God and brought shame to their households. This explains why many men had more than one wife and why, often, the pains of childlessness were deepened by disdain within a family or the reproach of neighbors.

A mother of nations: Sarah

As Noah's descendants replenished the earth, God called a couple from which he would establish a chosen nation. At the Lord's command, Abram and Sarai left their homeland in Mesopotamia and traveled to Canaan, where God said to them, "To your offspring I will give this land" (Genesis 12:7).

Yet, at the time, Abram was seventy-five years old and Sarai, in her mid-sixties, and they had no children. Moreover, their community was nothing like a nation, but a loosely related, extended family of tent-dwellers (Rendsburg, Gary. The Great Courses. *Genesis*, lecture 4).

More than two decades later, God proclaimed that Sarai, still childless at ninety, "shall be a mother of nations" (Genesis 17:16 KJV). Here, God's command to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" changed to a promise: "I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her" (Gen 17:16). To emphasize his promise, God gave this elderly couple new names: Abraham and Sarah, meaning "father of multitudes" and "princess of many."

Sarah became the first of the four matriarchs of Israel, central to God's plan to create and call a great nation that would bring salvation to all nations, through the eventual birth of Jesus Christ. The only women in the Bible given this title are Sarah, her daughter-in-law Rebecca, and Rebecca's daughters-in-law Rachel and Leah. All but Leah are named several times in prayers at the Orthodox Christian sacrament of marriage. For instance, as the priest crowns the bride, he blesses her, saying: "And you, O Bride, be exalted like Sarah, and exult like Rebecca, and multiply like Rachel." Each of these three women endured the shame and sadness of childlessness long before they experienced the joy of bearing a child. Each mothered a son who would lead God's chosen people. And each lived within the first generations of a new people taught by God to wean themselves from their pagan ways and to worship and serve the God of gods, Yahweh.

This process of forgetting the old ways, of learning new ethics, of trusting the one God "who does wonders" took generations. Sarah couldn't grasp the depths of God's purpose or

power and laughed within herself, unbelieving, when she heard the Lord's message that she would bear a child. God heard this and said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Gen 18:11-14).

Sarah's descendants multiply

As God promised, Sarah at ninety bore her son Isaac, meaning "laughter." Isaac married Rebecca and became the father of Jacob, who was renamed "Israel" by God and with his wives Rachel and Leah became the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob died in the land of Canaan and was buried with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and his wife Leah. But Jacob's twelve sons and their families fled Canaan during a famine and settled in Egypt, where over generations they grew to a great number (Exodus 1:7).

Because the Israelites thrived as a people, the Egyptian king "set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. … But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied … And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field" (Exodus 1:11-14).

Freed from bondage: Miriam

"For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam" (Micah 6:3-4).

Named by God as a leader among those who delivered the Israelites from bondage, Miriam was Moses and Aaron's sister. She was born in Egypt and grew up there, enslaved with

her people, the Israelites. When she was a girl, Pharaoh commanded his people to throw into the Nile “every son that is born to the Hebrews” (Exodus 1:22). So, when Miriam’s baby brother grew too old to hide in the tent, their mother Jochebed waterproofed a basket and placed him in it among the reeds along the Nile. The Book of Exodus does not name the sister who stood at a distance to watch the baby “to see what would be done with him” (Exodus 2:4) but Hebrew and Orthodox Christian traditions teach that she was Miriam based on records of Amran and Jochebed’s children in Numbers 26:59 and 1 Chronicles 6:3.

As she watched along the Nile, Miriam saw Pharoah’s daughter had found the baby and looked favorably on him. Miriam approached her and said, “‘Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?’ Pharaoh’s daughter agreed, and Miriam brought her mother, who nursed her child until he grew older. Jochebed then brought the boy to Pharoah’s daughter, “and he became her son.” Pharoah’s daughter named him Moses, “because I drew him out of the water’” (Exodus 2:1-10).

We next meet Miriam decades later, just after the parting of the Red Sea. Her brother Moses was eighty years old when God called him to lead His people out of Egypt, which means Miriam was older yet when she, among the people of Israel, “walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left” (Exodus 14:29).

When the Israelites reached the banks on the other side, all the people praised God with a song of victory. “Then, Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing. And Miriam sang to them: ‘Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea’” (Exodus 15:20-21).

From the banks of the Red Sea, the Israelites entered a wilderness where they wandered for forty years, hoping one day to settle in the Promised Land of Canaan.

At one point during their wanderings, when the Israelites were camping in Hazeroth on the way to the wilderness of Paran, Miriam became the focus of God's attention after she and her brother Aaron harshly criticized Moses for marrying a Cushite woman rather than an Israelite. They had said, "Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" (Numbers 12:2). This question implies Miriam's status in Israel as a prophet, as one whom God has spoken through. But the Lord was not pleased with Miriam's attitude and called the siblings "to the tent of meeting," where He defended Moses.

In a pillar of cloud, the Lord said, "If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" (Numbers 12:4-8).

What happened next suggests that Miriam was the instigator of the criticisms, for she was harshly punished by God while Aaron was not: "When the cloud removed from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, like snow. … And Aaron said to Moses, "Oh, my lord, do not punish us because we have done foolishly and have sinned. Let her not be as one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away … And Moses cried to the Lord, "O God, please heal her—please'" (Numbers 12:10-13).

The Lord heard Moses, who earlier in the chapter was described as "very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3). But for seven days Miriam

remained leprous and stayed outside the camp. During this time, the people waited, not setting out for Paran until Miriam was restored to them.

A pillar of Israel who turned from God in pride, Miriam's story of affliction demonstrates that even the most valued and committed among the faithful experience the cycle of sin, separation, healing, and finally full restoration "in the presence of all His people" (Psalm 116:14).

Choosing the God of Israel: Rahab & Ruth

During Moses' lifetime, the family of Israel had become a nation (Rendsburg. *Genesis*, lecture 4). After his death and under the guidance of their new leader, Joshua, the Israelites continued as poor tent dwellers wandering toward Canaan, the land God had promised to Abraham's descendants. Israel wasn't considered a military threat to their more powerful neighbors. Yet they were clearly different than all the other nations and people groups in the Near East at this time: They followed a unique set of laws and worshipped one God, Yahweh, who was gaining a reputation.

Word had begun to spread beyond Israel about how Yahweh parted the Red Sea for His people, fed them in the wilderness, and defended them against much stronger nations.

One who heard these stories and believed was the innkeeper and prostitute Rahab, a Canaanite who lived in the city of Jericho when Joshua was leading God's chosen people toward Canaan. Another who chose Israel's God was the young widow Ruth, a Moabite who lived in time of Judges.

Rahab in Jericho chose to hide the Israelite spies surveilling her city and to risk her life by tricking her own king's messenger to save them. Ruth left her own land and people to follow her mother-in-law Naomi, also widowed, to Bethlehem, where they had no land.

Each cut herself off from her own people, place, and traditions. Yet neither woman was forgotten during her lifetime. Rahab and her family were deliberately spared by the Israelites when Israel overtook Canaan. And through Naomi's patient strategizing, Ruth married the landowner Boaz, a relative of Naomi's impressed by Ruth's loyalty to her mother-in-law. Rahab and Ruth are also remembered millennia later as direct ancestors of Christ (Matthew 1:5), and Rahab is named as a model of faith by Saint Paul and Saint James in their letters to the Hebrews (Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25).

Most memorable in the stories of Rahab and Ruth are how they answer for their choices to act against what's expected of them. Their words express to us what it means to proclaim Israel's God as Lord of all and to be ready to give an answer "for the hope within you" (1 Peter 3:15).

Rahab addressed the Israelite spies she was hiding: "For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan. … And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath" (Joshua 2: 10-11).

Ruth declared her intentions when Naomi, returning to her homeland of Bethlehem, insisted repeatedly that Ruth turn back and stay with her own people in Moab. Ruth finally

"clung to" her mother-in-law, saying, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more" (Ruth 1:16-18).

Champions against oppressors: Deborah & Jael

After Joshua's death, the Lord raised up judges, and Deborah, a prophetess, was the fourth judge of Israel. Deborah and her people lived in Canaan among people of other nations and were subject to Jabin, the king of Canaan in Hazor. "Then the people of Israel cried out to the Lord for help," for Jabin's army under the commander Sisera was powerful "and oppressed the people of Israel cruelly for twenty years" (Joshua 4:3).

Stirred by the pain of her people, Deborah summoned Barak, commander of the Israeli army, and admonished him for not heeding God's command to face Sisera in battle (Judges 4:6-7). Barak, cowed by the power of Israel's oppressors, agreed to go but only if Deborah would come with him, which she did. With Deborah among the troops, Barak's army subdued Sisera's despite the odds against Israel, but Sisera himself fled on foot to a safe place, the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, for there was peace between King Jabin and the Israeli house of Heber. Jael, pretending to show hospitality, acted in hope of a full victory for Israel and killed Sisera while he slept, fulfilling the words of Deborah to Barak: "I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman" (Judges 4:9). King Jabin was now without an army or general,

and the Israelites were able to enter the city of Hazor and destroy their oppressor (Judges 4:1-24).

In her poetic song of victory, Deborah with Barak remembered the cruelty their people endured under Jabin, recounted the heroes that overthrew their oppressors, cursed the Hebrew tribes who hid in their tents during the battle, and honored Jael as “most blessed of women” for dealing a decisive blow of victory for the Israelites (Joshua 5).

After this victory, “the land had rest for forty years” (Joshua 5:31).

A kingdom divided and conquered

After the time of judges, the Hebrews were ruled by three kings: Saul, David, and Solomon. When King Solomon died, Israel divided into two kingdoms: The northern, Israel, and the smaller southern kingdom, Judah, whose lineage led to Christ. In time both kingdoms, Israel and Judah, were dispersed throughout the Near East by their conquerors, the Assyrians and Babylonians, who were eventually absorbed into the Persian Empire.

For such a time as this: Esther

Esther was an orphaned Hebrew whose king, Ahasuerus in Susa, was Persian. When he chose Esther among the virgins in his kingdom to be his queen, only her relative Mordecai, who had raised her as his daughter, knew that was she was from the ancient Judaic tribe of Benjamin.

That she held such a secret became a conundrum for Esther when King Ahasuerus decreed that on a certain day, all the people in his kingdom should gather to destroy the Jewish people scattered among them. For anyone to approach the king without being summoned by

him was punishable by death—unless he held out his scepter to the petitioner. Esther hesitated to do so, but Mordecai encouraged her to take this risk: “If you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”

Esther replied with a command for Mordecai: “‘Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.’ Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him” (Esther 4).

Esther’s story includes many plot twists and turns. But ultimately, after King Ahasuerus extended his scepter to receive her, Esther through patient strategy persuaded him to spare her people.

Esther was one of many deliverers God sent to lift His chosen people from distressing circumstances throughout their ancient history. Life was often bitter, sometimes for generations at a time. Yet always a remnant remembered God’s promise, that He would send a Messiah, the One who would finally deliver God’s people from their oppressors.

The new Eve

For the ancestors of Sarah and Abraham, the birth of a healthy child brought joy and honor to its mother, hope to its family for another generation, and the promise that among the progeny of God’s people, one child would one day deliver Israel from its oppressors, finally and forever.

When God announced Israel's long-awaited Messiah through the angel Gabriel, it was not as anyone expected. The first to hear was a young, still unwed woman named Mary. The angel Gabriel appeared to her and said: "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:31-33).

This announcement troubled Mary. She said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" On the face of it, there was no personal consolation for her as there had been for her foremothers. Mary had not been waiting to conceive a child as had Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel.

And the angel answered her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God' (Luke 1:34-37).

For Elizabeth and her husband Zachariah, who had been waiting years for a child, the announcement "took away [their] reproach among people" (Luke 1:25). But for Mary, a pregnancy would bring reproach upon her in a culture where unwed mothers were put to death. There was no guarantee that Mary's unique circumstance would be believed and accepted by her betrothed, Joseph, or among her people.

Yet for Mary, whose heart was open to God, there *was* consolation in Gabriel's perplexing message about the coming child—not only to Mary and her people but to every

person and every nation: “For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now” (Romans 8:22).

Mystified and humbled, Mary said to God’s messenger: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

Encountering the God-Man: Photini

When during his ministry Jesus rested at Jacob’s Well on his way to Galilee, he asked a Samaritan woman drawing water for a drink. This baffled Christ’s disciples, who marveled not only because He spoke with a woman, but also because of His original instructions to them: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 10:5-6).

For similar reasons, the woman was also confused by Jesus’ interactions with her, for traditionally the Jews had nothing to do with Samaritans. She asked, “How is it that You, a Jew, ask a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” (John 4:9).

From there, the two began a conversation. At first the woman took Jesus’ references to “living water” literally, as meaning flowing water. But as the conversation continued, she began to perceive a spiritual meaning and said to Him, “Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw” (John 4:15).

Christ then revealed he knew far more about her life than she had told him. She said, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet,” implying He could be the Messiah, for the Samaritans believed the next prophet after Moses would be the Messiah. Christ confirmed her suggestion: “I who speak to you am He” (John 4:19, 26).

So, this woman who was not an Israelite left her water jar at the well and went into town and introduced Christ to a people the disciples had been told not to evangelize. She said, “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” (John 4:28-29). By this act, she became the only person during Christ’s lifetime to evangelize a whole community. “Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony” (John 4:39).

After Christ’s Resurrection, according to early-Church tradition, this evangelist to Samaria was baptized with the name Photini, “the enlightened one” (John 4:28-30 commentary OSB).

In the Garden: Mary Magdalene

At the end of Jesus’ life on earth, Mary Magdalene was among the women who followed Him to Galilee and ministered to him. After witnessing his death on the cross, she and the myrrh bearing women came to the tomb with spices to anoint Christ’s body. It was the third day after the Crucifixion, and they found the tomb empty. An angel told them, “Go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead” (Matthew 28:7). Hearing this news from the women, John and Peter came to the tomb and believed, then returned to their homes.

But Mary Magdalene stayed by the tomb, weeping. As she wept, she saw two angels in white sitting where Jesus’ body had lain. She then turned and saw Jesus, the new Adam, but mistook him for the gardener.

Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” In her sorrow she pleaded, “Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away.”

Jesus then said to her, “Mary!” And she recognized him, and exclaimed, “Teacher!”

Christ then commissioned her: “Go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.’” And she did as he said, telling the disciples she had seen the Lord and proclaiming everything he had told her.

Mary Magdalene is remembered as “the apostle to the apostles,” the first of his followers to see the risen Lord and the first among us to proclaim, “Christ is risen!”

Our Cloud of Witnesses: The Body of Christ

There are many women in the Bible whose calling we have inherited as the Body of Christ, His Church. From Eve to the Theotokos, from the matriarchs to the women saints in the early Church, together they form our cloud of witnesses and today participate with us, and we with them. They surround us in icons, and we join them in songs, prayers, and proclamations. With Eve, we exult in Our Lord and Savior’s harrowing of Hades, His lifting us from despair by our upstretched arms. With Mary Magdalene and all nations, we further proclaim His Resurrection every Sunday and Pasha. And with Mary, the God bearer, we hope and believe that “of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:33).