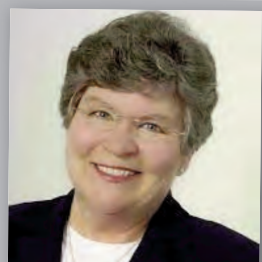


# Women Erased:



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Tonight there are three main topics that we're going to look at. We're going to talk about the sociocultural context of early Christianity and the fact that female evangelists and the expansion of the Jesus Movement was, incredibly, largely enhanced by women. We're also going to take a look at the art and archeology and sources of information about early Christian women, and we're going to do a deep dive into the whole topic of women and authority as seen on fourth century catacombs and Christian sarcophagi.

So, one thing we do need to know is that Jesus Movement didn't stay in Israel. In fact, it spread throughout the Greco-Roman Empire, and this map sort of tells you where things were in the first three centuries of the common era. And Greco-Roman culture was all over. The Romans, because of their incredible military, built great roads all over the empire, and it was mostly so that they could get their military to places where there were problems.

But a wonderful side effect was, it was very easy and safe to travel throughout the empire. And this was another factor in the rapid spread of Christianity in just 300 years from being a backwater in Israel and Palestine to, by the end of the third century, becoming, first, tolerated, and then the main religion of the empire, which was remarkable in such a short period of time.

So, the rapid spread, then, of the Jesus movement owes a great deal to the initiative of women, particularly from evangelists and missionaries such as Junia who with her

husband, Adronicus, is called an apostle. "Foremost among the apostles" in Roman 16, Prisca, with her husband Acuala, founded house churches in Corinth, Ephesus and Rome. Actually, Paul gets the credit, but Prisca and [Acquilla] were there first. And [Thecla], who was a really wonderful evangelist and probably one of the great instigators of the prophetic movement in Asia Minor.

They were also heads of house churches, such as Lydia in [Phillipi], who was a businessman who had a purple dye trade. Again, Prisca and Nympha in [Laodacia]. There were widows such as Grapte—we'll hear more about her—and Tabitha, who we just heard about several days ago in our daily readings, who was a leader of widows and much beloved in Joppa. We remember Peter raised her from the dead. But she was a very important female leader in the early Church, and some scholars seem to feel she may have been another person in Jesus's Galilean discipleship, which is why Peter rushed over there so quickly, because he knew her.

Then, of course, there are prophets: [Phillip's] prophetic daughters in Acts and Maximila and other female prophets.

I'm just going to run through a bit of the history from the literary record because it gives us good context for the archeology. The other thing behind the spread of the Jesus movement was financial support from wealthy Christian women and business women. This is one of those very little to unknown facts: that women of wealth have

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supported Christianity from the very beginning, starting with Mary of Magdala and Joanna. Mary, the one from Magdala, we will note, is named by the town she's from, not by any relationship to the male patriarchal household. In Luke 8:1-3, we learn that Mary of Magdala, Joanna, [Suzanna], and, quote, "many other women," accompanied Jesus around Galilee and provided for them from their resources.



Now, in my *naivete*, I thought that meant they were cooking meals for them. Wouldn't that be good? But, in fact, Biblical scholars say that Mary, the one from Magdala, is probably a woman of considerable wealth because she is named in her own right. Magdala was also a very wealthy fishery town. And Joanna was the wife of Harrod's steward, [Chuza]. Harrod was the king. So Joanna also had wealth. And scholars tell us, providing for them from their resources really means that they were financially underwriting Jesus's Galilean mission.

Of course, in ancient Israel, observant Jewish men did not speak to women outside their own families in public. So, Jesus, in his own way, was very counter-cultural by including women in his discipleship. Admittedly, things were a little looser in Galilee than they were in Jerusalem, but nonetheless, the Biblical record is clear: that it wasn't just Jesus and twelve men going around Galilee doing good; it was also women learning from Jesus, what it meant to be about proclaiming the reign of God that was coming into the world in a new way through Jesus.

There's also Lydia, a purple dye trader, from Thyratira. Purple dye was very expensive, and she was a woman of means. She had a big house.

She invited Paul and the other disciples to her home after her conversion in [Philippi]. Phoebe, Romans 8:16 1-2 is somehow completely deleted from the lectionary. Don't get me going; that's a whole other talk. But she is not only a *diakonos*, which is the same word Paul uses to describe his own ministry; she's also a *prostatis*. And Lynn Osiek says that 'prostatis' means a benefactor, and that was probably the more important of Phoebe's titles, because she also supported Paul's itinerant evangelizing mission.

Olympias was a fourth century deacon of incredible wealth who probably subsidized just about every bishop in Asia Minor. She was in Constantinople and started a whole monastery. And there are many other examples. You can read the book if you really get into this.

The ultimate contemporary word on this came from none other than Pope Benedict XVI on February 14th. He noted that the history of XX would have turned out very differently without the contribution of women. The female presence, he said, was anything but secondary. Now, he's arguably among the most erudite of Popes. He's not exactly a poster child for feminism in the Catholic Church. But he was a good enough scholar to know how important women were to early XX. Women were anything but secondary. That meant they were either on a par with the male presence or even better.

Early house churches were led by women of status such as Grapte. She's another name we never heard, a second century leader of communities of widows and orphans in Rome. The shepherd of Hermas is one of the earliest Christian writings, which tells a story of Hermas, who sees a vision of a great, divine person who tells him to write his vision down and make two copies and take one to [Clement] in Rome and one to Grapte. These are the two leaders in the Roman Church in the early second, mid-second century. Clement is often remembered; Grapte is not. Clement was not a pope. The Roman Church was actually the last one to get a monarchical episcopacy, but that's another talk.

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Grapte was one of the two main leaders in Rome in the earliest second century.

Through the house church, early Christians gained access, then, to social networks that brought them into contact with people of very different social classes. For example, when a female head of household, perhaps a wealthy businesswoman, such as Lydia, converted to XX, Christian evangelists such as Prisca or Paul gained access not only to Lydia's own household but to her patronage network. And again, as a purple dye trader, Lydia had a huge network of business contacts. That was sort of how XX spread.

Most Christian women were probably free-born or free persons. They were able to acquire wealth. Contrary to preconceptions, they were not barefoot, pregnant, and chained to the stove all the time. Because of their wealth they also then acquired status, and that was a very important cachet in the Roman patronage social system. They gained this through small business enterprises such as processing wool, trading in purple dye, such as Lydia, leather work and tent making, such as Prisca, and things like that. Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. McDonald note in their wonderful book, *A Women's Place*, that, quote, "lower-class women had money, high status, and freedom of movement, especially throughout the extended household of antiquity."

So, Celsus, who was an early leader—actually, an early critic of Christianity—had strongly criticized Christianity as the very heart of a troublesome new movement. He said, "Christians convince the foolish, the dishonorable, the stupid, and slaves and little children to leave their father and their schoolmasters and go along with the women and little children who are playfellows to the women's apartments, the wool [dresser] shop, or the cobblers, or the washerwoman's shop."

Sometimes from the criticism, you can get an idea of what this early movement was like. So, Celsus's critique with evidence from early Christian writings shows us that the Jesus movement in fact expanded through house churches and small business

networks, such as those of Lydia, Prisca, Grapte, and Paul. Evangelization, therefore, was conducted person to person, house to house, by women who reached out to other women, free persons, and slaves. The Jesus movement's whole-hearted embrace of an egalitarian social ethos, therefore, particularly with regard to the leadership of women, even slave women, was a challenge to the Greco Roman culture.

In Asia Minor, [Pliny] wrote to [Trajan] (the emperor) wanting to know what to do about these two Christian slave women who were called *ministra*. And that's evidence that female slaves actually held leadership roles in early Christianity. So, the fact that this was happening was very shocking to more than a few in a broader Greco-Roman culture.

Women's public leadership was unsettling to mainstream understandings of women's roles. And these were based on what we call Greco-Roman household codes, which had very strict ideas, gendered ideas, about what were appropriate places for women. Women's initiative and leadership was not seen as appropriate in the public space. It was only tolerated within the domestic space. The other thing about the household codes is that the father, the *paterfamilias*, rules the roost, and so everyone in the households, the wife, the children, are all subservient to what the father wants. Early Christianity challenged some patriarchal norms.

The Romans were very superstitious, and they believed that as the family went, so went the Empire. So, here you have these Christians with women saying, no, I'm not going to marry some 40-year-old guy who's had four other partners. I'm going to embrace celibacy like Paul said. And suddenly it led to persecution of Christianity. And that's the third point here: that Paul's valuation of celibacy and its embrace by many women undermined patriarchal marriage, which was mandatory, pretty much, in the empire, because Rome wanted everyone to be having babies—plus, not to mention the fact that throughout history, women were bargaining chips to expand the wealth of a patriarchal household.

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So, from the early second century to the early fifth century, male church leaders, repeatedly cited 1 Timothy's admonishment: *women are to be silent in the churches as justification for curtailing female authority*. Biblical scholars are pretty united in their assessment that 1 Timothy was not written by Paul, but much later by someone in the Pauline School.

There are just too many internal contradictions for Timothy saying, women be silent, and Paul saying elsewhere in Corinthians, women, when you prophesize, make sure you cover your head. Anyway, that's another talk.

Christian women and a few good men took initiative outside of patriarchal norms because of their belief in Jesus. And so we see that women's countercultural exercise of authority in the context of everyday domestic life is an oft-unheralded key to Christianity's rapid expansion. Despite official sanctions, women persisted in teaching, preaching, evangelizing, and baptizing.

So, there were three significant differences between first and fourth century Roman society that can be attributed to the exercise of female ecclesial authority. These are the three that I recognize. Other people will probably see others. But from doing my study, this is what I came up with.

And the **first** is the freedom to choose a life of celibacy, which effectively dismantled one pillar of patriarchy, which is mandatory marriage. Now, this seems odd to us in the 21st century, but we live in a different world than people did in the first four centuries.

The **second** is that Christian widows and virgins—we didn't talk about this too much—but people like Tabitha, Grapte, the widows and virgins, rescued, socialized, baptized, and educated thousands of orphans who would otherwise have died of exposure or been doomed to prostitution. And this came from the Roman practice.

The *paterfamilias*, who was free, by the way, to have sexual relations with everyone in his household—the women, the men, the female and male slaves. And any offspring would have to be approved by the *paterfamilias*. If he rejected, then they were put them out by the wayside. Hopefully someone would pick them up, and usually someone did, but then they had to become prostitutes. Well, the Christian women rescued these orphans and saved them from that. And that was another thing, actually, that changed the Roman Empire, because by the early sixth century, this practice of exposing children was outlawed in Christianity.

**Third**, the domestic networking and evangelization activities of women played a leading role—and this is the most important point for our purposes—in transforming Roman society from a predominantly pagan to a predominantly Christian culture.



Okay, we'll take a breath for a moment, because now we're going to turn to some of the visual evidence. So, as I mentioned earlier, the presence of female leaders and patrons is barely discernible in early Christian literary sources. Therefore, visual imagery and artifacts from tombs provide information about women in the early Church that is either not available or, not infrequently, I'm sorry to say, distorted in the written history. And that's why this kind of study has gotten to be pretty popular and important.

Now, one thing: People who studied Roman funerary art tell us that there were certain purposes—that the sarcophagus for the ordinary Roman was a monument filled with meaning. It was not just a container for a corpse.

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So the funerary art was meant to construct the idea or the identity of the deceased. It was meant to commemorate the values and virtues of the deceased, and it provided information about the deceased as role models. And this is the basis for why we are able to say something about what the tomb art meant in light of the early Christian woman, or the early non-Christian Roman woman. Christian funerary art, though, did come from the Romans' own funerary conventions.



This is a very elaborate, very expensive marble sarcophagus of this couple right here. This is a mythological sarcophagus. And it portrays the war between the Greeks and the Amazons, in which Achilles here, who is the leader of the Greeks, wins the war and slays Penthesilea, leader of the Amazons. And as the myth goes, as he slays her and gazes into her face as she's dying—here's a closeup of it; he's not really gazing into her face—he falls in love with her.



This seems like a weird kind of thing to put on your tomb, but to the Roman mind, this is a way of saying something about the undying nature of the love between the couple who chose to have this art on their sarcophagus. So, mythical sarcophagi were very big. They were the late first to late second century.

But then, into the late second, early third century, we see the sophistic period of Roman sarcophagi, Roman tombs. And by that is meant philosophy. Philosophy was hugely important in Roman culture. It was a sign of status, and it was signified by people holding scrolls. And it said right away that they were literate and that they were learned. Philosophy was almost like a religion, in many ways, in Roman culture.

This tomb shows a woman with a scroll, and on either side of her engaging in discourse—I sort of think this was her husband; one of the descriptors said they were philosophers, but usually philosophers are depicted without clothing, or very minimally dressed, because they eschewed any public display of wealth. Anyway, I think this was her family. The point is that this woman or her family showed her as a woman of learning, and so she would be greatly esteemed. And again, this was a hugely expensive tomb.



Here's another. And just to give you some flavor of how the Romans used their tomb art. This is a sarcophagus of a deceased woman, and this is her husband. This family chose to show this couple in the context of muses. And the muse figure was very popular in Roman culture. These are the sources of inspiration for music, art, play-acting, writing, poetry. There are nine muses and they are always shown standing. I say this because of a little known fact. Art historians tell us the orans prayer figure that became so popular in later Christianity derived, actually, from the muse.

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There are nine muses, and in this picture we see eight standing muses. Huh, what's that about? Well, here is the ninth muse. And this is this gentleman's wife holding a harp of some sort. So this art is saying, this woman was my inspiration. So you sort of get the idea of how Romans used the important things in their culture to say something about the values, the virtues, the status, and the role model of the deceased.

I was very fortunate that at the same time that I was working on this book, a Danish scholar, Stine Birk, had just completed a study of non-Christian portrait sarcophagi from Rome. And she had an estimated 90% of all sarcophagi that had been found to date. In her study, Birk found an equal number of solo male and solo female portraits on their tombs. So, just hold on to that thought. She also found that the most popular self-representation for non-Christian women was a learned portrayal. That is, that she was depicted with a scroll. And there are 382 female portrait sarcophagi, and 160 commemorated them through a learned female figure, and that was pretty much equivalent to how the men were portrayed.

Let's turn now to Christian Roman funerary art. It provides information about how early Christian women and men self-identified. It provides information about how they were viewed by their families and friends. It also provides evidence that early Christian women, as well as men, were role models, and we'll get into that.

So, I'm just going to take a few frescoes, and then we'll spend the time on the fourth century tombs.



This is a wonderful fresco from the catacombs from Domitilla, -- these catacombs were actually donated by a wealthy Christian woman patron as a site to bury Christians when they die. It's dated late 4th-early fifth century. And as we can see, the painting shows two women dressed in clothing from two different historical periods. This woman, with the wide sleeves and the veil, is Veneranda, she who is to be venerated. It's her tomb. Next to her is Petronilla. And Veneranda is dressed in late fourth century clothing. Petronilla, however, is dressed in a much earlier style with the toga, no veil, and it says, Petronilla, martyr.

Next to them are signs of their ministry. A codex with streamers is typical for how Scriptures were represented in the late fourth century rendition of the Gospels. This basket, is called a *capsa*. It has a shoulder strap. In the early centuries, we didn't have the Gospels written down in books. And sometimes we didn't have them written down. We had the Hebrew scriptures. So the early evangelists carried these texts around with them in this portable basket.

There was all this debate about who Petronilla is. For a long time they thought it was Peter's daughter. But, in fact, there's no decent evidence to that fact. There's no evidence that Peter's daughter was a martyr, for one thing. It's much more likely that Petronilla took her name from the cognomen Petronius, which was a very prominent family.

There's this whole thing about how you figure out how someone is a martyr. And most catacomb experts believe that there was no evidence—her name doesn't appear in the fourth-century Roman calendar of feasts, the *Depositio Martyrum* (354). The Catholic Encyclopedia says this supports a late first or early second century dating of Petroneila's martyrdom because no martyrs prior to the third century were included in the *Depositio*, except for Peter and Paul. But because she does not appear—another excellent scholar, Nicola Denzey, felt her absence really showed the disconnection about who people actually venerated and who Rome's bishops would advocate for veneration, and it may have been gendered. So, the official list is dominated by male saints, with only four of the four to six being women.

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Veneranda's painting on her tomb suggests that even in 354 of the late fourth century, the memory traditions of unrecognized martyrs such as Petronilla still lay in the hands of women. And I think the art would let us know that Veneranda clearly identified her ministry as a woman of the word, if you will, with that of Petronilla as a woman of the word.

And if you think I'm crazy about the *capsa* being a sign of authority, here we have Paul in the same catacomb around the corner with his *capsa*, only here it's called "a sign of the doctrine." There's more analysis in the book if you're interested.



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*Bitalia in Pace*. Dorothy [Irving] and others believe that at the center is a rendition of a *cuppum* because she's standing at a table. She could be presiding at a Eucharist. It is my own belief, you really can't tell what ordination roles, formal roles—people held from the art. But you can tell what titles they held from inscriptions. And during the same time period, there are numerous inscriptions that have women with the *presbytera* title. We have [Leta] the *Presbytera*, [Kale] the *Presbyter*, and others. So, it's not impossible, but I just don't think you can say it on the basis of the art alone.

Here is another similar one, *Cerula in Pace*, also at the catacombs of St. Januarius in Naples. And this is even more notable because it's got a Christogram, again, with the two codices. But I want to point out something very special about this.



This is this acclamating figure here, which has a long, narrow face, pointed beard. This is Paul, who is often portrayed in this way. On this side, though, you can't see it, was probably Peter. Also with an in-facing, acclamating posture. And we'll talk more about that in a minute.

This is the *Fractio Panis* (below) detail at the catacombs of [Priscilla] that for a long time people were saying these were all men, when in fact, there's all kinds of evidence with the veil and the earring, that these were women. Early, they said it was a Eucharist, but now most scholars believe it was a funerary meal. But what seems obvious is that this is a group of woman at prayer.



This is the room itself where the fresco was located. And it is a place where women come and pray, because we've got other images of Susanna and other women on the walls.



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Now, let's get to Crispina. I chose this for the cover of the book because it's one of the few women we have a name for, actually, on the sarcophagi. There's a Christogram here on the codex that she's holding. She's sort of cradling it.



And in the next one, this is a lid. The left half of the lid is not available, but there are two unidentified men here, and note that one of them is holding a scroll with a speech gesture. Here's Jesus with the multiplication of the loaves. There's an arrest of Peter And Peter baptizing his jailer with water from a rock. Now, these latter two depictions are not from the Gospels or from the New Testament; they are from the Acts of Peter. But we have to remember that Peter was very popular. This is Rome, and so this story shows up on quite a few tombs.



In any case, this is another image of a mid-fourth century [not captioned] sarcophagus, in which a woman here is holding a codex with her hands in a speech gesture. I'm just trying to give you some idea of what these images are. Anyway, she's got her hands in a speech gesture with a *codex*, and what else? Well, on either side of them are stories from the New Testament on her

left, which is the healing of the blind men, the multiplication of the loaves, Jesus's triumphal entry into Israel. And to her right and our left, this is probably Ezekiel raising the dead bones, although some think it could be the raising of the son of the widow of Nain. This is Peter's arrest and the jailers.

Now, just note how many of these folks are holding scrolls, including Jesus here. So, again, it was very important for Christians to be portrayed in their tomb art as literate. But also, it was very important for this woman to be shown in her tomb art as proclaiming good news. And by the way, this little wand here, the Romans didn't have a category for miracle. They only had a category for magic. So, Jesus is often shown with a wand.



This is another women but her mouth is open, which says something about her tomb, and she is also holding a scroll. And on either side, again, this is the nativity, this is the baptism of Jesus on our right. This is the raising of the daughter of Jairus. And on the left side, we're not sure what this is. It could be Peter's denial. But in any case, this is Jesus being taken by the soldiers before [Caiaphas]. And we know it's[Caiaphas]. because of this little *yarmulke* here.

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So, just to show you how the Christians worked themselves into their tomb stories, this is the healing of Jairus' daughter. This is Jesus. This is the same woman that was shown in the central part of the tomb. And what's happening here? Well, this is not a little girl on a bed. This is a child wrapped in a shroud in a sarcophagus, because here we have lion feet. So, it was probably this woman's tomb, but it was also her daughter's. And she is in her tomb art expressing her faith that her daughter will be raised through belief in Jesus.

Now we'll do a run-through of my lengthy analysis of all the extent images published in three volumes of photos and analysis done by German scholars. I looked at 2,119 images. I recorded 762 of those images in a database. Many, many had no carvings or fragments or anything. I was very strict in how I defined what was a Christian sarcophagus. This database by the Germans, by the way, these books, in their view they were all Christian. I was more strict in how I defined it. I would not say they were Christian unless they had Biblical figures. Anyway, I found 558. And of those, I found 312 portraits on 247 tombs. And that means a portrait is a depiction of the deceased.

And—ta-da!—this is the thing I never expected. We found three times as many solo female portraits compared to male portraits on the early Christian tombs. The likelihood that the difference was due to chance was just 1 in 1000. So, this was a big surprise.

I just want to remind you that of the non-Christians portrait sarcophagi in Rome, there were equal numbers of male and female

portraits on Roman tombs, but not so on the Christian tombs. So, right now-- because it takes a lot of money to have one of these tombs--it tells you right there that many women were wealthier and more prominent, at least in the fourth century, than were Christian men, just from a status and societal point of view.

Then I looked at all the signs of learnedness—scrolls, codices, scroll bundles. There was no significant differences between male and female portrayals.



One interesting thing is that the couple depictions on pagan tombs, non-Christian tombs, the man is always shown holding the scroll or the sign of status. The woman is never shown holding it.



However, on the Christian tombs, which I don't think I emphasized enough when I saw it, we found six women in the couple depictions who were holding scrolls. And one of them was the deceased [Eugenius], who died at 57 years old and had, after 41 years of marriage, left four surviving children. In this depiction, her husband is in the orans (prayer) posture and she is shown holding a codex with a scroll and speech gesture.

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Here's, the Projecta Casket, at the British Museum with a portrait in the central [tondo].



There was some debate whether this was Christian. Although there was a Christian inscription on the side, the toiletry box also had Venus and many of the goddesses on it. But the fact that the woman is holding the scroll and the man is not---We can pretty sure that this was a Christian artifact belonging to a wealthy woman.

I looked at portraits with speech gestures. There was no significant difference between male and female. Again, that's the speech gesture you can see. And then I looked at portraits that had both the scroll and caps, a sign of learnedness, and a speech gesture, and there was no significant difference between portrayals of men and women.



If you're wondering about the authority piece, this is a window that was built in 1950 in a church in Cleveland showing Pius X with his hands in a speech gesture and holding a book or a codex. So, you can see how these art depictions come down through history. It's very fascinating.

Next we're going to talk a bit about the *orans posture*, or a prayer posture. And again, it derived from the muse. This is from a tomb in France, actually. It's now being used as a flower box outside of a chateau. But I loved it, so I really worked hard to get a photo from the museum.



Anyway, this is a box, a *scriptorium*, that holds scrolls. So, she has both learned and prayer postures. And, oops, guess what? We have in-facing, acclaiming apostle figures on this tomb.



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And here's another most illustrious woman, Marcia Romana Celsa from [Arles].



Her husband was Consul at Arles. You can see that she is also portrayed with scroll bundle at her feet and two in-facing apostles who have introducing gestures.



I don't have time to go through all biblical scenes, but just to show you how elaborate her tomb was.

The female portrait orans outnumbered the male portrait orans by eight to one, which, again, is probably not too surprising, because, as I said, the prayer posture derived from the standing muse figure which was always female. For a long time, art historians said, because there were so many female orans everywhere, the male archeologists could not quite believe that these were all women.

So they said, oh, no, this was a depiction of the soul. So, I had to spend a lot of time in the study showing that each of these figures had distinguishing features, like jewelry and hairstyles, and they were, in fact, portraits of deceased women.

So, again, this was a hugely significant difference. The thing that was probably significant is that so many men chose that posture for themselves as well.



Here you see a male bust over a female body, which is saying, the men were using the women as role models, the *orans*.



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Here is another depiction of the two brothers sarcophagus. And again, this was originally a married couple. You can sort of see the breast here, but with a speech gesture in that one. That's just a little aside.

Then I looked at all learned portraits, because the *orans* were derived from a muse and were thought to be a learned posture. And again, there were no significant differences between male and female.

Now we come to one of the most—I was going to say it was one of the original discoveries I made, and that is the in-facing apostle figure. And here you see a woman—and this was the first one that caught my eye because we have a woman with a scroll and these two men looking at her rather intently.



And then right down the aisle at the Pio Christiano, there a depiction of Jesus holding the scroll with these disciples looking at him.

And then, oh, here's another one with Jesus. You can't really see the scroll too much because it's broken off, but it's here. Again, two disciples looking intently at Jesus.



Come to find out, Felicity Harley, who's a very well known historian of Roman art, says that this frieze from the sarcophagus—they call it Plotinus, but they don't really know who is it—but this art became the model for how early Christian art portrayed authority. You can see a gentleman seated with a scroll and then two in-facing figures. So, that became iconic.

So, I did a study of this and found that with the in-facing apostle authoritative depictions, interestingly, the female portraits outnumber the males by seven to one. Very significant.



Here's an example on the sarcophagus of Sabino. Again, a woman here. And *orans* with in-facing figures. She's up here again holding the scroll.

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And here's yet another one. This is at Notre Dame in France. And again, a woman in an orans. And again, you can see the different jewelry, etc.



So, what was this in-facing thing all about, anyway? Well, some scholars said that the accompanying figures were accompanying the figures into paradise. And someone else said, "Well, they're sort of just filler figures." The fact was, though, 73 women were in that posture, ten were men, and then we had 166 images of Christ shown in that posture. So, surely, Christ did not need apostle figures to accompany him into paradise. Therefore, my deduction was that because women were being told to be silent and not to teach, our fourth century women felt they needed the authority of the apostles to back up their authority to preach, teach, and evangelize.

I want to take a moment now and compare the tomb iconography of fourth century women with what we know about fourth century women from literary sources. And we find remarkable corroboration about the women whose portraits are found in early Christian *sarcophagi*. These women were well-educated, wealthy, wives and mothers. And judging from the number of solo female tombs, they were single women or widows as well. The funerary iconography indicates that at the least, they proclaimed or taught scripture.

When you do a review of the literary sources, which I do in the last chapter of the book, these attest that women such as Marcella, Macrina, Egeria, Melania, the Elder, Melania the Younger, Marthana, Proba and others were wealthy, well educated, married, and single women.

Let me just give a few examples. Marcella started a fourth century biblical study group in the [Aventine?] in Rome years before Jerome came to Rome. But when Jerome departed for Bethlehem, the priests in Rome turned to Marcella for scriptural interpretations. She also publicly debated Church men on the [originist] controversy in Rome. Melania the Elder exercised a discerning, loving, spiritual authority that included reconciling schismatic monks, leading a prominent churchman back to his vow of celibacy, teaching and converting men. And she was instrumental in resolving a schism at Antioch that involved, quote, "some 400 monks." She was a formidable scholar well versed in Christian theology and probably some classical works. And then Olympias was the deacon.

So, basically, these fourth century women were lovers of Scripture and scholars, who taught both women and men. These early mothers of the church exercised authority at a time when the fathers of the Church forbade women to speak or teach publicly, preferred that women stay at home, and judged women more susceptible to heresy than men.

Yet, the Christian women of the fourth century did not keep silent or remain enclosed. They spoke up about important ecclesial issues, they taught both women and men. They served the marginalized. They witnessed freely about the Christ with whom they had thrown in their lot. And, judging from the regular proscriptions from "Church fathers,"--the criticisms from Church fathers, telling them not to do this, (which meant that they were doing it)--women also regularly baptized and celebrated the Eucharist.

# Archeology's Testimony to the Witness of Early Christian

In all these words, I don't want to lose the meaning of what the experience of reflecting on an early tomb would have been like. So, just bear with me for a minute because I'm going to read from a certain part of the book.



And this is a tomb of a woman—we don't know her real name, but I have called her Junia. So, let's just walk through what this experience would have been like for the early Christian community.

Several years before she died, Junia or her family commissioned this uniquely sculpted sarcophagus to memorialize her and the values that shaped her identity. When Junia died, her sarcophagus was delivered to her home, where she would lie in state for up to seven days so that family members, clients, and friends could pay their respects and gaze upon her carefully carved memorial. They would enter a liminal space to reflect upon her life, her values, her beliefs, and inevitably, the meaning of life and death.



So, take a moment here and look at what is on Junia's tomb. Well, here she is in the center with a codex in her hands and a speech gesture. To our right and her left, this is Jesus healing the paralytic, healing the man born blind; Jesus with the miracle at Cana; Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead; and right here, depending on how the German analysts chose to describe it, either Martha or Mary kneeling at Jesus's feet. Actually, this looks very like Junia, the same kind of configuration. To her left, this is Adam and Eve. And this is Cane and Abel bringing the first fruits to God, the Father.

These are the biblical stories that Junia and her family chose for her tomb. So, again, as her family and friends gathered around, they entered this liminal space to reflect on her life, her values, and her beliefs.

Janet [Tulloch], the specialist in early Christian images, has observed that ancient art was used as social discourse meant to, quote, "draw in the viewer as a participant" and that art was understood 'to perform meanings and not simply to imbed them.'

So, using Tulloch's criteria, it's plausible that Junia and/or her loved ones wished us to enter into a liminal space and experience Christ's power to reverse the effects of the fall from paradise—namely, healing the blind and lame, providing an abundance of wine in the new reign of God, and raising Lazarus--and Junia--from the dead.

Where did Junia find her authority to witness and teach about Christ? I believe a hint is found in a closeup of her face, which has been carefully sculpted close to the face of Christ, who leans in with mouth open as if to whisper in her ear. Junia and her family wished her to be remembered as someone who taught with the authority of Christ. Her mourners commune not only with the departed Junia, but also with the Christ who heals and raises up through the meaning evoked and performed by the art on her sarcophagus. Junia exhorts the living to embrace the Christ who authorized her ministry and to whom she continues to witness beyond the grave.

# Women Erased:

She joins a sisterhood of Christian women, past and present, who obey an authority that supersedes any who would silence them. Junia is one of countless women who witness that they are made in God's image and called to serve in *Persona Christi*—in the person of Christ. Amen.

So, that's my story and I'm stickin' to it.

## Q&A

**Moderator:** Thank you, Chris. We're going to open this up for questions. As you're getting your questions ready, Chris, remind us of what that speech gesture means.

**Christine:** It's just a sign of someone speaking. It derives from ancient plays. They'd have the odium or the big amphitheater. The Romans loved plays and they were putting on all the different Greek plays. Since you couldn't always hear everything, they developed a code. So, the nearest they can tell, it just means speaking out loud.

**Frank:** We've been discussing this among ourselves. I'm Maryknoll priest. Can it be argued that Mary was not the only one from Magdala? There were probably other single women who went to Magdala because they could make an income and live. Maybe they had developed some kind of network, a group of Galilean women who were seeking some kind of liberation from the patriarchal structures. I'm positing that there may have been a women's Galilean liberation movement in Magdala that joined with this other group, men, from Capernaum, which is pretty close, and that they were two movements that combined together. Can I make that argument or am I out in left field somewhere?

**Christine:** In my opinion, it's putting the 20th century back on the first century. I think the big attractor for Mary, the one from Magdala, was Jesus. We don't know what it was. The Scriptures tell us that he cast seven demons out of her. Of course, in the 20th century, we think that means she was evil.

But in fact, in the first century, all that meant is that she had a very serious or chronic illness.

Whatever it was, it was a profound experience for her. I don't know if anyone has seen the series, *The Chosen*, on Amazon Prime, but it's really excellent. It shows that women were exercising initiative but within the context of their own culture. So, for me, the networking that could have happened with Joanna and Mary, the one from Magdala, they may have known each other from various business arrangements. [Chuzar] was Harrod's steward. So, the networking that was happening, I think, was probably primarily proprietary through business, through goods and services, through patronage. The main thing was patronage.

My own belief is that—and I don't know if this is worth studying—there was something about Jesus's uncompromising sense of the dignity of every human being and the importance of justice, and not diminishing the dignity of every human being. He fought courageously on behalf of a God who loved everyone and who wanted dignity for everyone. And so, a lot of his healing was geared to righting some horrible illness or wrong.

He was in the prophetic tradition of Israel. There is a reason why Isaiah is the most quoted prophet in the New Testament. It's because in many ways, Jesus modeled his own ministry—he was a prophet. And even in the Transfiguration with Moses and Elijah, he was modelling—he's the new Moses. And so, the whole thing with the prophetic tradition was, the last shall be first.

I think it was in that context, that lighted a fire in the women, but also in the men. But in some ways, even more in the women, because who has experienced more oppression in that culture. As oppressed as the whole culture was, it would have affected the women more than the men. So, you could look at it from that point of view. I think they just knew that this Jesus was proclaiming something new, and it was good news for them—that they were equally valued.

# Archeology's Testimony to the Witness of Early Christian Women

**Moderator:** Did any countries or cultures after the fourth century continue the practice of women teachers and leaders?

**Christine:** Well, actually, there are women deacons right up to the 12th century. I do think there were women who had presbyter roles. In the early Church in the same way that men had presbyter roles. There were too many Church men like Pope Gelasius complaining about it. So, there is evidence for both female—certainly the female deacons, you just really can't contest it from a scholarly point of view. But I think there's pretty strong evidence for female presbyters also.

Once Christianity became okay in the Roman Empire, it was sort of the beginning of corruption of the leadership of the Church in many ways, because the bishops suddenly had access to large amounts of money. Even Pope Damasus led a war so he could be a pope and slayed, I don't know, 200 followers of the guy who was supposed to be pope against him. And so, it really, in many ways, corrupted the early Church, the early vision. That could be an anachronism also.

But I think you have to look at the rise of monastic communities of both women and men in the Egyptian desert, and then also the rise of religious communities of women and men that did continue that prophetic strain in Christianity over against the power predilections of the leadership. That was very much counter to how Jesus instructed the early disciples. Let no man call you father. Serve the people.

**Moderator:** Another question came up. I don't know if you've read very much about this. Someone said, we understand that some of the current scholarship says Magdala is probably the nickname meaning tower and not necessarily a hometown. Have you thought about that?

**Christine:** There are different names for the site of Magdala, where we found a first-century synagogue. So, it's hard to know. I haven't studied it enough to know, especially with some of the new stuff coming up. I do think she was a real historical person, because at one point—this was 15 years ago—people were saying that she was not historical. I don't want to comment because I feel I haven't done enough research on that. But I do think it was pretty fabulous to find the first-century synagogue in present-day Magdala, where supposedly there had been none.

I think the questioning came from the fact that there were several names for the town that became known as Magdala. But it's always hard with the naming because depending on the culture, a name can be known in a culture and not in the literary writing.

**Moderator:** As always, Chris, it has been an extraordinary evening. Thank you!

Pictured Below: Trinity by Kelly Lattimore

