Women of the Bible: Nearly Nameless—Never Forgotten

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An Honors Project

By:

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A General Outline

I. Interview with the Author
   A. The allure of studying women in the Bible
   B. The allure of elaborating on subjects we know little about
   C. The bigger issues of faith involved in studying women in the Bible
      1. Who are these women really?
      2. What would it mean if they weren’t who we thought they were?
      3. How can we grow as Christians from studying these ideas?
      4. How can I incorporate faith and writing these short glimpses?
   D. Exactly what was done for this project

II. The Women: Nearly Nameless Wonders
    A. Eve: the feminist version
       1. Genesis
    B. Pharaoh’s daughter: the real Miriam
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    C. Woman with the alabaster jar: after the anointing
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    E. Adulterous woman: closer than you think
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III. Poetry to Guide
    A. “eve’s version” by lucille clifton
    B. “Leah” by Madeleine L’Engle
    C. “Lot’s Wife” by Noreen M. Livoti
An Interview with Myself

1. What exactly were the terms of this project?
   I am to write several monologues from the perspective of different female characters of the Bible. Partially nonfiction, I am to do research about these women, as well as the culture of the time. These monologues should not just be a retelling of the stories found in the Bible, but either give fictional background or new insight into the story. Outside reading includes writing that is similar to what I am attempting to write (The Red Tent by Anita Diamant) as well as nonfiction history type books. I’ve also been reading poetry by Madeleine L’Engle and Lucille Clifton that are about Biblical characters.

2. What is the allure of studying women in the Bible?
   Women in the Bible tend to do two things: teach us incredibly valuable lessons and leave us hanging. By that I mean that there is often so little about them that we, or at least I, often attempt to fill in the details of their lives in terms of who they were and what the stories of their lives were.

3. What are some of the bigger issues of studying women in the Bible?
   For me, it is a matter of asking myself “who are these women really?” What if Delilah wasn’t as evil as we think she was? What if Mary wasn’t as wholesome? I want to know these women in their entirety, not just for what they did, but why they did it. It is the same with male Bible characters: we should want to recognize all of them—their faults and accomplishment—and go on from there. This can also stretch our faith a lot. I know a lot of people who cannot understand that Samson was not the holiest of all men, and that maybe Delilah was more wholesome than he. After all, if we smash down the image of our favorite role models, where does that leave us? Really, though, this kind of thought should be an encouragement to us as Christians: we don’t have to be perfect to be a child of God, because no Biblical character except Christ was. I also see this project as a way to explore my own faith. Aside from encouraging me to keep on fighting the good fight, I am forced to truly study the Bible and do a lot of hermeneutics as well, and for this I am glad to do as well as excited.

4. What genre of writing is this? Is it creative nonfiction? Historical fiction?
   I think it is both, but probably more on the fiction side than anything. I take a lot of liberties with the women I chose to write about. I try to make up as much as possible, because I want the reader to see them in a new way. However, I am counting on the fact that people know of or have read the original stories before, so in that respect, I suppose it’s a bit of historical fiction as well. Originally, I started this as a creative nonfiction project, but I found that I was just retelling the stories we already know by doing that. Saying that it is fiction is nice because it allows me to take more liberties with it.
How Her Garden Grew

Genesis

The garden grew itself, as an intricate, separate being, flowering and flourishing and constantly changing. She could almost hear each flower stretching, each yawn of the smallest butterfly as it unfurled its wings in the glory of morning.

She. It was a very essence that she did not understand. What was she? There had never been another like her, nor would those after her be quite the same, but of course, she had no way of knowing.

He came to her in the cool of the evenings, shy, like the first time the snake spoke to her. He told her his name, Man, and that she was him, only separate. She didn’t like to talk to him, mostly because it was difficult to think of things to come next; the peace of the garden was easier to enjoy in silence, and he was constantly looking for her company. Perhaps that is what happens when one being is created from another, she thought. The one begins to resent the other. Maybe that’s why the animals were created in pairs; to avoid this sentiment in all of creation.

She liked the trees mostly. She liked the feeling of the leaves hugging the air around her, dancing as she ran her fingers through the long branches. They spoke to her too, but not like he did. They whispered mostly, calmly telling her of the beauty and perfection of all that was in the garden. They never pried, never tried to ask questions to which she had no answers, never ordered anything to be named something they may not want to be named. He was still deciding her name.

All of the animals spoke too, but mostly the four-legged ones spoke to him. She spoke to those that flew and crawled in the trees, and the snakes, which had taken to rising like steam up and down the trunks. Mostly she watched them glide, as she watched the winged ones fly and the many-legged inch slowly. One snake spoke in music. She had never heard music before, and he did not like the song of the snake because it make her smile unlike he could make her smile. He did not speak to the snake, and stayed away from the trees. And all around them, the garden grew, while they seemed to stay the same, every day discovering a new animal or tasting a new fruit, yet they themselves never changing.

Until the day the serpent spoke instead of sang, and she listened, because his words were still song, without music. They were of growth, of change, of all she could be and know, and she could share this with him, the other, her partner in life. She never thought the fruit really had anything to do with it. She didn’t even know its name. It was simply something to take and eat while the serpent sang of places and ideas and of gods and worlds she would meet, and of how she would be mother of all.

She wondered what mother was and suddenly, the garden stopped growing. He couldn’t hear it: he was out in the clearing among the jabber of animals, but she could, because the trees stopped moving. They had never stopped before now, and it was unnerving. She called to him. It wasn’t a loud call—more of a soft whimper—but she had never done that before either, so he heard it, even from far away. He came to her, but she didn’t want his comfort, she wanted to know why.

And he didn’t know. He was good at questions, she knew, but the serpent seemed to have the answers, and now had slithered to branches unknown. But he was hungry now, and the fruit she was still clamping, white-knuckled, reminded him of her red, fleshy
lips. He asked where it was from—of course, another question. She told him: from the
tree, this tree, and she handed it to him, and he ate it, never checking to see which tree it
was.

Then the garden stopped completely. Nothing shook her more that to feel the
garden silence itself and her own body start to grow. How could she even describe to
him such a thing? But he wasn’t listening to her; he was telling the Creator why he was
not to blame, and it was not until they left the garden that she realized her name.

Woman. Every month she was reminded she was woman. He called her Living,
and worked in sorrow each day, coming home to squeeze it through her as he held her
tightly each night. She knew there was more to this new life, more to the curse than not
being able to talk with the trees and the animals, more than being forced to listen to
sorrow where before she was allowed to avoid listening to contentment.

And then she knew. Not right away. At first it seemed as if she would slowly
explode as the skirt of animal skin grew taught and pressed into her swelling middle. He
knew nothing, just cried and stared in horror as she grew each day. She wished for the
serpent, for his music words and answers and promises, but she knew when she felt
something move, something flicker like the leaves on her talking trees, that the serpent’s
words were still with her: mother. Soon, she would understand. And for the first time,
she felt peace.
The Real Miriam
Exodus 2

It is easy to love the one that bore him. It seems natural—only right even—to adore his courageous sister for loving him enough to approach a self-centered, spoiled princess who simply wanted another toy to play with and offer to care for him. It is easy to cheer for him as he spreads his arms like the wings of a great hawk and guides his people through the sea of slavery, safe on the other side, away from horrible, evil Egypt.

It is not easy to love me.

I will not give you stories of how I was a lonely, bored princess, surrounded by wealth and servants who would bend at my every will, and yet all I longed for was the freedom of the common person. That tale is not true. Those stories as lies for the slave who needs cheering. No—in my memory I am a mother, and it is the only story worth telling.

Those who claim it is easy are lying to you; those who say it is pure joy are lying to themselves. Motherhood can mean nothing but toil; nothing but constant giving and the never-ending ache of loving someone so much—such a small being that cannot even comprehend what you would do for them. This kind of love can only lead to pain for one of the parties. In my case, it was I—I the mere adoptive mother who suffered.

And for what? To be encapsulated in the minds of all generations as the Jezebel of my time simply because I did not follow the faith of my son’s biological family? Was it not I who rescued him from the waters? Was it not I who ignored the Hebrew robes that warmed him, ignored that I knew the skinny girl approaching me could only be his relative? I knew what the penalty for male Hebrew children was—I am no fool.

I named him. Yes, I named the great Moses, the leader of many, the one before whom all Egypt cowered. I dared not name him for the Pharaoh, or for any other god for fear they would remember him and come to claim him. Instead I named him for the river out of which I drew him, whose waves tried to soothe his tears as they carried him to me.

Would he remember the soft palms that I used to wipe away his nightmare tears when he demanded the slaves of his grandfather? Could he hear the laughter of his adoptive brother’s childhood echoing above the screams of his ocean death?

He has chosen, my son. The woman who gave him life mattered more than she who gave him everything else. And so I live alone, a sonless mother with her defeated Pharaoh, outwitted by the scheme of a quick-tongued Levite girl who followed a basket.
Alabaster Woman
Matthew 26:6-13

I watched him die. I stood there as he watered the ground with blood, in the midst of his tormenters and the tears of the other women. I didn’t cry. I couldn’t. Somehow, I knew it would come to this, and I knew I would have to simply walk away.

Apathy is a way of life for women. My life, like my mother’s, like my grandmother’s, and like all the women I have known, was not my own, and I learned to believe in this. I knew my place, and accepted my fate: I would someday marry, and instead of belong to my father, I would serve my husband and bear him sons. Being a good wife had its privileges: after bearing her share of sons, my mother was given trinkets and even favored for a while over other wives. And then I met him. Not the one who would marry me, but instead the man who would deliver me.

I often though I had no choice but to meet him. My mother would have gazed at the statues of her goddesses and said that the stars had ordained it. My very body had revolted against marriage and its rewards: I was barren. Though being female rendered me unable to be favored by my father, as the only daughter, my mother was never far away. It was she who kept my secret for as long as possible from the rest of the family, and especially from my father. Her hope was to trick him into giving me away in marriage before the groom’s family learned that I had never experienced the rite of passage into womanhood.

For a while, my mother’s plot was successful: I married the son of a tentmaker, and no one was the wiser. I had some status in the community, and my duties as a wife extended to the market, where I lingered over the merchandise that the owners so desperately wanted to sell, almost begging passersby to purchase. And yet, the synagogue was my favorite place to dawdle, and I often slowed to a crawl as I listened to the men argue on its steps, discussing all I could never grasp. He was different, never standing in the center of the great circle of men, but always off to the side, seated, as if at peace with what he had to say, and not agitated with the world like the rest of the Jewish leaders. They were odd, the Jews, with their many rules and sullen faces, but he was different, as if radiating with something which cannot be named.

The first day he noticed me I had dressed in my servant girl’s clothes, hoping I would not be noticed. I longed to hear him speak, not to hear his words, but to hear him say them. He spoke as if all should listen, with an urgency that I had never experienced. I sat in a corner, just beyond the temple’s steps, far enough away to not be noticed and with my shawl completely covering my head. The morning sun made the air glisten and wriggle with heat, but my mind simply longed to listen.

I had no idea how long I had been gone, not until my servant approached me, worried, telling me that my husband was looking for me. I rose quickly from the corner, and looked up. As I did, so did he, and, for the first time, I gazed into the eyes of someone who was certainly not simply another man.

My life continued this way until my husband learned of my barrenness: no healthy woman could remain childless after two years of marriage. My husband obtained another wife, a disgrace to me as I became so publicly unfavored. Those once called my friends now accused me of unmentionable sins, the gossip even being that I was an
adulteress because I was so often discovered hiding in the shadows wherever the great prophet spoke.

And yet I wasn’t afraid: when I learned of a feast at a leper’s house and that he would be there, I took every coin I had, my entire inheritance, every gift my mother had given me and sold it all—all to buy an alabaster jar of ointment. It was used for the dead, but it was the most expensive perfume one could buy, and I was going to give it to him, for reasons even I myself cannot explain.

When I walked in, the room hushed, as if they all knew my shames, as if my sins were tattooed on my robes. I had intended to simply give him the jar, but as if my hands were possessed, I broke it, spilled it over his dusty feet and cried when he looked me in the eye with compassion that I had never seen before.

I didn’t hear all the commotion that buzzed around me. I didn’t hear the concern and condemnation of those who followed him. The greasy thickness of the perfume that soaked onto my knees where I cowered on the floor seemed to not even be there: I was lost as he spoke words for me, and me alone.

I never returned home.

But still, I could not cry. I could not be angry like some, furious that he had died and left me, because I was not willing to die too. Instead I walked away, having given him everything, just to watch him die at the end, and not having enough faith to wait for the underdiscussed third day.
Almost an Apostle
Matthew 26:69-75

I was there. I knew of him from the beginning: stories of healings spread quickly, even among slaves. We spoke of him often, the other women and I, but only when no one was listening. Slaves of the high priest are not supposed to speak of such things, especially of a man who claims he is the true king of the Jews. We didn't care about that really, only this: that he who had the power to heal supposedly had the power to care for even the lowliest of creatures, namely us.

My name is Diana, slave of the high priest yet former follower of the man called Jesus. I have many friends in the palace, ranging from other servant girls to male palace guards, mostly because I have always been the teller of tales. My friend Mara says my ears are longer than a donkey's: gossip has always been my talent, if you will. Ever since the man called Jesus began his rampage of healings and demon cleansings, the palace walls practically buzzed with stories, most of which could not be believed without seeing: at least that was how I felt. And so Mara and I began to sneak away from the palace whenever we could to catch glimpses of the man and his followers, who were themselves an odd-looking crew. One man talked incessantly, his voice consistently drowning out that of Jesus.

Although I ignored this man mostly, except to comment often to Mara about his pig-shaped face and the way his hair looked much like that of a goat's, Jesus demanded my attention, not like the way my mistresses would slap or scream when I wasn't listening, but like the music of a harp draws one in, as if his words called to me, individually, "Diana, there is a place for you, my daughter, in my kingdom."

But that was before—before I knew that even his own beloveds did not believe. That was before the night that the story had reached us that he was to be killed, right there in the city, like a common criminal, hung on a cross. Even a slave could have a more noble death than that.

I didn't want to stay by the fire that night. We all took turns, the other servants and I, tending the fire in the courtyard. We were not to sleep all night, because if the fire went out, we would most likely end up sore for weeks. I hated the courtyard at night: one could never be sure who would arrive there. But I never expected to see him: the pig-faced follower of the Christ was there, of all places. There, warming himself by the fire as if nothing were happening to the one he had devoted his life to, the one he droned on and on about wherever he went.

Mara warned me not to speak that night. She said that we were not to gossip, that if our mistress discovered how much we knew about Jesus, she would also discover that we had been leaving the courtyard and spending time in the marketplace. But my rage could not be contained.

I challenged him. I asked him who he was, even though I knew it was him. No one had a face like that. I knew he had followed him from Nazareth, and he stupidly spoke, his Galilean accent sealing his lie. He refused to look at me, but didn't touch me either: surely a man who told the truth would have beat a common servant girl who dared to challenge his authority. When he rose and began to curse I thought he would hit be, and braced myself for the blows, but we heard a rooster in the distance, and suddenly, he turned and ran, weeping like a child.
I sat motionless the rest of the night, rising only to stir the fire until Mara wrestled me from my reverie, telling me gently that the king of the Jews was dead.
Accusing
John 8:4

You’ve probably heard of me. You’ve probably been taught all of your life to stay away from me, from those like me. But in the end, you must admit, you’re just like me. And it inflames you—deep inside you know that’s why you can’t look me in the eye. It’s why you shoo me out of the temple or refuse to look me in the eye at the wells. You’re just like me, only I have the courage to admit it.

It doesn’t matter if you came from the cities of Sodom or the wilderness of the desert: I’ve been to both, and neither location has made me any different. The wilderness makes you lonely and bored and the cities make you hard and used to evil. Either way, doing whatever you want to do, regardless of whether it is right or not is inevitable. It’s a part of humanity—of me and of you.

I was a little girl once too. I was not always a lover of all men, but the love of only one: my father. You say I am what I am because my mother beat me and my father starved me, but they were both good, both upstanding, like you and yours. My father made sacrifices at the temple regularly; my mother bore him sons whom he educated well, and still had enough energy left over to show kindness to me—a man among men.

And then you look down at your little girls, your treasures, their fertile minds and bodies waiting to be filled and you cover their eyes and tell them not to look when you pass me, as if I was a disease you could shield them from. But I tell you I was once shielded, once wrapped in a cloak of innocence, and I too learned to take it off when offered enough gold.

I was given a name once—probably the same as some of you, as some of your wives—before they called me a whore and spat on the ground beside me. Will you teach your daughters to hate my name, even if they share it? Do you think they are immune to me, to what I have become?

You look at yourselves, your pious lives at the temples and your purple robes of royalty, cursing my name in a loud voice and forbidding those who would have compassion come near. Yet your rage gives away your secret—your fear of the consequences of your quiet sin make is hard for you not to call out me, if to do nothing more than to ask why.
Prisca
Acts 18:18

Sometimes, I think I’m insane. I was always an imaginative child, losing myself in the impulsive king and queen tales my father would tell me and the village children, but this—this can be no act of imagination.

I just need someone to tell me to stop, to tell me that I’m dreaming up what isn’t there, that I’m on the verge of ruining whatever chance of a perfect life I have in my grasp over some fantasy. Just to tell me that, so I can go home and be thankful for a husband that loves me and good food on the table and a roof over my head.

I don’t know what it is. He’s simply captivated me; made me look at life in such a different way. I see that I have purpose in life, that there is more than babies and mother-in-laws. He even calls me Prisca, not that silly nickname I’ve been called since I was four, but Prisca, my true, honest, womanly name.

When he, the apostle, came to live with us, I thought things would be strange: how was I to act now, with two men to rule over me and two sets of rules to obey? They thought he was reckless, constantly roaming around and risking his life for a man who was dead and buried. And here we were, keeping him in our home, feeding him, distracting those who did not like him.

Aquila soon made it clear that he would be nothing but submissive to the apostle. The men in the marketplace mock him, calling him the little wife of the apostle. I cringe at the word, not because of the banter, but because I know what it reduces me to: Aquila’s “little Priscilla”—more like his child than wife.

I have duties now, not only to cook and clean and take care of Aquila and my own children, but to help write letters. The apostle noticed my hands the first time he greeted me, not chastising me for the ink stains but asking me to use my gift—to recklessly give it away to God’s work. He insists I teach my own daughter to write, the way my father taught me, and my skill in writing grows daily.

I watch him with my daughter, I watch when we go through towns, the way the people gasp at what he calls “good news,” and my presence at meetings reserved for only the men. He will even recognize me over my own husband—“Prisca is the best scribe I have,” he says, as if I am important, as if he feels that my father didn’t waste his time by teaching me to read like Aquila says, as if it is wrong for the men to look down on me and refuse to meet my eyes when I speak. Aquila they can stand since he is the best tentmaker for miles, but us—we are of a different type, willing to die for this news, this gospel, as he calls it.

When my apostle speaks, there is no one who can’t listen: his words are like music. He says my name so wonderfully, as if it were the final note in a song that the rabbi sing. Prisca, with just enough accents on each syllable, rolling like wine on the tongue, instead of the childish gonging of “Priscilla.”

I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to contain myself, to shield myself from this infatuation that I’m afraid will turn into something more. I cannot help but remember the apostle’s Christ, loving those who were not supposed to be loved. The apostle says nothing of it, of course, but he swears I will always be remembered, that my name will be even more treasured than Aquila’s. I, a woman, to be remembered in history, like his, my name connected with his for all time. And yet, I wonder, not of the
scrolls of time or of the future generations, but of the soft glances that I can feel burning on the back of my neck when I turn away from the gaze of this great man, and of what may have happened if he had named me sooner.
Bibliography


Poems

lucille clifton

eve’s version

smooth talker
slides into my dreams
and fills them with apple
apple snug as my breast
in the palm of my hand
apple sleek apple sweet
and bright in my mouth

it is your own lush self
you hunger for
he whispers lucifer
honey-tongue.

Madeleine L’Engle

Leah

We lived by deceit,
all of us,
one no better than the other,
I as bad as the rest,
willing to take my sister’s place
in Jacob’s bed on her wedding night—
humiliated, but still willing.

How could it be that Jacob did not know?
After a wedding feast such as Laban
gave his son-to-be
how could it not be?
And I loved him,
his strange, smooth body,
and his strong and joyous play.
Out of my love I bore him children,
left off bearing,
and bore again,
still unloved by him.
And when he had her, too, to wife
his god, or ours, or both,
closed my sister’s womb,
and then, incomprehensible, re-opened it.

My father, keeping our Jacob with us
by deceit, by deceit
was himself cheated,
Jacob taking
the best of his beasts.
Until, surprised at Laban’s anger, he stole us
and we fled. Deceitful still,
my sister stole our father’s gods
and sat on them.

And yet, from our deceit
and from our love
we gave to Jacob
twelve sons, twelve nations
and, in the end,
one God.

Noreen M. Livoti

Lot’s Wife

Too many times I’d walk there,
Under the massive bridges, sigh and
Revel at each shop and golden calf with love,
Never thinking that one day it would all
End: nothing left to show for it but a
Damned pile of cooling sulfur.
They said I was too attached,
Overly in love with the city of shame,
Spilling its sin, ripe like Cain’s garden.
At least there I had been somebody: at
Least there I could sleep at night: at least
There they knew my name.