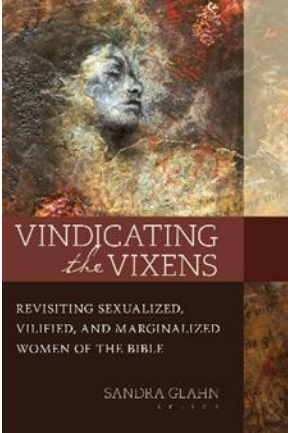


An interview with Sandra Glahn, Editor of *Vindicating the Vixens*



Bathsheba, Tamar, Rahab, Hagar, and the Samaritan woman at the well—were they really the “bad girls” of the Bible or simply women whose situations were greatly misunderstood? In *Vindicating the Vixens: Revisiting Sexualized, Vilified, and Marginalized Women of the Bible* (Kregel Academic), sixteen writers, alongside general editor Sandra Glahn, take a closer look at the stories of these and other prominent women to help readers gain a better understanding of these women’s God-given roles in the biblical narrative.

The church has a long history of viewing notable women of the Bible through a skewed interpretive lens. For example, Eve is best known for causing the fall, Sarah is blamed for tensions in the Middle East, Ruth acted scandalously on the threshing floor, and Mary Magdalene is infamous for a life of prostitution. But do these common representations accurately reflect what Scripture says about these women of the Bible?

Q: *Vindicating the Vixens* is a collaboration written by an international team of scholars. How did the concept and execution of the book come together?

Vindicating the Vixens has been on my heart and mind for more than a decade. When I served as editor-in-chief of Dallas Theological Seminary’s magazine for seventeen years, I became acquainted with the writing and research of men and women from a cross-section of multiple societies who brought perspectives to some biblical stories that seemed truer to the original than what is typically taught in the West. Then, as I studied history and ancient cultural backgrounds at the doctoral level, I ended up revisiting some of our western-influenced interpretations such as marriage practices in the ancient Near East. The woman Jesus met at the well in Samaria would not have dumped five husbands. More likely, she had been widowed many times.

As I revisited some Bible stories such as this one and as I read the works of others who had done similar work, I wanted to bring all this research together in one place and include a variety of ethnicities and backgrounds.

Q: Would you share more about the backgrounds of the writers and the different approaches they had for writing about their respective woman from the Bible?

The sixteen writers who contributed each hold a high view of scripture and have at least one advanced degree in Bible and theology. They are a diverse group: men and women, complementarian and egalitarian, black, white, and Arab, and authors of books such as *Discipleship for Hispanic Introverts*. Some are from Dallas Theological Seminary where I teach, but we also have scholars from Biola, Wheaton, and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary to name a few. One lives in Australia. One is in Scotland. Not all are in the academy. They serve in a variety of roles. The authors’ varied backgrounds mean they each bring insights in the text that the majority culture in North America has often wrongly interpreted—and exported. As a result, the authors’ combined efforts provide a fresh look at the kindness of God and His heart for the vulnerable.

Q: Why is it important to re-examine what the Bible says about these women and challenge our traditional views of them?

First, because it’s time. There has been an explosion of information about backgrounds. The influx of women into history departments in the past sixty years added more of an emphasis on social history when political history had been “the thing.” The historical women we knew about previously made for a short list—such as Cleopatra or Livia. We certainly didn’t know much about everyday people, but that has changed. Now instead of explorations limited to empires and troop movements, social historians ask different questions. What was the average life expectancy? What were people’s thoughts on divorce? Did they cover their hair, and if so, when and why? Further, the internet and translation software has made it possible for scholars across the world to have access to each other and to sources living and dead.

Additionally, the makeup of the scholarship pool is much more diverse, and that has aided our understanding. Scholars from underrepresented groups looking at the Bible see what many in privileged positions have missed.

They have brought to the text observations from a powerless perspective, which is the perspective of the typical person to whom Jesus ministered. The body of Christ is made up of many parts that need each other to function as a healthy whole, but we've missed out on what some of those parts have to offer. Hopefully this book helps broaden the conversation and deepen our understanding.

Q: Some women in the Bible most certainly fall into the category of “bad girls.” How do those women differ from the ones discussed in the book?



Right! Our goal is not to vindicate women who did evil—such as Jezebel who lied and had someone killed over property or Potiphar's wife who tried to seduce Joseph and left him stuck in jail. We are looking at women *wrongly* vilified. Take Bathsheba, for example. There is nothing in the text that even suggests she consented to physical contact with David and certainly not that they “had an affair,” as some claim. The text says she was washing herself—and that word “washing” could mean she was washing her hands. What we know about power differentials also suggests that when we consider a king's authority over the wife of one of his soldiers, we need to stop making Bathsheba responsible. That is not how the author of the story tells it. The text says David saw her washing and *sent* for her—sent *men*, plural, for her.

What happens when we blame her instead of placing the responsibility where the author does? We can end up with the idea (prominent in many churches) that women are the temptresses; we can teach that it's a woman's job to keep a man from falling, that men are helpless and controlled by their passions so women must cover up, be hidden, and take responsibility for men's actions. What an insult to men! We women are called to love our brothers, but we are not called to take responsibility for their actions.

Q: When discussing the genealogy of Jesus as outlined in Matthew 1, it's not uncommon to point out the few women included and refer to their sordid pasts. Why do we have the tendency to focus on the negatives of their history, especially when the men in the bloodline had as many flaws as the women?

Jesus's genealogy in Matthew is full of both male and female sinners, but the women's sinfulness is not the point Matthew is making. Not all of the women in Jesus's line had sordid pasts, and in making their sex lives our focus, we miss what the author is telling his Jewish readers. In the highly stylized genealogy in Matthew's Gospel, every person is intentional, with Jesus's ancestors arranged into three groups of fourteen generations. Matthew makes a break from the usual exclusion of women from genealogies, and he's clearly up to something. In his Gospel, *foreign* kings worship Jesus at his birth. Later a centurion—a *Roman* soldier—requests healing for his servant, and the text says this centurion “amazes” Jesus with his faith. Jesus grants the request and tells the disciples, “I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.” Notice “not anyone *in Israel*.” Matthew salts his narrative with the faith of Gentiles. In the genealogies, Matthew is setting up his readers, the Jewish faithful, to accept cultural and racial outsiders into the community of faith through belief, not blood.

Judah married the Gentile Tamar. Bathsheba is the wife of a Hittite. Rahab is a Caananite. Ruth is a Moabite. These are outsiders who are women of faith in the Messianic line. Judah says of Tamar, “You're the righteous one, not I.” Rahab says she believes in Yahweh Adonai as Elohim. Ruth says Naomi's God will be *her* God. Bathsheba suffers a great injustice but is grafted into the royal line. The idea of Gentiles being included would have blown the minds of Matthew's readers, but that was the promise God had made to Abraham—that through him all nations would be blessed.

Q: Can you give examples of how some people tie the evil committed by the Bible's so-called bad girls to something sexual when scripture states a different motivation?

In addition to the Samaritan woman and Bathsheba, another example is Tamar. The cultural gap between the modern West and her world is huge. In being impregnated by her widowed father-in-law, she was probably within her legal rights.

Centuries later, in the wedding blessing of Boaz and Ruth, Tamar is honored: “Through the offspring the LORD gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah!” (Ruth 4:12). Both King David and his son Absalom named daughters “Tamar,” and significantly the first Tamar's actions bring about a key change in Judah. Earlier he had sold his half-brother Joseph into slavery, but when he sees Tamar's

righteousness and his own hypocrisy when he seeks an honor killing for her immorality, something changes in him. The next time we see him in the Genesis narrative, this man who sold Joseph into slavery is offering his own life in exchange for that of Joseph's little brother. In vindicating Tamar, we also come to see in Judah a changed man, too.

Q: Throughout the past couple of months, the news has reported story after story of women coming forward, sharing their experiences of sexual harassment and abuse from men in a position of power. What similarities might their stories have with someone such as Bathsheba?

Sarah Bowler, the person who wrote the chapter on Bathsheba, said of her that understanding her tale has ramifications for how Christians respond to a world saturated with sexual misconduct. She wrote, "As I researched, I found current examples in which Christian writers and editors failed to be empathetic toward victims as they reported stories. Even sadder, some spiritual leaders rape or sexually abuse young women, and many of the victims still receive partial blame in situations where a spiritual leader is fully at fault.

"It really hit home for me after a pastor's kid I had disciplined several years ago started reading [my writing] about Bathsheba. She got back in touch to say: 'Thank you. I was raped two years ago Friday on a date in my home. I had three ministry leaders whom I held on a pedestal put full blame on me. . . . I can never thank you enough for not blaming the victim.' How we interpret biblical narratives affects how we interpret events around us. When we say phrases such as 'Bathsheba bathed naked on a roof,' we overlook the fact that Bathsheba was an innocent victim. We may also forget the modern-day Bathshebas. I long for the day when believers eradicate the line of thinking in which the victim shares partial blame for a perpetrator's sin. One step toward that end is sharing the *true* Bathsheba story."

Q: From a cultural standpoint, as modern Christians what do we misunderstand about the term "prostitute" as it applied to Tamar and Rahab? Do we wrongly assume the same about Mary Magdalene?

In the case of Tamar, the Gentile, she was not a prostitute. She *posed* as one once in an act of God's covenant love to her deceased husbands. As for Rahab, she was indeed a professional sex worker before she believed and was spared. However, considering what we know today about human trafficking, I think it's safe to assume she did not set out to aspire to harlotry as a career. Interestingly, Mary Magdalene is never described in these terms. The text says only that she was healed of seven demons, and if we study biblical references to "demons," immorality is never mentioned in association with them. That is not to say sexual sin could not be included, but saying Mary Magdalene was immoral is embellishing the text.

Q: How does Mary, the mother of Jesus, fit in with the other so-called vixens?

First, the subtitle of the book is *Revisiting Sexualized, Vilified, and Marginalized Women of the Bible*. Mary certainly falls in that last category, "marginalized," as she gets pushed to the margins by many Protestants. Because of a belief that other strains of Christianity elevate Mary too highly, many Protestants swing the pendulum to the other extreme and ignore her. She is the fourth most-talked-about person in the New Testament after Jesus, Paul, and Peter. She shows up in six books of the Bible, and she's one of the most radical disciples; she's there for nearly every event in Jesus's life, and she's passionate about his Messianic identity.

One of the definitions of a vixen is an ill-tempered or quarrelsome woman. Protestants often point to the story of the family intervention when Mary comes to take Jesus because she thinks he's too distracted and has to get back on track. People use this to establish that Mary is sinful and controlling. That is not the point the author of that story is making. Dr. Tim Ralston, who wrote the chapter on the Virgin Mary, explores what is happening in that story and how we have wrongly vilified Mary in it.

Q: Given that Eve committed the first sin by eating the fruit God told her not to, how can she be vindicated?

Eve sinned. That was wrong. We aren't seeking to vindicate her for that! However, we do Eve—and all women—a disservice when we extrapolate with her story. The idea that all women are easily deceived come from such extrapolation. Eve becomes everywoman in that way. Some also teach that Eve seduced Adam and thus all women are seductresses, but the text says nothing of the sort. Think of how such thinking affects people talking about #MeToo or #ChurchToo. If we assume women are seductresses, the go-to question when a woman gets sexually assaulted is "What were you wearing?" or "How did you provoke the rape?"

Additionally, some see the commands to the first humans to be fruitful/multiply and subdue the earth in terms of gender categories. They think men rule and women contribute to multiplying—that men work and women have babies. That is a very middle- and upper-class Western way of seeing Eve's story. Our friends in rural Kenya would never think of work outside the hut as something only men do or that raising children is "women's work." Men and women were made to have dominion over the earth in partnership together. It takes man and woman to be fruitful and multiply—together.

Q: Were you surprised by anything you learned or viewed differently as the chapters of the book came into you from their respective writers?

Yes, in fact, two things stand out. First, that often in vindicating women, men are vindicated as well. Take the Tamar story, where we see a pivot point when Judah sees his own hypocrisy before we see him again offering his life for that of Benjamin, Joseph's brother. In the story of Deborah, many—myself included—have seen Barak as a wimp. A fresh look at that story demonstrates that he respected Deborah and wanted her to accompany the army—no shame in that.

The other thing that came as a wonderful surprise was that as the authors helped us re-look at these select women, the writers did a good job of going one step further and asking what we were missing in the narratives by "vixenizing" the women found there. What emerged was a fresh look at the kindness of God and His heart for the vulnerable. Our Lord lends His ear to the powerless Hagar fleeing in the desert, the multi-widowed woman of Samaria, the multi-widowed Tamar, the powerless Caananite woman in Jericho—all the Gentile outsiders grafted into the genealogy of our Lord. His ear is bent to the humble, and that is a God I want to worship and follow.

Q: Profits from the sales of the book will go to benefit the work of the International Justice Mission. Could you tell us more about the work they do?

In much of the developing world, justice systems—police, prosecutors, judges, social workers—that should protect people from violence don't. When a justice system doesn't work, people are more likely to become victims of crimes and less likely to receive help when victimized. When laws are unenforced, violent people abuse, exploit, and enslave others without consequence. Violence becomes commonplace. The International Justice Mission (IJM) works to fight systemic injustice and to assist the sexualized, vilified, and marginalized. The authors contributing to this book may not be able to go with IJM to back alleys and court rooms, but we can use our scholarship and our writing skills to support IJM in their work. That's why we have agreed that all profits from this book will go to support the efforts of those who are vindicating the "vixens" in our time.

Learn more at www.aspire2.com, and follow Dr. Glahn on [Facebook \(Aspire2\)](#) and [Twitter \(@sandraglahn\)](#).