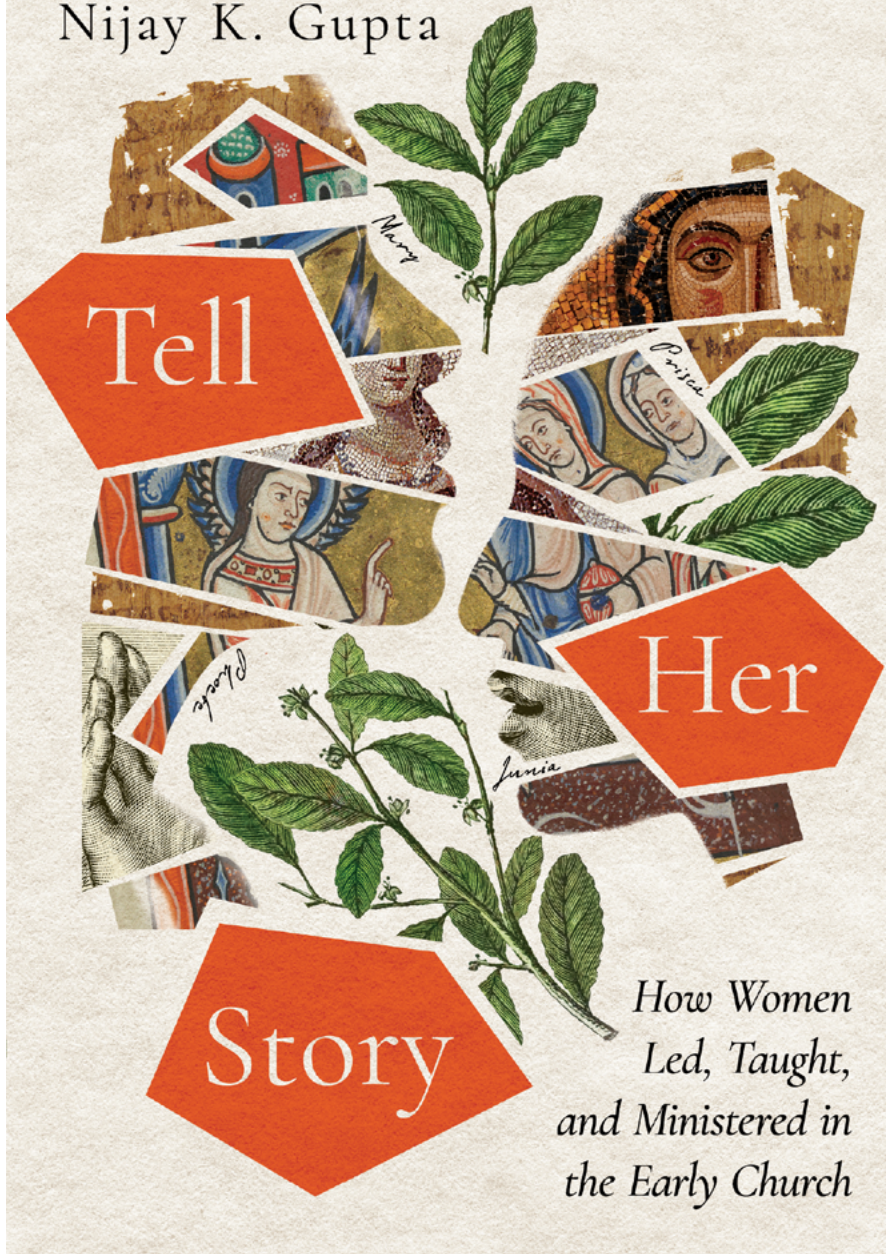


Nijay K. Gupta



Tell

Her

Story

*How Women  
Led, Taught,  
and Ministered in  
the Early Church*



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# Introduction

## *Hidden Figures*

**In 2016**, Margot Lee Shetterly's book *Hidden Figures* made a big splash in nonfiction literature. Shetterly pushed into the public spotlight the lives of three Black women in the 1950s who made major achievements in mathematics and engineering in their work for NASA. We should have grown up knowing the names and accomplishments of Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson—but we didn't. We are more acquainted with the men who went into space, whom we remember in textbooks and for whom we build statues and monuments. But some of the great American space-flight achievements would not have been possible without these brilliant and brave women, eager to make scientific breakthroughs in spite of the sexism and racism they faced.

In the summer of 2020, NASA announced that its Washington, DC, headquarters would be renamed the Mary W. Jackson building in honor of its first African American female engineer. This is a reminder to me that we can all benefit from telling the stories of women who have done great things. The problem of unknown changemakers is not just a 1950s phenomenon, or 1850s, or 1750s. As I learned about these three Black women, I couldn't help but wonder what leadership contributions made by ancient women have been "lost to history" and obscured by cultural dynamics and the myopia of our history tellers. More specifically related to Christian history, what do we really know about women leaders in the early church?

Most of us are familiar with a few names. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was clearly an important figure, not only in the life of Jesus as mother, disciple, *and* mentor of the Messiah, but also after Jesus' ascension, when she was still centrally involved in the gospel mission (Acts 1:14).<sup>1</sup> Prisca (a.k.a. Priscilla) is another notable figure; she was an artisan and business-woman, and she and her husband, Aquila, were a traveling missionary couple who were frontline gospel-mission leaders. But were there others?

In the early years of my Christian faith, my knowledge of the contribution of early women leaders pretty much ended with these two women. I had the impression that ministry was a man's job—after all, patriarchy ruled the day (more on that in chapter three). But historians like Shetterly have left me wondering, *What stories have not been told, perhaps once known, but later lost and forgotten?* I have come to learn over the past twenty years that the New Testament *does* testify to the roles and impact of many women, if only we pay attention. But I didn't always think that way.

When I began reading the Bible as a teenager, I attended a church where men stood up front and led the church service, only men served as elders, and only men could preach the Word of God. In college, I participated in parachurch ministries that had male-only campus directors (in some cases as a policy). I took for granted that this is the way things should be in the church and that this reflects what is in the Bible—men are leaders, women are followers and supporters. At first, I didn't really question any of this, because it was so deeply ingrained in the church and ministry cultures I was in at the time, and also because it could be reinforced by appealing to the fact that Jesus was a man, the disciples were all men, and the Bible said women couldn't teach or have authority in the church (didn't it?). So, for about the first decade of my Christian faith, I was content with the assumption that the church is for everyone to attend and participate in, but should be led by men, because that's the way it has always been according to the Good Book. Then I went to seminary.

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<sup>1</sup>See chapter four in this book for more on Mary, the mother of Jesus.

No, seminary didn't turn me "liberal." I learned the biblical languages (Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic), and I was trained and challenged to study the Bible and its world in depth, and it opened up a three-dimensional world, where I had experienced before only a two-dimensional one. Before, I had been *unconsciously* constructing a theology of gender (where men lead, women support) on the basis of a handful of biblical texts and a few observable patterns (male Israelite priests, male disciples), but the tools I acquired in seminary equipped me to look more *comprehensively* at the Bible in its time, culture, and environment. And I began to see the women that were there all along (just like the women of NASA in the twentieth century) but to whom I hadn't paid much attention. These women leaders of the early church are more than just extras on the set of the gospel drama. They are often key characters. I was not taught their importance in my early years, but I know better now. And now more than ever, their presence and work deserve our attention, our thorough examination, and also our admiration.

This book, to be clear, is *not* an attempt at some form of revisionist history. Our goal is not to upend everything said or written before about the history of the early church. It is an exercise in *amplification*. For centuries, the church has focused its interest on the male leaders of the early church—as if women weren't even there. In fact, some seem to think women *weren't* there in the rooms where important things happened. But there is ample evidence inside and outside the New Testament that women *were* actively involved in ministry, at the frontier of the gospel mission, as respected leaders in the church, and even as primary leaders of household congregations. Does what I am saying sound unbelievable? Women leaders of the earliest Christian churches? That is precisely why a book like this is necessary.

Part of the problem is that we often bring to the New Testament what I call a "Little House on the Prairie" perspective on the world of Jesus and the apostles. When we think about "the ancient world," we might imagine a place where mama and sister are sewing in the house while soup begins to boil in the pot. Father is out hunting, and brother is chopping wood. That image of the family might resemble rural life throughout time, but

we need a more diverse, complex, and sophisticated imagination to conceive of life in the many-cultures world of the Roman Empire, which is the historical, social, political, religious, and cultural environment of the New Testament, and the home of the birth of the early Jesus communities. Patriarchy was the dominant cultural infrastructure of the Roman world, but that system did not mean that women were resigned to only “domesticated” duties, or that they never exercised leadership or power related to civic life, religion, or business.

Let’s briefly look at a case study: Romans 16:1-15 (we will discuss this passage in much more detail in chapter six). This is a greetings and commendation list from Paul to the churches in Rome. It’s the kind of thing we might just skip over when reading this weighty letter, like the closing credits of a movie. But this is precisely the kind of stuff that historians pay attention to. There is a gold mine of information embedded in these verses that tells us a lot about the lives of the early Christians.

There are, in total, twenty-six people mentioned in this list. (That may not seem like an interesting phenomenon, but think about it like this: Apart from the genealogies in Matthew and Luke, do you know of another long list of names in the New Testament?) The fact of Paul’s greeting implies that he knew these people, either in person or perhaps in some cases by reputation. His comments, titles, and descriptions are all positive, so he was honoring each of them publicly, praising them as model leaders. Ten of them are women. Ponder that for a moment: more than a third of Paul’s list was model Christian women, many of them recognized Roman leaders: Phoebe (vv. 1-2), Priscilla (v. 3), Mary (v. 6), Junia (v. 7), Tryphena and Tryphosa (v. 12), Persis (v. 12), the mother of Rufus (v. 13), Julia (v. 15), and the sister of Nereus (v. 15). This is nothing short of astounding. First, it is unusual in any piece of literature to have such a long list of commendations of women (most of whom are mentioned without reference to a husband). Second, none of Paul’s comments are focused on their domestic duties. The most common commendation Paul gives is for their “hard work” on behalf of the Lord. Paul doesn’t make explicit what this work is. But it is unlikely that he had in mind household work. Why? You have to ask yourself, *How does*

*Paul know these ten women?* Keep in mind, he says to the Romans that he had not visited them before, so Paul did not meet the people he greeted in Rome. So where did he meet them? How exactly does he know so much about them? He could have met them anywhere they traveled for ministry, as he did with his friends Priscilla and Aquila, but travel many of them did and that tells us something about their independence and mobility. Some of these women of Romans 16 were apparently out and about doing ministry, participating in the gospel mission. Our goal in this book is to know them better and to create a more complete picture of the first-century beginnings of the people of Jesus. To achieve this goal we will listen to their stories, stories about their many inspiring contributions to the planting, growth, and health of the earliest Christian churches.

This is not a comprehensive handbook detailing the lives of all the women mentioned in the New Testament. Our discussion will be selective, focusing on the most important figures. Also, it will become clear that the writings of Paul are the main sources we will use for studying women leaders in the early churches. That is for two reasons: first, Paul is our earliest witness to early Christianity, having written his letters around the middle of the first century; second, Paul happens to mention numerous women *by name* and with some descriptions of their social status, location, social identity, and relationships. And that is extremely helpful in the historical task of reconstructing social history as best we can.

The book is broken up into two main parts plus a bonus section. In part one, I will offer the background to the main discussion of early Christian women leaders. It begins with Deborah (Judg 4–5) because of the important role she played in Israel’s history. Then we will go back to Genesis 1–3 to consider Scripture’s vision for man and woman, and how sin unraveled the harmony that God had created. The next chapter paints a picture of the Greco-Roman world of the first century, especially the lives of women. There are a lot of popular misconceptions about how women navigated a world of Roman patriarchy, and I think you might be surprised to learn about some of the accomplishments and positions of power associated with certain women in the Roman world. Getting

some of this “scene setting” information clear as a first step is important for processing what women could and did do in those early Christian communities. That is not to say there were no legal, social, or cultural barriers for women. There were, and we will discuss that as well. But a major point of this book is to look not just at laws and generalities but at actual women who held positions of authority and power, whose faces were on coins, and who found ways to circumvent certain cultural rules and expectations. The final chapter of part one examines the women who were in the life and ministry of Jesus, according to the Gospels.

The second part of the book focuses on the women of the early churches. We will look at the many named women leaders that are discussed in the New Testament (e.g., Phoebe, Prisca, Junia). After these five chapters, we have a bonus “What About . . . ?” section. Here I address hot topics like Paul’s prohibition texts (1 Tim 2:11-15) and the household codes that use submission language for women (e.g., Col 3:18–4:1).

My hope is that when we really understand the world in which Jesus and his followers lived and what the New Testament *actually* attests about women leaders in the churches, it will become clear that women were there; they were welcomed and supported by apostles like Paul, they were equipped and trained for ministry leadership, they ministered *to* leaders, they served on the frontline of the gospel mission and faced hardships because of it—and some became heroes and legends. Their stories are amazing and inspiring, and it is my honor to help tell them.



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