In the fall of 2017, the name “Harvey Weinstein” made headlines. The #MeToo movement gained momentum, #ChurchToo soon followed, and the stories of sexual abuse in the church poured in. Thousands of women made it clear that the practice of sexualizing and silencing victims was not unique to the culture at large. Such abuse has been part of church subculture for centuries. The pattern hasn’t just shaped the way we’ve viewed events that unfold in our own time, either. It has tainted our understanding of the Bible.

Soon after, my publisher released *Vindicating the Vixens*, a book I worked on with thirteen other scholars. The timing couldn’t have been more fitting. The book recovers the true stories of the Bible’s women, especially those we’ve made into villains and seductresses. We (myself included!) have made a habit of turning honorable women into villains.

We need to set aside our assumptions and revisit the women of the Bible. When we do, it will change the way we see women today as well.

### Vindicating the “Vixens” of the Bible

After spending years reading diverse perspectives on the Bible’s women, I’ve come to see how blind I was to their stories and to the way the Bible actually portrays them. Here’s a glimpse of (a few of) their stories.

**Hagar.** When was the last time you heard about Hagar the exemplar of faith? Normally, we hear about Hagar the uppity servant who thought she was better than Sarah, God’s chosen mother of his people. Until reading the work of an Arab seminary professor, I missed the fact that the Bible presents Hagar as a hero of the faith. Hers is a story of God hearing the cries of the oppressed and delivering them. The Angel of the Lord appears to her, a clear sign of favor, and God reveals himself to Hagar (not to Sarah) as “the God who listens.” Ultimately, God delivers Hagar from Abraham and Sarah and blesses her with countless descendants, much like the blessing given to Abraham himself.
Bathsheba.² It’s common to hear about how Bathsheba seduced David, and God punished him for his adultery. But that’s far from what the text says. The text describes the story like this: David, pacing the roof of his palace, sees Bathsheba bathing. Her husband, Uriah, a leader in David’s army, is away at war. David rapes Bathsheba. Upon learning she is pregnant, David calls Uriah home from battle and orders him to go home and sleep with Bathsheba. (This way, people will assume that he is the father, not David.) Uriah refuses to take part in the cover-up, so David sends him back to the front lines and orders his general to ensure Uriah dies in battle. After his death, David plays the part of a noble hero, marrying the newly widowed Bathsheba. He almost gets away with it, but God sees his actions and sends the prophet Nathan to deliver judgment. Scripture places full responsibility on David. This is not a story of a seductress and a man who can’t resist her. It’s the story of a king abusing his power for sex, and then engineering a cover-up. We’re too often blind to the truth of the text because we’re so accustomed to assuming the best of men and assuming the worst of women.

Esther.³ In a Bible study I wrote on Esther, I assumed she was complicit in joining Xerxes’ harem and becoming his queen. I completely missed the power differential between the gentile king and the orphaned Jewish girl. But then an African-American friend pointed out the history of African-Americans “passing” as white, typically in contexts of injustice. She spoke about the pain and loss caused by denying one’s family and culture in a carefully maintained deception, adding to the pain of oppression. The backdrop to Esther’s story is a context of such injustice that she would do just this—conceal her Jewish identity and name, Hadassah, from her husband. Her membership in Xerxes’ harem was not by choice. She was not a seductress who set out to woo the king, but a girl forced into the sexual service of a king—a king who had deposed his last wife for refusing to give up her dignity. She learned quickly and used not only her beauty, but her courage and political savvy to save her cousin Mordecai and the Jewish people.

The Samaritan woman at the well.⁴ I had always heard this woman described as one who divorced five husbands and didn’t bother marrying the sixth. She is the picture of sexual promiscuity. A serial adulterer. It makes for a powerful story of transformation, but is it true? Likely not. Consider that in her world, girls were often married to much older men (Mary was just a girl when she married Joseph). And, the main cause of death for men was war, so they often died young. Consider, too, that women were rarely economically self-sufficient. They depended on their father’s family, then their husband’s. Knowing this, it should not surprise us if the woman at the well was not an adulterer, but simply had the misfortune of marrying a husband after a husband who died, or perhaps divorced her, until eventually no one would marry her, and she had to settle for concubine status in order to eat. Our lack of historical knowledge and our tendency to sexualize women has caused us to see this woman as someone she likely was not.

The women of Jesus’ genealogy. Every Advent, I hear about how the women in Jesus’ genealogy were included to demonstrate God’s willingness to forgive sexual sin (never mind the sexual exploits of Judah, David, Solomon. . .). By making these women’s sex lives the focus, preachers vilify their actions and blame victims for their abusers’ actions. And ultimately, we miss the actual reason these women are included in Matthew’s genealogy—because they are faithful “outsiders.” Accepting cultural and racial outsiders into the community of faith through belief is a major theme of the book of Matthew. He uses the genealogy, including these women, to set this up.

When we wrongly sexualize and marginalize women in the Bible, it gets easier to blame and disbelieve female victims today, while protecting male abusers and minimizing harassment and abuse. In short, by distorting Bible women’s stories, we provide a “biblical” rationale for rape culture.
So why was it overlooked that Tamar was within her legal rights; Bathsheba was a victim; Ruth did not proposition Boaz; and Joseph’s desire to send Mary away quietly suggests she was not even “showing” let alone publicly shamed? Why does our focus so often come back to women’s sex lives?

When we wrongly sexualize and marginalize women in the Bible, it gets easier to blame and disbelieve female victims today, while protecting male abusers and minimizing harassment and abuse. In short, by distorting Bible women’s stories, we provide a “biblical” rationale for rape culture. We can do better.

Our response to abuse

When we recover the truth of the Bible’s women, it changes how we see godly women in our own time, too. They are no longer divisive troublemakers, but holy role models. They don’t thirst for power, but for justice. Their stories challenge us all confront our own biases. They call us to change the way we see women who are abused and the men who abuse them. They inspire us to actively build a Christian church that is faithful to God and to the most vulnerable in our midst.

I’ve had the chance to hear from people who have experienced this transformation. One pastor, after learning more about Bathsheba, began his next sermon with, “I was wrong.” He then re-preached a sermon he’d delivered on Bathsheba. This time, he focused on how David went from a humble shepherd to a king with immense power. He told how David abused that power, and how we are all vulnerable to doing the same. He told his congregation how God saw the victim and brought Nathan to speak to power. Like this pastor, we must have the humility to admit wrong and strive to do better. Here are three ways:

Seek out diverse voices. We don’t recognize our blind spots, and often, neither do people just like us. Learning from a diverse community helps us see more clearly. This is why our translation teams need men and women from multiple continents. We also need men and women from diverse backgrounds partnering to read, interpret, and preach. Put your money where your mouth is on this. Support organizations that help members of underrepresented populations get biblical training and teaching positions. Buy books by women. Buy books by people of color. Share their work. You can help drive the movement.

Believe differently. We tend to blame victims, even in the face of solid evidence that they are telling the truth. The knee-jerk response of the powerful is to believe the high-profile person’s denial over the less powerful accuser. Research suggests that only two to eight percent of rapes are falsely reported. That means more than more than ninety percent of accusers are telling the truth. When we fail to see the Bathshebas and Esthers among us as victims of power differentials, we dull our ability to empathize with victims who experience similar trauma.

Speak up. Proverbs 31:8–9 tells us, “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute . . . defend the rights of the poor and needy.” Part of our calling as Christ-followers is to give voice to those deprived of justice. The apostle Paul called on the recipients of his epistle to the Ephesians to “expose the deeds of darkness” (Eph. 5:11). If we know of abuse happening—whether it’s a David with a Bathsheba or a Potiphar’s wife with a Joseph—we must advocate for the defenseless and take appropriate action. If crimes have been committed, we need to seek justice even if we fear it will tarnish the reputations of our churches.

The #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements have highlighted widespread injustice in the culture at large as well as within Christian subculture. As believers, we must recommit ourselves to “doing justice” by listening well, reaching out, removing blinders, exegeting carefully, interpreting faithfully, and speaking rightly as we labor shoulder-to-shoulder in God’s vineyard.

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2. For more, see Sarah Bowler, “Bathsheba: Vixen or Victim,” in Glahn, Vindicating the Vixens, 81–100.
4. For more, see Lynn Cohick, “The ‘Woman at the Well’: Was the Samaritan Woman Really an Adulteress?” in Glahn, Vindicating the Vixens, 249–54.