IN THE MARGINS BETWEEN VIRTUE AND VICE
Women in the early religions of the eastern Mediterranean

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It is a great honor and privilege to talk before you today. I wish to thank Dr. Aida Khalafalla president of the Twin Cities- Minnesota Friends of the Library of Alexandria for suggesting I develop a presentation,

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and Heidi El Shafei, Specialist in Public Relations & International Contacts Department who made the arrangements to bring me and so many of us here.

It is important for me to clarify from the beginning that I am not an art historian or a librarian. I am an artist who is fascinated with how history informs our practice as artists. I am a visual storyteller drawn to stories and places that resonate with social conscience and responsible practice. My individual artwork involves the development of visual metaphors that are sometimes reasoned and sometimes intuited: parts that stand in for the whole, associations that can become something else than is depicted.

I have spent many years studying the manner in which cogent visual narratives or stories have been developed. A particular interest is the visual narratives of the eastern Mediterranean, with a particular focus on Greek, early Christian and Byzantine imagery.

This study has provided me a means to expand an information base and guided me towards a more thoughtful reasoning of ideas and inspired inquiry.
One focus of my work as an artist, a teacher and a woman of Greek heritage has been an investigation into the meaningful reoccurring female characters of the eastern Mediterranean.

Today, we will consider the stories of Sarah and Hagar, Lot’s wife and daughters, Rachel and Leah, the Samaritan Woman, Mary of Egypt, Hypatia and Catherine of Alexandria, and Fatima Al-Fihri.

If we consider the gaps, omissions and erasures of the narrative details in “the margins of written documents and images”, another imaging of these iconic characters is revealed.


1. What signifiers are present in their narratives?

2. How have their depictions shifted over time as political and cultural needs changed? Can they be rethought? Do we need to be told who we are—or can these role models change? There is occasional discomfort in such investigations.

3. How might these reconsidered histories reflect contemporary social relationships and interconnectedness and the needs relevant to a contemporary audience?

Good storytelling requires detailed description, sometimes reinforcing odd or unexpected juxtapositions, definitely exaggerations, incompatibilities, and ironies, sometimes humor and always lament. The intention is recognition of the passing of
things with the anticipation of renewal. Included in this prescription, is the probable desolation, destruction, ruin or loss of any or all of the above.

Many stories have women as central characters, but the events focus on men and male activities. Even today the titles of images, often omit the presence of women in the image.

**Such is largely the case for Sarah.**

Sarah, the wife of Abraham and the mother of Isaac in Genesis is a central Hebrew biblical character because of her role in the establishment of the Israelites.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the story of Sarah and Hagar, Sarah’s servant and Abraham’s second wife, is related in the Book of Genesis. In Islam, Hagar’s story is alluded to in the Qur’an, but her name is not mentioned. We know of her indirectly through the eyes of Abraham. Hagar is frequently mentioned in the books of hadiths.

During a time of severe drought and famine in Canaan, Abraham moved his family and his herds to the Nile delta.

Imagine the vulnerabilities of a sojourner (living among people who are not your blood relatives).

Imagine living in a country where you have few legal rights and were dependent on the generosity of your hosts.

In Egypt, and in a later migration to Gerar, Abraham introduced Sarah as his sister (so as to protect her.)
His rationale was they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. [13] Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you."

*Genesis 12:10-13*

But still, Sarah's beauty causes her to be abducted into the Pharaoh's harem. Eventually she is released back to Abraham.

Hospitality to strangers has always played an important role in the eastern Mediterranean. But there is sometimes a double-edged nature of hospitality and its practice complex.

The ambiguity and unease that can underlie the ideals of home and hospitality have long been analyzed by thinkers. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida describes the expression 'make yourself at home' as “a self-limiting invitation: please feel at home, but remember that this is not your place and that you should respect my rules.

This was much the case with the migration of the African-Americans from the southern US to the North during the World Wars. This was powerfully depicted by Jacob Lawrence in *The Migration Series* (1940-41) Casein tempera on hardboard, 18 x 12 inches.

*Panel 1. During the World War there was a great migration North by Southern Negroes*

*Panel 3. From every southern town migrants left by the hundreds to travel north. Panel 57. The female workers were the last to arrive north.*

*Panel 58. In the North the Negro had better educational facilities*

Today, famine and oppression of refugees is in the news. Millions of refugees are uprooted from their homes by natural disasters and/or conflict—and resettlement in "foreign" lands is problematic.
But let us return to Sarah.

The mosaic decoration in the Churches of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome and of San Vitale, Ravenna, from the 5th and 6th century Christian era respectively, juxtapose Hebrew and Christian biblical narratives. In Ravenna there is an additional imperial Byzantine court presence.

Even where narratives had women as central or pivotal characters, the focus was on men and male activities. The listed titles of these images focus on Abraham:

Nave Mosaics at Santa Maria Maggiore:” Abraham and the Three Angels”
North Lunette San Vitale: “Abraham and the Angels”
Rembrandt, 1630. “Abraham and the Angels”

There is a positioning in San Vitale which I believe is significant.
Within the lunette, Sarah is positioned at the left of the entire scene. The Latin and Greek languages (which were the languages of the Byzantine empire when the mosaics are constructed) are read from Left to right, So if we are ‘reading ‘the image, we encounter Sarah first. Why then is the title not “Sarah, Abraham and the Angels”?

In addition, this lunette is diagonally opposite the solemn gaze of the Empress Theodora and her retinue. I do not believe this is accidental.
Sarah looks intently over her shoulder at Theodora, a former circus performer who enchanted the Emperor Justinian. Theodora, often scorned for her humble origins, survived through her tenacity and strong sense of purpose as a woman in power. In a sense, this is how Sarah survived her second fiddle placement in regards to Abraham and to Hagar.

At the pronouncement of the angels (a personification of God) that Sarah, who is well past child-bearing age, will have a child, Sarah laughs. In fact the child who is born is called Isaac, which means “to laugh.”

Mark Chagall’s print presents us with that brief sense of the joy that God has finally spoken to her in a personal manner. Until then she has been unacknowledged.

There are two versions of the events regarding Sarah, Hagar and Abraham:

*The dismissal of Hagar*
Pieter Pietersz Lastman, 1612

*The Casting out of Hagar*
Gustav Doré, 1866

The Hebrew Bible states that before the surprise of being able to conceive and give birth to Isaac, Sarah wants to fulfill the command of God that Abraham would lay the foundation for a strong nation. Sarah compromises by offering Hagar, her Egyptian handmaiden, to Abraham to bear a child.

According to Islamic tradition, Hagar (which means ‘stranger’) was the daughter of the Egyptian king, who gifted Hagar to Abraham as a wife when Pharaoh thought that Sarah was Abraham’s sister.

Either version results in awkwardness. Sarah gives in to the emotion of being replaced. After Isaac is born, she urges Abraham to send Hagar and Ishamel (Abraham’s and Hagar’s son), away.

Abraham takes Hagar and Ishmael to a desert and abandons them there.

*Hagar in the Wilderness*
Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot
1835
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art
Roma woman who has just lost her husband
Forced evictions from Chad

When the two run out of water, Hagar repeatedly climbs two mountains to search for water. “After her seventh climb, Archangel Jibril /Gabriel rescued her, digging the ground with his heel and causing a miraculous well to spring out of the ground.” Today this is called the Zamzam Well. It is located a few meters near the Kaaba in Mecca.


Ishmael is regarded as the patriarch of the Ishmaelites, the Arabs. The story of Hagar’s repeated attempts to find water for her son by running between the hills Safa and Marwah has developed into a Muslim rite (known as the “sa’i” in Arabic). During the two Muslim pilgrimages (the Hajj and Umra), pilgrims are required to walk between the two hills seven times in memory of Hagar’s quest for water. The rite symbolizes the celebration of motherhood in Islam, as well as leadership of the women.

Marc Chagall, 1960, *Hagar in the Desert*
Iraqi mother Wafaa Hussein, tries to revive her son Thaer, aged six, Baghdad, 16 September 2007

The story of Hagar demonstrates that survival is possible even under harshest conditions.
Her abandonment, destitution and desperation model the struggle of unjustly suffering exiles or of lone mothers and their children.

**Lot’s wife and daughters**
Abraham was Lot’s uncle. Both were shepherds. There came a point when the land they used could not support their combined flocks

Lot and his family moved to the plains of Sodom and Gomorrah, at the south end of the Dead Sea.

*Parting of Lot and Abraham*
Nave Mosaics at Santa Maria Maggiore
Rome, c. 440 CE

In this image in Santa Maria Maggiore, we have a rare image of Lot’s wife before she is turned into a pillar of salt.

We know that she disobeyed the order to not look back as Lot’s family fled the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.
Nameless, except as Lot’s wife, she has become a symbol of denial and disobedience.

Lot and his two daughters escaped to the hills around the Dead Sea.
After years living in a cave, Lot’s daughters emerged to repopulate the area with children they had borne.
Lot and his Daughters
Orazio Gentileschi  c. 1621
Oil on canvas
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

Lot’s daughters evoke difficult deliberations on the nature of mother-daughter relationships and on incest.

Here I have inserted one of my works as an example of how the narrative of Lot’s wife: her confusion, desperation and disobedience influenced me: Amman, Jordan is expanding rapidly especially with the influx of international business people using Amman as a base and of Iraqi refugees who have pushed up the cost of living enormously. Building continues despite a lack of potable water.

Rachel
Rachel was the favorite wife of Jacob, one of the three Biblical Hebrew Patriarchs, and mother of Joseph and Benjamin. She and Jacob fell in love. Jacob worked for her father, Laban for seven years to earn the right to marry Rachel. –and Rachel remained silent when Laban brought out her elder sister Leah to marry Jacob. Jacob then worked another seven years to earn the right to marry Rachel.

Dante’s Vision of Rachel and Leah
Dante Gabriel Rossetti 1855
Watercolour on paper
Tate Gallery, London

Rachel and Leah, seated at the fountain in the Earthly Paradise, “symbolise the active and the contemplative life. Leah, in green dress the color of life, the active one, works with tendrils of honeysuckle and carries a red rose in her long loose hair. Both flowers
had connotations of sexual attraction for Rossetti. Rachel is dressed in purple, the colour Rossetti often associates with inactivity and sometimes even with death.”


While Leah bore Jacob seven sons and Rachel’s maid Bilhah bore him two sons, Rachel, like Sarah, remained barren—a social disgrace. Finally Rachel does conceive and after the birth of her first son Joseph, Jacob did not tell Laban that he was returning to Canaan.

Rachel took the idols of her father with her when they left.

![Rachel Hides Her Father’s Household Goods](image)

*Rachel Hides Her Father’s Household Goods*
Marc Chagall, Lithograph, 1960

Why did she steal them? Was it to prevent her father Laban from worshipping idols? Did the idols have some magical power that would reveal to Laban the way that Jacob’s family traveled? Did she take them to prevent Laban from following them? Or did she instruct Joseph to take an idol, so they could sell them? Or did she want these idols as part of her cultural inheritance for household religious observances?

Stanley K. Stowers, in “Theorizing the Religion of Ancient Households and Families,” argues that the most important practices and institutions in the ancient Mediterranean involved land, wealth from the land, and food,—all of which could be offered back to deities who gave the products and legitimated the ownership and social order. Susan Ackerman, in “Household Religion, Family Religion, and Women’s Religion in Ancient Israel,” argues that the terms family and household function basically as synonyms...Ancient Israelite women prepared food and drink for the god or gods venerated within their households and then presented these offerings. In doing so, women also acted as the theologians who gave voice to household and family religious beliefs.
Leah, Moses, Rachel are in this uncompleted free-standing funeral monument by Michelangelo for Pope Julius II, c. 1515.

The original plan may have included as many as forty-seven large figures carved of Carrara marble. The sadly scaled-down structure was installed in San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome, far away from the papal majesty of Saint Peter's Basilica.

Michelangelo Buonarroti: Project for a Wall Tomb for Pope Julius II (62.93.1) | Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History | The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The statues of Leah and Rachel in the niches to the right and left of Moses were substitutions for statues of two slaves already in Rome. Rachel is in a position of prayer, whom scholars interpret as representing the faith and meditative life, whereas Leah as the bearer of many children, is considered to represent the active life.

Leah and Rachel are evidence of the injustice of the patriarchal society, which the Hebrew Bible describes as ordained by God. Leah was forced by her father into a deceptive act of sex without love, resulting in an unhappy marriage with a man who loved her sister, not Leah herself. Leah's value was counted strictly in terms of her ability to bear children for Jacob.


Jacob unknowingly cursed whoever had taken the idols and sadly.
--And Rachel died on the road to Canaan during the birth of their second son Benjamin.

"Jacob set up a pillar upon her grave; the same is the pillar of Rachel's grave unto this day."

Genesis 35:19-20.

Jews, Muslims and Christians hold Rachel in high esteem. She is the wife of the prophet Jacob and the mother of the prophet Joseph. The Qur'an recognizes the role of a wife and mother of a Prophet (Qur'an 13:38).
(Aren't we all grateful to our mothers for their sacrifices, especially when hardship is involved!)
Jews, Muslims and Christians have the right to access the grave to pray for the blessing of childbirth.
Rachel’s memorial today between Bethlehem and the Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo

Today, access is problematic and witnesses territorial controversy. Located between Bethlehem and the Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo, the monument has been surrounded by a wall cutting it off from the road that pilgrims have traveled for thousands of years.

Frederick M. Strickert, Rachel weeping: Jews, Christians, and Muslims at the Fortress Tomb

Rachel Corrie in Gaza

Sadly, the name Rachel continues to bear witness to desolation and sanctimonious judgment. Rachel Corrie, (1979 – 2003) was the 23-year-old peace activist killed on March 16, 2003 when she was crushed by an Israeli bulldozer on the Gaza Strip.

The Samaritan Woman

Samaritan Woman at the Well
Catacomb Via Latina, Rome
340-350 CE

The Samaritan Woman is described in the Book of John, chapter 4 in the Christian Bible. Christ encounters an unnamed Samaritan woman at Jacob's well.

She spoke to him as an intellectual equal, and he responded.

The well was the hub of a village. Every drop of water used in a household had to be carried from a well. It was women’s work to fill heavy earthenware jars, and carry the water home. The strong younger women of the household normally did this task.
When Jesus asked the Samaritan woman for something to drink, the longest conversation recorded between Jesus and any person begins. It is surprising that this conversation happens with someone who was a woman, and non-Jewish. The woman herself was certainly surprised when Jesus spoke to her, because Jews and Samaritans did not have anything to do with each other. (John 4:1-10)

According to tradition, after her meeting with Jesus Christ at the well, the Samaritan woman, along with her seven children, became Christian missionaries. All of them were executed by the Emperor Nero.

When we know this fact of martyrdom, the presence of the Samaritan Woman’s image in the frescoes on the boy’s side of an early 14th c church for orphans takes on special meaning. The Samaritan Woman And Christ’s conversation bridges the space of the arch that reveals the altar. In addition the images of the Samaritan Woman and of Mary, mother of Christ, present at the marriage of Cana are next to each other. This sequence affords strong female role models to young orphans.

The placement of this scene in San Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna is also of import. On either side of the nave, there are processions of martyrs holding their crowns of martyrdom. The procession mimics the position of the audience in the liturgies church female on the north side, males on the south side.

The vignette of the Samaritan woman is above the female procession. (Ironically directly across from the repentance of Judas.) Her conversation with Jesus adds further reinforcement to the presence the female martyrs and their sacrifices.
Hypatia of Alexandria

In the 4th century Christian era, Hypatia of Alexandria, a renowned mathematician, Neo-Platonist philosopher and teacher, defied the social norm that women learn quietness, modesty and submission to men.

In fact, she questioned any form of dogma. She studied conic curves and is believed to have proposed a heliocentric view of the universe and to have discovered that the ellipse is the form that governs the motion of the planets.

Like her father, Hypatia taught at the Seraphaeum, a sister library to the great library of Alexandria that was a scholastic complex dedicated to learning. She was caught in a rivalry between the Roman state, which at the time was adopting Christianity as its official religion, and the Christian church, which in Alexandria was headed by a zealous bishop Cyril. A rational secularist, she was murdered by Christian fanatics.

Hypatia, was an exception to Neo Platonic dualism that placed women in a patronized, diminished status.

In the 4th c BCE, Plato proposed the theory of dualism, suggesting that everything in the cosmos had an equal and opposite counterpart. This theory was not to women's advantage. 'Woman' was placed in a category containing elements that were viewed as negative:


Among the dualities Plato proposed were

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>Practical</td>
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<td>Intellectual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Idealistic/challenging</td>
<td>Nurturing/emotional</td>
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Civilization was the ideal. 
Nature was mistrusted and women were perceived as closer to the natural/animal world than men. 
Logic and reason were admired, emotion was irrational and untrustworthy. 
Goodness was always preferable to evil 
Light was preferred to darkness. 

“By nature”, women were not able to make their own decisions, govern their own lives. 
They had to be controlled and they were never treated as equals. 

In struggling to explain and maintain authority, early philosophers and religious leaders often became strident in their perspectives. But Hypatia is credited with this illuminating thought: 

“To understand the things that are at your door is the best preparation for understanding those things that lie beyond.” 

None of Hypatia’s work or the work with her father Theon survives. It was destroyed in the religious furor of her time. We know her work today through the writings of others, particularly her former students, who quoted her. 

In the 16th century CE, the great Renaissance painter Raphael allegedly submitted a draft of his work, ”The School of Athens”, to the Catholic church fathers. 

"Who is this woman in the middle?” asked the Bishops. 
"Hypatia, the most famous student of the School of Athens,” answered Raphael.
"Remove her. Knowledge of her runs counter to the belief of the faithful," admonished the priest. "Otherwise, the work is acceptable."
"As you command," replied the artist, given no choice.

However, he still "snuck" her back into the picture, using Francesco Maria della Rovere as his model.”
http://womenshistory.about.com/od/hypat1/a/hypatia.htm

The recent film about Hypatia, *Agora*, directed by Pedro Amendare, and starring Rachel Weisz has not been widely distributed in the United States. There is some thought that distributors fear US right wing Christians much as the pagans of Alexandria feared the Christian thugs portrayed in the film.

Two versions of the poster advertising the film present very different perspectives. While the European version, introduces Hypatia as the focus of the film, the US version introduces three protagonists: Hypatia to the left, slave admirer and one of her pupils.

In my own work in trying to find appropriate metaphors, I combine and rework images with a variety of media. When trying to reconcile an image of Hypatia I started with the anthropomorphic statues found at 'Ain Ghazal near Amman and anthropomorphized Mameluke ceramic hand grenades.

The complex of Ain Ghazal dating from around 6500 B.C.E. was found during a road-building project in the 1970s. The architecture was simple and documents an agrarian society. Thirty-two anthropomorphic statues were found in pits near ceremonial structures.
When I visited Jordan in 2008, I was able to view a number of the statues in the Archaeological Museum in Amman. The fascinated me. They are half human size (those that are full figures are around a meter high), made of plaster shaped around bundled reeds bound with twine.

The eyes are traced with bitumen and pupils are inset bitumen. Only 3 have double heads.

*The functions of the statues are unknown.*

*They may represent a twin-headed god or goddess, but it could also be interpreted as a human couple, or twins, perhaps worshiped as revered ancestors.*

([http://www.asia.si.edu/jordan/html/views2.htm](http://www.asia.si.edu/jordan/html/views2.htm))

It is as thought that the statues were once painted, wore wigs and were dressed.

In selecting this image to work with, I considered many parallels:

*Among the many things plaster was used for were to make keepsakes of geometric forms.*

*Hypatia studied geometry. In fact she was credited with inventing several astronomical tools.*

*Like the twinned Ain Ghazal statues, Hypatia had two balanced natures: an Idealistic and challenging thinker and intellectual, and an attractive, nurturing and practical woman.*

**Catherine of Alexandria**

*St Catherine of Alexandria: Scenes from Her Life*  
Donato D’ and Gregorio D’ Arezzo, ~1330 C.E.
Eusebius "father of Church history," writes around the year 320 C.E., of a Christian woman of Alexandria noted for her wealth, intelligence, and beauty.

She is said to have learned philosophy, languages, science (natural philosophy), and medicine. Either her mother or her reading introduced her to the Christian religion. She refused to marry, not finding any man who was her equal. She refused the advances of the Roman emperor Maxentius and was punished by banishment and the confiscation of her estates.

Popular stories in the Golden Legend and in an "Acts" of her life add details, some of which conflict with each other.

*Saint Catherine and the Emperor Maxentius*
Masolino
c. 1428-1430
Fresco
Rome, San Clemente

Maxentius could not answer her arguments against his pagan gods, and summoned fifty philosophers to confute her. They all were won over by her reasoning, and were burned to death by the enraged Emperor. He then tried to seduce Catherine. She indignantly refused him. He had her beaten and imprisoned. But then he discovered that his wife Faustina and a high official, Porphyrrus, had been visiting Catherine and had been converted, along with the soldiers of the guard. They too were put to death, and Catherine was sentenced to be killed on a spiked wheel.

*Saint Catherine of Alexandria*
Artemisia Gentileschi (Italian, b. 1593 d. 1651/1653)
c. 1618-1619 CE
Uffizi Galleria, Florence, Italy:  
oil on canvas  
77 cm: height X63 CM: width

_Saint Catherine of Alexandria_  
Caravaggio  
Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza  
oil on canvas  
173 cm: height 133 cm: width

When she was fastened to the wheel, her bonds were miraculously loose and the wheel broke, its spikes flying off and killing some of the onlookers. She was then beheaded.

The juxtaposition of two saints in _The Lamentation with Saint John the Baptist and Saint Catherine of Alexandria_ who quite literally lost their heads is noteworthy.

_The Lamentation with Saint John the Baptist and Saint Catherine of Alexandria_  
Master of the Legend of St. Lucy , 1493-1501; Bruges, Netherlands  
Oil on panel, 99.7 cm X 79.38 cm  
Collection: Minneapolis, MN, Minneapolis Institute of Arts

The text of the “Acts” of Catherine state that her body was carried by angels to Mount Sinai, where a church and monastery were afterwards built by the emperor Justinian in her honor.

_The Burial of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai_  
Francisco de Zurbaran, ca. 1630- 1640  
oil on canvas,  200 cm X 137 cm  
based on an engraving by Corelis Cort, “Entombment of Saint Catherine,” 1575.  
Seville, Spain. Collection of the Count of Ibarra

Christians pray to her for healing. She is also considered the patroness of wheelwrights, mechanics, millers, philosophers, scribes, and preachers;
and she is the protector of young girls, especially those who are students or cloistered. When reading this paper, one of my colleagues commented “The only way young women could be saved, was to put them in a convent”.

There is a direct comparison of Catherine with Hypatia. St. Catherine is often depicted arguing with philosophers.

St. Catherine was especially popular in France, because she was one of the saints whose voices were heard by Joan of Arc.

*Les Vigiles de Charles VII: King Charles VII and Joan of Arc*
Martial d'Auvergne, 1484
folio 61 verso: Detail This is a black-and-white image of a colored illumination. 
Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale

**Mary of Egypt**

Mary of Egypt was born in Egypt in the year 344 CE and died in the Jordanian-Palestinian desert in 421 CE.

Her biography was written by St. Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem two hundred years later between 634 and 638 CE.

“She was considered a prostitute by many, but the sexual favors that she used to do were only consequence of her nature, since she described herself as ‘driven by an insatiable desire and an irrepressible passion’.” (Today this would be considered an honest self evaluation.) “One day, when she tried to enter to a church she felt a force that kept her from going in, so she realized that she was impure, she converted, and
decided to live as an ascetic, and later went to the desert to live as a hermit, taking with her only three pieces of bread.”

She wandered in the desert for 40 years. Towards the end of her life, Mary of Egypt crossed the Jordan River to meet St. Zosimos of Palestine by walking on the surface of the water---

…but in her imaging, she does not walk on water.

and in the hymns of the church, she is remembered as a reformed prostitute.

In the church of St. Nicolas, Geraki, Peloponnese, Greece, there is an image of Mary of Egypt and St Zosimos on the inside of the Altar. In the Orthodox Church, women are not allowed entrance into the altar area. And yet here, as the priest faces his congregation to offer them communion, is an image that mirrors this activity. Of the many images that one could choose from, I find this a remarkable choice.

A similar situation happens in the refectory (the eating area) of the former male monastery of Apollonia, Albania.

On the left side of the great arch, Mary receives communion from Zosimos. This scene is in the register below the scene of Christ washing the feet of his disciples. The postures of Christ and Mary are humble and similar.
Across from each other in the arch, Mary receives communion from Zosimos on the left and, on the right, the prophet Elijah is fed by ravens in the desert. Both are visual clips from complex allegories for disciplined, abstemious behavior. Both were intended to inspire the monastic community.

Nicholas Kristof, impressively wrote in the *NY Times*, Jan 9, 2010:
“When religious institutions exclude women from their hierarchies and rituals, the inevitable implication is that females are inferior.... religious groups should stand up for a simple ethical principle: any person’s human rights should be sacred, and not depend on something as earthly as their genitals.”

**Fatima Al-Fihri**

The basic thrust of the Qur’an is towards equality and so any examples of inequality being advocated in the Qur’an are to be considered "time and space dependent".

http://knol.google.com/k/feminism-in-islam#Criticism_of_Patriarchy

This leads us to a contemplation of ‘contracts’ in opposition to ‘status’.

"The dowry, previously regarded as a bride-price paid to the father, became a nuptial gift retained by the wife as part of her personal property."

Under Islamic law, marriage was no longer viewed as a "status" but rather as a "contract", in which the woman's consent was imperative. "Women were given inheritance rights in a patriarchal society that had previously restricted inheritance to male relatives."


Fatima Al-Fihri was the well-educated daughter of a wealthy merchant family who had migrated from Kairouan (hence the name of the university), Tunisia to Fez in the early 9th c. CE, joining a community of other migrants from Kairouan who had settled in a western district of the city.
Fatimah and her sister Maryam, both of whom were well educated, inherited a large amount of money from their father. Willful and intelligent, Fatima vowed to spend her entire inheritance on the construction of the mosque.

Using her dowry, she constructed the Al Karaouine mosque. In the midst of the construction of the mosque, the University of Al-Karaouine was established. The location of the university within the compounds of the mosque attracted scholars from far and wide. In medieval times, Al-Karaouine played a leading role in the cultural exchange and transfer of knowledge between Muslims and Europeans. Today it is the oldest continuously operating institution of higher learning in the world with a large collection of rare manuscripts.

In accordance with Islamic tradition which proscribes imaging individuals, I have been unable to locate an image of Fatima; her legacy is an architecture of integrity.

In conclusion, the perplexing, confusing and frustrating contradictions in the imaging of women continues today. Advertisements push sexual allure. Religions promote modesty and abstinence. Contemporary culture promotes predatory behavior. Images challenge traditions.

Shirin Neshat
Untitled, from the "Rapture" series, 1999
Passage, 2001

What we clearly see today is the problem that such oppositional thinking is not productive or constructive. We are all hybrids of these characteristics. The challenge is
to find a balance among these mixed messages so many of which are biased against women.

Today I have chosen images that reflect the struggle of female archetypes with these dualities.

Their stories are complex allegories

of exile, migration and sacrifice

of discipline, silence and observation

the difficulty of making choices and taking initiative

Hypatia, William Russell Flint, 1902 Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN

and the struggle for dignity.

It is my hope they can be part of a constructive guide to a consideration of the margins of virtue and vice to promote a respectful re-imaging of women that guides and inspires the next generation.