

DISCERNING IDENTITY AND BIBLICAL LITERACY THIRD SPACES THROUGH
NARRATIVES OF MOTHERS

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Dedicated to Tabitha Ruth and Sophia Ann

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Samantha Bise

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The Protestant Reformation put the Bible into the hands of the people for the first time, ultimately putting Christian texts into the hands of women. This began a trajectory of women beginning to contribute to the historically male-dominated interpretation processes of biblical texts. This qualitative narrative study explores the lives of five Christian mothers using a feminist lens. Murdock's *Heroine's Journey* and *I-Poems* are used to situate their narratives surrounding womanhood and motherhood, how these experiences contribute to their biblical readings, and how they are choosing to teach—or not teach—their children about Christianity and the Bible. These mothers discuss the roles of church teachings in their understandings of womanhood—including issues like purity culture, gender roles, and domestic labor. They also discuss their identities as Christians—many of them discussing shame and embarrassment about sharing this identity. A key finding in this study is the rise of third spaces where people are teaching and learning about biblical texts. These third spaces are contributing to alternative biblical literacy practices, decentralized power, and the challenging of hierarchies.

Keywords: Christian education, biblical literacy, third spaces, biblical womanhood

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Research

Introduction

The Protestant Reformation was a turning point in the history of literacy and education (Henrich, 2020, pp. 7-17). For the first time in history, people were encouraged to read biblical texts in their homes. This was especially impactful for the lives of women. Women were encouraged to read and to help educate their children in the home (Henrich, 2020, p. 9). The early history of literacy in the United States also involved the Bible. Slave narratives suggest that reading the Bible is how many enslaved people became literate (Cornelius, 1983). The links between marginalized groups and literacy cannot be analyzed without understanding the role of the Bible. These shifts in human history occurred over generations ago, and as a result we are beginning to see a shift in how parents, and specifically mothers, are choosing to educate their children about biblical texts and Christianity in light of their own experiences. In turn, we are seeing a change in the emerging spaces where biblical literacy practices are occurring. This project examines the narratives of women and the “third spaces” where they are engaging in biblical literacy educational practices.

Problem Statement

The Protestant Reformation has given women the opportunity to interpret biblical texts, and many mothers are now changing the way they choose to immerse their children in Christian religious education settings. Men have been dominating Christianity for most of history, meaning women have been marginalized in Christian education settings. However, the Protestant Reformation’s emphasis on providing women and mothers with biblical texts in their homes has made it possible for women to begin challenging dominant interpretations of biblical texts and the Christian education spaces where these texts are used. There is no shortage of literature to

support the role gender has on how a person or community interprets biblical texts. Tribble (1984, 1986)--an author who is often assigned reading in mainline Protestant seminaries--and Benckhuysen (2019) write about the impact gender has on biblical interpretations and the ways women have re-interpreted these texts throughout history in contrast to dominant male interpretations. Barr (2021) uses historical evidence to showcase the ways the patriarchy has systematically created the concept of “biblical womanhood” throughout the centuries, resulting in oppression and trauma for many people who identify as “woman.” The late Rachel Held Evans (2012) conducted her own study on “biblical womanhood” when she spends an entire year adhering to biblical notions of womanhood--like covering her head and calling her husband “master”--as a means to challenge the notion that “an ancient collection of sacred texts, spanning multiple genres and...thousands of years in cultures very different from our own [could] offer a single cohesive formula for how to be a woman” (p. xx). Research and experience dictate the fact that male-dominated interpretations of biblical texts have created trauma in women and Christian communities, and new feminist interpretations are emerging and challenging old understandings. The ways these re-interpretations are showing up in Christian education spaces and taught to younger generations is beginning to be examined, and mothers are playing an important role in this unfolding. Furthermore, there are alternative, “third spaces,” emerging where people are engaging in biblical literacy practices--as demonstrated in the narratives of these five women.

Personal Importance

I was raised without a faith tradition. In my late 20s, I became what I call “spiritually curious.” I was dating the man who is now my husband, and we began to explore potential churches to attend. I knew that I could not be a part of any community that devalued women in any way, so this left only a few local churches to choose from. This began my interest in the

ways people's experiences in various church settings impact their ideas of gender, and more specifically womanhood.

We are in the midst of a paradigm shift when it comes to womanhood and motherhood. Women and families are renegotiating their roles. However, many of us have not seen womanhood and motherhood modeled for us in the ways we are currently experiencing these identities. For example, many millennial women—myself included—grew up with mothers as the primary caregivers and managers of domestic labor. As mothers ourselves now, some of us are in the workforce and share domestic labor with the rest of our family.

This interest in the intersections between Christianity and feminism led me to read many books about the fact that women have been leaders in the church since the beginning of Christianity (see Torjesen, 1993). I have been hearing women's stories about faith deconstruction; in other words, many women I know have left their childhood churches because of traumatic doctrines they were handed. Most of these women have come back to Christianity, but not to the same communities from their childhood. Many of them have redefined what it means to be a "Christian" and a "woman" for themselves. I want these women's stories to be told.

Dominant Christianity told women that to be feminine means to be soft and nurturing. However, feminism told us that we need to adapt to a masculine system to be deemed valuable. Women are deemed "successful" when we climb corporate ladders, achieve academically, and become economically prosperous. We are uplifting a system that does not like us, or at least does not look like us fully. These can be fulfilling journeys, but women have been told the masculine path—assertiveness and external achievement—is the best path. Christianity and feminism have contradicting messages. I want women's experiences to speak for themselves.

In addition to being a woman and a feminist, I am an educator. I am often frustrated when education is seen as only a means to obtain a career and a paycheck. Douglas Rushkoff—a media theorist—says this about education:

It's a wonderful idea that we want kids to be able to get jobs...but since when is education about getting jobs? Education wasn't about getting jobs. Education was compensation for a job well done. The idea of public education was for coal miners who worked in the coal mines all day, and then they'd come home and they should have the dignity to be able to read a novel and understand it. Or the intelligence to be able to participate in democracy. When we make it an extension of the job, what are we really doing? We're just letting corporations externalize the cost of training their workers.

Exploring literacy education in a setting where transformation is seen as a primary goal is interesting to me. Religious literacy education has less to do with careers and jobs, and more to do with learning and community.

Purpose and Significance

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study is to use narrative inquiry methods to examine the ways Christian education experiences of millennial mothers have shaped their understandings of gender, and the ways these mothers are choosing to educate or not educate their child[ren] about biblical texts. Religious education spaces shape identities, and parents bring these identities into their parenting philosophies and practices. Christian education settings are shifting in light of emerging feminist interpretations of biblical texts, and we are seeing more “third spaces” emerge. These shifts taking place—along with the experiences and identities of these mothers—help inform the ways these mothers immerse, or do not immerse, their chil[ren] in

Christian education settings. This study will collect stories of millennial mothers concerning their understandings of gender and biblical literacy education.

Significance of the Problem

Dominant understandings of the Bible are being challenged, and Christian education settings are changing as a result. Voloshinov (1973) states, “History knows no nation whose sacred writings or oral tradition were not to some degree in a language foreign and incomprehensible to the profane” (p. 74). In other words, sacred texts are often only seen to have value within the sacred community. Edwards (2015) complicates this notion by criticizing the quantitative studies conducted concerning biblical literacy rates, many of which claim that biblical literacy is on the decline; however, Edwards (2015) argues, “Popular culture [is] in a constant state of...reinterpreting biblical stories, characters and figures” (p. ix). She goes so far as to ask, “Could the situation be more complex than the quantitative research has reported to date?” (Edwards, 2015, p. ix). The Bible is something that appears to have interest to both sacred communities and to popular culture.

Biblical literacy is a complicated topic that demands a nuanced and qualitative research approach. No matter an individual's view on the Bible, it is obvious the dominant teachings surrounding biblical texts have influenced many facets of society and shape individuals' identities (Rosowsky, 2015, p. 174), including people's and society's ideas of “womanhood” and “motherhood.” These concepts can be shaped by biblical literacy practices.

Religion and literacy practices coexist. Rosowsky (2015) discusses three vital literacy studies which have faith literacies at their core (pp. 172-173), showing that literacy as it relates to religious practices and ideologies are central to literacy education scholarship. However, Rosowsky (2015) goes on to state that scholarship in faith literacy spaces remains “peripheral

and marginali[z]ed” (p. 175), and faith literacies related to syncretic learning need further research (pp. 177-178). Syncretic learning is the ability to learn in seemingly contradicting spaces. For example, syncretic learning is when a child’s literacy practices in church differ from their literacy practices in school (Rosowsky, 2015, pp. 177-178). Relevant to this project is the fact that many women are told directly or indirectly what it means to be a woman in their Christian education spaces, but their experiences in other spaces contradict these teachings; this project addresses syncretic learning and can therefore help contribute to this gap in the scholarship.

Religious spaces are “one of the most widely distributed contexts for literacy practices” (Rosowsky, 2015, p. 172), and the landscape of faith literacies is changing as more underrepresented people and communities interpret the texts through their lenses. The dominant teachings surrounding biblical texts come from male perspectives, but women are changing the way these texts are engaged with. The role women and mothers are playing in how the next generations will interpret these texts and experience faith literacy has not been thoroughly explored. Including the voices of mothers through narrative inquiry methods into this body of scholarship is an important contribution.

This study provides an opportunity for an underrepresented group—women—to share their experiences in Christian education settings, their definitions of “womanhood” and “motherhood”, and how they are choosing to educate their children about Christianity. This study can contribute to the growing scholarship of existing stories from nondominant voices in Christianity. The women interviewed shed light on the many forms “third spaces” can take. Christian leaders can use this research to help their educational efforts evolve ,and to become more inclusive and creative in their Christian communities.

Research Questions

This research explores the narratives of millennial mothers who have experienced a Christian education at any point in their life, how this education shaped their identities as women and mothers, and how they are raising their own children. The following research questions are examined:

1. What are the life stories of these millennial mothers who have experienced Christian education and theological deconstruction?
2. What kind of lived experiences do these millennial mothers say they have had that contribute to their understandings of womanhood and motherhood?
3. How do these millennial mothers bring their womanhood to their biblical readings?
4. How are these millennial mothers raising their child[ren] as it relates to religious education?

Theoretical Framework

Religion, like most of society, is patriarchal in nature. Mohanty (2003) argues, “The rise of religious fundamentalisms [have] deeply masculinist...rhetoric [which] poses a huge challenge for feminist struggles around the world” (p. 229). Feminism as a term “was coined in 1837 by the utopian philosopher and radical socialist Charles Fournier (1772-1837) as a reaction to the organized forms of activism for supporting women’s suffrage” (Malinowska, 2020, p. 1). Feminism is a Western movement and inherently flawed, which will be discussed later. With that being said, the movement is usually discussed in its four waves. The first-wave of feminism began in the early 1800s and continued into the early 1900s, and it was primarily concerned with women’s “rights for work, education, property, reproduction, marital status, and social agency...[and] women’s entitlement to vote” (Malinowska, 2020, p.2) . The second-wave of

feminism was from the 1960s to 1980s, and “focus[ed] on women’s work and family environment...[and] gender roles and women’s sexuality” (Malinowska, 2020, p. 3). In the early 1990s, the internet led to the beginning of the third-wave of feminism (Malinowska, 2020). Women used the internet to write blogs, create and share content, and centralize the female experience. The fourth-wave of feminism began in the 2010s, “social media became a real catalyst for the fight against women’s harassment, professional discrimination, media sexism, and gender shaming” (Malinowska, 2020, p. 6).

Millennials—the demographic in this study—exist during a specific historical moment in the context of feminism. We were born into a post-first-wave culture, meaning we were born into a western world in a time when women could work, become educated, own property, have some control of our reproductive lives and marital status, and vote. Additionally, we find ourselves in a time when feminist discourse revolves around shame when it comes to gender. These things can be experienced throughout society, including in religious settings as seen in this research study.

Research on women’s experiences in a historically male-dominated space like Christian education settings must be looked at using a feminist theoretical lens. However, feminist theory is too broad of a lens to look at this research through, so this project will use Maureen Murdock’s (1990) *The Heroine’s Journey* as its theoretical framework. The Heroine’s Journey comes out of Murdock’s (1990) experience in the second wave of feminism in the early 1970s (p. xii), which had a focus on equality among the sexes. This focus on equality led to many women finding themselves assimilating to masculinity, rather than working towards “feminine” traits being seen as valuable. Downing, who wrote the foreword to Murdock’s (1990) *The Heroine’s Journey*, writes about Murdock being “attuned to the struggles of women who...have succeeded in a world dominated by masculine values and yet come to find that success meaningless and

themselves spiritually empty” (p. xiii). Women being forced to adapt to masculine narratives is the concept that birthed *The Heroine’s Journey*.

To understand *The Heroine’s Journey*, Joseph Campbell’s (1990) *The Hero’s Journey* must first be understood. *The Hero’s Journey* outlines a pattern present throughout myths, stories, and narratives. Campbell (1990) theorizes that all myths are connected to the human psyche and experience. He explains that the general journey a character goes on begins with a call to an adventure, which leads to the conquering of a crisis, and ends with the character coming home as a transformed person (Campbell, 1990). There are many predictable patterns within this journey, shown in Appendix A: *The Hero’s Journey*. *The Hero’s Journey* is often used to help writers and anybody engaging with story-telling. This research project is grounded in narrative inquiry, so this would be a beneficial theoretical lens to utilize. However, there is a problematic shortcoming in *The Hero’s Journey*.

The Hero’s Journey has been critiqued from many scholarly disciplines; the most relevant critique to this research project is the feminist counterargument—*The Heroine’s Journey*. Maureen Murdock (1990) discusses her personal and professional entry into her work by stating, “I had worked as a family therapist and as a teacher of creative writing using the pattern of the hero’s journey described by Joseph Campbell but found it spiritually lacking—it did not address the deep wounding of the feminine on a personal or cultural level” (p. xv). Women’s experiences have not only been missing from the stories and narratives of our culture, but also in the very way we see story-telling being conducted. *The Hero’s Journey* is masculine in nature in that it focuses on masculine traits like taking action and conquering. Murdock (1990) argues that “women’s lives have a mythology that is different from men’s” (p. xv). This resulted in her creating *The Heroine’s Journey*.

To be clear, Murdock (1990) is not claiming that there is a stark line between masculinity and femininity. Masculine and feminine traits exist in everybody, but what culture has deemed “masculine” has been overvalued while what has been deemed “feminine” has been undervalued. Murdock (1990) describes femininity as home for many women, but also says that we do not need to stay home all of the time (p. 2). In other words, women have been assimilating to masculinity and therefore abandoning the feminine aspects of their identity. This has led to a feeling of abandonment and loss of identity.

As Murdock (1990) listened to the stories of her clients and friends, she found that many women were what she calls “a father’s daughter—a woman who has identified primarily with the father, often rejecting the mother, and who has sought attention and approval from the father and masculine values” (p. 4). Eventually, many of these women describe a journey they have gone on and continue to be on to unlearn this way of identifying with the world. The Heroine’s Journey eventually emerged.

The Heroine’s Journey includes stages leading to transformation similar to The Hero’s Journey; however, the patterns present in The Heroine’s Journey do not include taking action and conquering. A masculine journey is an external and actionable journey, while a feminine journey is an internal and spiritual journey. The Heroine’s Journey includes the following stages (Murdock, 1990, p. 5), also seen in Appendix B: The Heroine’s Journey.

1. Separation from the feminine
2. Identification with the masculine and gathering of allies
3. Road of trial: meeting ogres and dragons
4. Finding the illusory boon of success
5. Awakening to feelings of spiritual aridity: death

6. Initiation and descent to the Goddess
7. Urgent yearning to reconnect with the feminine
8. Healing the mother/daughter split
9. Healing the wounded masculine
10. Integration of masculine and feminine

There are subsequent writings emerging from Murdock's (1990) work. For example, Sarah Durhman Wilson (2022) book, *Maiden to mother: Unlocking our archetypal journey into the mature feminine*, gives voice to her Heroine's Journey and reclaims her femininity. These reclaimings of feminine narratives are essential for all disciplines, making The Heroine's Journey a valuable theoretical lens to examine narratives issues through.

Murdock (1990) argues that "so many women [have] taken the hero's journey, only to find it personally empty and dangerous for humanity" (p. 10). The Heroine's Journey provides a framework for the stories of many women's experiences. Using this as a theoretical framework for this research project allows for an empowerment of women's voices and a deeper focus of women's narratives. Murdock (1990) states, "women have embraced the stereotypical male heroic journey and have attained academic, artistic, or financial success" (p. 1). On the contrary, womanhood has been defined differently in some Christian education settings. Understanding these seemingly contradicting identity-forming cultures can be explored through The Heroine's Journey archetypal framework.

Background, Positionality, and Role of Researcher

First and foremost, it is important to note that I am currently leaving a deconstruction phase of my life. For nearly a decade, I have been critical of Christianity. I am entering a reconstruction phase when it comes to church, faith, and biblical texts. As Sarah Bessey (2013)

says in her book *Jesus Feminist*, “I practiced anger and cynicism, like a pianist practices scales, over and over. I *practiced* being defensive...Like many of us, I called it critical thinking to hide my bitter and critical heart” (pp. 5-6). She goes on to say, “I won’t desecrate beauty with cynicism anymore...I will practice, painfully, over and over, patience and peace until my gentle answers turn away even my own wrath” (Bessey, 2013, p. 6). Like Sarah Bessey, I want this project to be less critical and more about gentle truths. I don’t want this project to have an angry posture. Instead, I want mothers to share their experiences without the filter of my historically critical lens.

The axiological (what we value) assumption I make as a researcher is that objectivity does not exist. Subjectivity, if made as transparent as possible, can be a strength and contribute to the methodological process. I have a feminist epistemology (how we know what we know) because I believe gender identity is often at the root of how we come to understand and navigate the world. Gender identity is one of many social factors that I believe shift reality, meaning I have a constructionist ontological (what reality is really like) position. I believe my identity as “woman” is always up for interpretation in the same way I believe Christianity and biblical texts are always up for interpretation. Reality is interpreted based on our identities, and my reality, and therefore research, is shaped by me being a woman and a mother, a Christian, and a writer.

I am a woman and a mother

Womanhood is a story, a script women have been given. What it means to be a woman is a script I was handed as a child. I was raised with the belief that strength and value came from “masculine” traits—assertiveness, logic, obedience. As a result, my identity became rooted in masculine traits. There is nothing wrong with masculine traits. All gender expressions have these traits to varying degrees. However, I spent my 20s feeding the masculine energies in me, and as a

result ended up suppressing the feminine energies. Then, in my 30s, I became a mother to two daughters. I had an identity crisis. I suddenly started to experience the “feminine” traits I had been unconsciously taught to suppress—tenderness, creativity, surrender. Motherhood healed the femininity within me, the traits that society tells people are less than. When my daughter chooses a doll over legos to play with, I still struggle. I am re-teaching myself what it means to be a woman. I have gone through my own Heroine’s Journey (see Murdock, 1990), which informs my research greatly.

I am a Christian

Feminist issues are at the core of my identity and this research; however, I also identify as a Christian. On the surface, these identities may seem like contradicting ways of being and ways of knowing, but to me they are interlinked. I began going to church when I was 28 years old and recently divorced. I began attending various churches, and I got to one with a female pastor who was also divorced. This was my first time realizing there are many ways to be a Christian, not only the dominant way rooted in patriarchal and masculine values. It is also important to note that my husband is a pastor.

I am a writer

There are many qualitative methods that could examine how Christianity and womanhood are being experienced by millennial women today. However, I am a story-teller and writer. More specifically, I am a poet and plan to use my love for writing by using narrative inquiry for this research. My writing helps inform my always changing ideas of womanhood, motherhood, and Christianity. I wrote this poem in 2021 shortly after my first daughter was born:

Woman

I don’t know what it means to be woman,
but I know you are watching me
as I put on my lip gloss in the morning.

I know there is a fine line between
being healthy and dieting,
and I walk it.
I have lipstick in 7 shades of pink,
but I don't want you to grow up to think
that this is what it means to be woman.
What does it say about me
that I cringe when I see advertisements for dolls on the tv,
but high heels and flamingo lips make me feel powerful?
I don't know what it means to be woman,
but I do know that woman is powerful.
Some people will read you a story
about two characters named Adam and Eve,
and they will try to convince you that woman is cursed,
that her punishment will be a painful childbirth.
But creating life from the inside out
is the closest to God I've ever been,
and the happiest people I know
have first felt the greatest pain.
I tried not to be woman,
tried on a brand of feminism once
that told me feminine somehow equals weak,
but Love found me out,
softened me until I could not break,
like an awkward silence or a pinky promise.
All these years I've been trying to be hard,
but motherhood melted me back into my original form:
woman.
All these years I've been searching for a woman's heart,
but you, my daughter,
hear it every night when I hug you before bed
beating in my own chest.

I wrote this poem in the same year about my identity as an academic and as a Christian:

Pastor's Wife

I am an academic, a professor,
only a few years away from being called doctor.
I am also a pastor's wife
raising the preacher's daughter.

I am coexisting in the academy and the church,
but there is a fine line between a sermon and a lecture.
Both can all be called “cult” if you hold it up to the light just right,
see-through as stained glass and library windows.
Sometimes, I don’t know how to worship a God
with followers like this.
I don’t know how to walk up to an alter
without first having an existential crisis,
without being critical and first analyzing.
I’ve heard the words of Jesus being weaponized,
Christians forgetting that we sold slaves
like guns and sugar,
all the while using scripture as our evidence,
forgetting about the melanin in our own Messiah.
It’s all just scripture-sanctioned business.
Just look at the profit found in prisons.
Look at people selling salvation like blood diamonds.
Cleanliness is next to godliness,
which must be why churches keep sweeping things
under the rug.
I say that I don’t believe in the devil,
but I’ve seen the demons hiding behind drunk men’s eyes.
I know that for many, steeples symbolize evil.
I know this is all true.
But church is also the place
where I first learned about forgiveness,
where I learned how to give and receive grace.
Church is the place where I learned
to stop asking why the addiction
and to start asking why the pain,
to notice that the winners of tug-of-war
are still brush-burned palms
falling into the mud.
What the church had been calling prayer,
I had been calling poetry.
I know that church can be
both a place of pain and a place of peace.
I know all of the damage religion can do,
but I’ve seen the healing, too.
So for now,

I am going to keep learning how
to hold onto these two contradicting truths.

I use the phrase “pastor’s wife” in this poem as a commentary to the fact that historically and today, “pastor’s wife” is often an identity in itself. I do not identify as a “pastor’s wife.” In fact, I reject this phrase any time somebody refers to me this way. My husband is a pastor, and he was in graduate school as I worked on this project. I spent many hours listening to his online seminary classes as background noise as I wrote many pages of this project. While I don’t identify as a “pastor’s wife,” I do have to admit that the access to information, learning, and clergy conversations I have had has impacted my perspective on this project in many ways. For example, listening to his classes and reading through some of his textbooks has helped me realize the important role a pastor has in a biblical literacy setting. Biblical texts require a deep and critical reading if the reader wants to have a full understanding of the meaning of the text. These texts were written thousands of years ago. The stories were written during times and in cultures very different from our own. Furthermore, biblical texts were written in other languages, were translated many times, were sometimes altered at the hands of empires and power structures with agendas, and have been interpreted and taught by many different groups and peoples. Being married to a pastor has led to my understanding that a religious leader with in-depth knowledge about the Bible is necessary.

I share these parts of my identity and these poems in an effort to show how I wrestle with these identities. My research is a narrative inquiry into mothers and their identities as women and as Christians (or former Christians). I believe there is no one way to be a woman, a mother, or a Christian. However, I also believe examining the way these culturally constructed identities inform each other is relevant and valuable, specifically in the ways religious education is being practiced.

Relevant Terms

Christian education

What I am calling “Christian education” is sometimes referred to as “faith literacy” (Rosowsky, 2015). These are literacy spaces “characteri[z]ed by the centrality of a text (often ancient)...[and] practices as integral to identity, collective and individual” (p. 169). These spaces may include but are not limited to sermons, Bible studies, Sunday School, youth groups, private Christian schools, homeschooling, other teachings in the home, books, or podcasts. These literacy education spaces shape identity.

Biblical literacy

Christian education refers to the *spaces* where individuals and communities learn, while biblical literacy refers to the practices that occur within these spaces. The definition of biblical literacy and its role in society continues to be debated. Edwards (2015) complicates this in her work by discussing the many disagreements about what a biblically literate person is. Biblical literacy in practice may look like reading a book or listening to a podcast where biblical texts are central to the theme of the book or podcast episode. Biblical literacy may also refer to listening to a sermon during a church service, engaging in conversation during an adult Bible study meeting, or participating in an activity during a Sunday School class or youth group gathering. It is impossible to list every way biblical literacy could manifest in practice. In the context of this research project, biblical literacy is the practice that takes place within Christian education settings where a biblical text is central to the focus of the practice.

Third space

Borrowing from scholarship by Bhabha (1994) and Ladson-Billings (1995), third spaces refers to a new, shared learning spaces where traditional understandings of identity are

challenged and new understandings emerge. Third spaces in the context of faith education and feminism emerge when women, among others, gather to create new understandings of a text and space that were previously male-dominated.

Millennial

Pew Research Center (Dimock, 2019) defined millennials as anybody born between the years of 1981 and 1996, as seen in Appendix C: The Generations. This research project will use this definition of millennial.

Woman and mother

The definitions of woman and mother are left up for interpretation for the purposes of this research project. Research participants will be asked how their own understandings of woman and mother have been shaped, so these words are purposefully left undefined. This research focuses on womanhood and motherhood; however, it does not support binary gender assumptions. There is additional research needed on the experiences and biblical interpretations from members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Additionally, this research project focuses on the experiences of mothers. There are many ways to be a mother; for example, some people become mothers by giving birth and others become mothers through adoption. This project leaves the definitions of woman and mother open for research participants. The research participants in this study include people who self-define as “woman” and “mother.”

Organization of Study

Narrative inquiry will be used to collect data and to analyze data. This methodology will be used to collect the stories of five millennial mothers who have been or currently are immersed in a Christian education setting. Interviews will be conducted with each participant to answer the research questions of this study.

This research is rooted in feminism and the belief that women have been harmed by being left out of dominant biblical literacy practices for too long. McIsaac Bruce (2008) writes about narrative inquiry as a “holistic and creative approach” (p. 325) to research. She elaborates by discussing narrative methods as empowering and a means to “claim...voice and power” (p. 325). Women have been robbed of their voice and of their power in relation to the historically male-dominated practices of Christian education and biblical literacy. Narrative inquiry is a way to contribute to the reclaiming of voice and power. Furthermore, narrative inquiry is, as McIsaac Bruce (2008) describes, a spiritual approach to research. This research project focuses on people’s experiences in a Christian setting; a research methodology that does not allow for complex and nuanced experiences often present in spiritual settings would fall short for this study.

In addition to using narrative inquiry because of its creative, empowering, and spiritual potential, an arts-based method will be used to communicate the findings of the research. Academic discourse is not the only productive means to communicate. Academia often values logic and meaning-making that can be communicated directly. Art moves towards emotion and subjectivity, and is a valuable means of meaning-making. Art remains a vital part of the human experience. There are millions of people who gather weekly for the sake of religious worship. These spaces contain art—music, lyrics, sculptures, stained glass windows, etc. For this reason, art is an obvious medium to help communicate the findings that arise from the narrative inquiry for this project.

More specifically, the findings will be presented poetically. Faulkner (2017) discusses poetry as a feminist practice by stating, “Poets do not offer solutions...They offer a depth of understanding” (p. 91). This research, too, does not offer solutions, but a better understanding of

these mothers and their nuanced experiences. Faulkner (2017) goes on to support poetry's relevance for this project when she states, "Poetry that gives voice to gendered experiences can be a form of poetic consciousness-raising" (p. 91). A line from one of her poems says:

poetry was consciousness-raising;
poetry was theory,
private and public
emotion and intellect.

(Faulkner, 2017, pp. 91-92)

Poetry and biblical literacy have overlaps in these ways. Both can be consciousness-raising. Both can be theoretical. Both are simultaneously private and public. Most importantly, both poetry and biblical literacy involve emotion and intellect. Poetry is a way to communicate both emotion and intellect.

The organization of this study incorporates narrative inquiry and poetry. These two things are in alignment because both are concerned with specificity found in stories and specific moments in time. Leavy (2020) says, "a poem can be understood as evoking a snippet of human experience" (p. 85), which is what this research is doing. Millennial mothers will be interviewed to discover the "snippet[s] of human experience[s]" (Leavy, 2020, p. 85) they have had in relation to the research questions outlined in this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This research explores the narratives of millennial mothers who have experienced a Christian education at any point in their life, how this education shaped their identities as women and mothers, and how they are raising their own children. This is based on the argument that biblical literacy impacts womanhood and motherhood, and vice versa. The scholarship surrounding this research involves millennials as a demographic, how the Bible impacts identity, feminist understandings of biblical texts, and spaces where biblical literacy practices take place.

Millennials and Religion

Human beings have intersectional identities. We are nuanced and complex. We cannot easily fit into categories or be generalized. With that being said, we still try to categorize humans to make sense of human behaviors and identities. One way to categorize people's general behaviors is by analyzing generations. The national and global catastrophes a group of people live through in their formative years can influence a generation's behavior and attitude moving forward in their life times. For example, the identities of millennials are shaped by the aftermath of 9/11, which in many cases has formed a strong correlation between religion and violence for this generation. (Bauman et al., 2014, p. 305). Additionally, Bauman et al. (2014) discusses the ways "being continuously connected to information, online social networks, and people and places around the globe via increasingly customizable digital technology is an inherent facet of what it means to be human" (p. 301), and this is impacting the way this generation learns and engages with learning spaces—including religious educational spaces. Bauman et al. (2014) looks at millennial students in North American universities to overview the literature discussing the challenges religious educators face when teaching religious studies and theological studies to

millennial students, and the findings raise more questions than answers about millennials and religious education while acknowledging there is a gap between faculty goals and millennial student identities. Similarly, Walvord (2008) discusses religious classes in higher education and the attitudes of instructors compared to the attitudes of students by stating that faculty have the goal of critical thinking, while millennial students have the goal of personal faith formation. Generations can often be at odds with each other.

This is evident in generation X's reputation for not trusting the government or churches and millennials' greater trust in these institutions (Walvord, 2008). Contradictingly, Pantou (2017) states, "it is becoming increasingly difficult to involve young people in church services and activities, [not because of] a shift in how they view religion [but] because of changed parenting methods, increased democratic decision-making in family life and the society changing rapidly" (p. 2). Pantou (2017) goes on to describe this change by saying, "In the past, and especially in the global south, sources of authority were parents, teachers, church leaders and the Bible. The youth of today choose to whom they are willing to listen" (p. 2). The views concerning authoritative figures of the millennial generation impact many educational settings, including religious settings. Millennials view connecting to different Christian denominations differently than former generations, largely because of the global world they were born into (Pantou, 2017) and the access to information they have without engaging with authority figures. The way this generation engages or does not engage with religious institutions is impacted, and so is their use of biblical texts.

Lemons (2017) says that millennials' use of the Bible is paradigm shifting. Lemons (2017) examines millennial college students in the southeastern region of the United States by using Ralph Turner's theory of self-conception to understand how millennials exegete the Bible

and how they apply their exegetical model to the social issue of same-sex marriage. The findings include a statement for further research about the spiritual lives of American millennials, because the research on this demographic as it relates to religion is lacking.

However, there are some scholars researching this demographic. Smith and Snell (2009) explore the religious lives of millennials and claim this generation is less religious than former generations as teenagers, but are not dramatically less religious as young adults than former generations dating back to the 1970s. Additionally, they found that millennials with a college education are more likely to be religious (Smith & Snell, 2009). Ford et al. (2021) recently explored the lives of millennials aged 18-35 in the UK by using surveys to learn about their relationships with the Bible, and they state, "The people who were most likely to engage positively with the Bible were churchgoing digital millennials" (Ford et al., 2021, p. 104).

While there are many millennials who engage positively with the Bible, there are still many who do not. Reed (2016) teaches a college class on the New Testament and faces the challenges of making the 16-week class relevant to millennials. The Bible is less valuable to millennials than former generations, but millennials tend to value other relevant things--like morality, materialism, financial stability, diversity, and tolerance (Reed, 2016, pp. 157-158). Teachers of biblical studies to millennials should take these values into consideration. Reed (2016) decides the Bible can be taught as "a rhetorical device" (p. 162). He goes on to state, "Our job then is to shake that comfort with a dose of an actual contextual understanding of the text" (Reed, 2016, p. 162), and he asks critical questions: "What purpose does it serve? Who does it benefit? Who does it exclude, and to what end?" (Reed, 2016, p. 162). The author argues that asking these questions will challenge millennial students, engage them based on their

generational values, and show that the Bible can be useful as examples of human experiences and as a resource for millennials.

Another relevant finding for this dissertation project is that Ford et al. (2021) concludes, "...survey data showed that young mothers were more religious and Bible orientated than those adults who had no children" (pp. 111-112). The millennial generation is one identity that shapes how religious education and biblical literacy is valued or not valued. Motherhood is another layer of identity that shapes how people engage with biblical texts. The next section will display the many ways an individual's or a group's identity plays a role in biblical literacy.

Bible and Identity

I heard a story once about children in a Sunday School class. Their pastor—a woman—was also their Sunday School teacher, and she decided to have another pastor—a man—visit to teach one of the lessons. The kids were playing when he walked into the room, and they all got quiet and timid. One of the students whispered, "I didn't know boys could be pastors."

Identity is culturally constructed. The brain is a cultural organ. Our beliefs and understandings of the world are often based on what we are exposed to. These children were growing up with a woman pastor. They were never exposed to a male pastor, and therefore didn't know it was possible, or at least didn't think about it as a possibility. Similarly, the way biblical texts are taught are seen as normal—until we grow into the awareness of our identities and begin to look differently at the texts. This is an aspect of what is often referred to as "faith literacies." Rosowsky (2015) defines faith literacies "as a term used here and elsewhere...to denote literacy practices taking place in settings that can be broadly understood as faith-based...[and are] characterized by the centrality of a text (often ancient)" (p. 169). Furthermore, Rosowsky (2015) states that faith literacy continues to be widely practiced globally. When discussing current

research, Rosowsky (2015) states, "It is a little odd that...the study of faith literacy practices, with a few recent exceptions, still remains a peripheral and marginalised topic within the academic literature" (p. 175) and discusses faith literacy as an identity-forming practice. While this area of literary education is lacking in the research, as argued by Rosowsky (2015), there are some scholars engaging in this inquiry as it related to identity formation. For example, Elster (2003) states, "Using evidence from religious reading practices, I argue that authority, performance, and interpretation are culturally and historically defined" (p. 667). Our identities and the way we interpret biblical texts matters. Elster (2003) uses the example of politics to make this point: "National leaders will continue to use sacred texts to lend spirituality authority to their words. Understanding how we read sacred texts will be part of understanding how we live in the world of the 21st century" (p. 665). Additionally, Elster (2003) discusses globalization as a driving factor influencing our identities and the way we value or do not value sacred texts.

Sacred texts, including the Bible, play a role culturally, societally, politically, and globally. Perry and Homan (2014) explore the many ways people practice literacy individually using an international cross-case analysis of ethnographic literacy practices data, and found that biblical literacy is a part of many people's personal and literate lives. Among these findings, a few are most notable. For example, Nina "used the Bible as an instrument with which to learn to read" (Perry & Homan, 2014, p. 425) and she said, "About 10 years ago, I converted to the word of the Lord. I didn't know how to read, so I asked God to give me the wisdom to discover his writing." (Perry & Homan, 2014, p. 424). Additionally, "a woman...explained that reading the Bible helped her extend prayers to her children that might protect them from problems" (Perry & Homan, 2014, p. 440). Perry and Homan's (2014) research supports the fact that the Bible is an important part of some people's and literacy practices and identities. Rogers (2004) has similar

findings to Perry and Homan (2014). Rogers discusses the role the Bible plays in many people's literacy practices and lives using a critical discourse analysis approach. For example, Carmen Montana was considered literate in her church community as she attended Bible college courses and became a minister in her congregation, and she came to the GED class with many literacy experiences related to the Bible" (Rogers, 2004, p. 277). Additionally, "in the family and community domain, reading the Bible and other texts associated with church was an important literacy activity that Natasha shared with her children" (Rogers, 2004, p. 287). Rogers (2004) goes on to discuss Lance and what he uses his literacy skills for in life: "Lance is a minister in the church where he grew up. He recently studied for and passed a test to be ordained as a minister. Prior to being ordained, he served his church by delivering sermons, teaching Sunday school and Bible lessons" (p. 288). Lance drove tractor-trailers and learned to read so he could read road signs and directions (Rogers, 2004), and his engagement with religious literacy in his church shows that biblical literacy is functional for him. There is no shortage of examples of people engaging with the Bible as an identity-forming and communal practice, like in the life story of Carol—"who dropped out of ninth grade and could not read basic words...She attended religious services almost every night of the week (e.g., prayer service, Bible study, choir rehearsal)" (Rogers, 2004, p. 299).

Sarroub's (2002) ethnographic study of six Yemeni American high school girls in the Yemen and Arab community in the Southend area of Davis, Michigan examines "the multiple uses of religious and secular text at school, home, and in the community" (p. 130). This study examines the use of sacred texts, not solely the Bible, and is still relevant to help showcase how sacred texts can shape identities—and vice versa. The way these girls' identities were formed and made sense of in their varying contexts is telling: "In-betweenness describes the textual space in

which Yemeni American girls make sense of their lives as high school students and good Muslim daughters, sisters, and mothers" (Sarroub, 2002, p. 130). Sarroub explains "The hijabat dealt with conflicting visions of literacy on a daily basis...striving to be both American and Yemeni, boy or girl, could be a struggle...[and] Knowing the Qur'an and being modest bestowed grace upon the individual" (p. 145). Rosowsky's (2013) comparative textual analysis of a teaching resource used in Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh schools in the United Kingdom is also not solely about the Bible, but still about sacred texts and makes the same point as Sarroub—sacred texts and identities are intertwined. The standards of literacy, and therefore the standards of the students, in religious educational settings surrounding sacred texts can be different than seen in more secular literacy settings. Rosowsky (2013) believes, "What may be more interesting for researchers is to ascertain the symbolic value of learning to read the religious classical which is possibly more important than the eventual outcome in terms of reading competence" (p. 77). When children are taught to value symbols of a text rather than only the literal transfer of meaning of a text, this can shape not only an individual but also a culture. The way a group reads has implications.

This can be seen in the way American Evangelicals read and interpret biblical texts. Juzwik (2014) discusses the ways in which this group reads the Bible and how this is central to their group identity. As the Bible relates to literacy practices, Juzwik (2014) views the Bible as "a literary artifact" (p. 341) and makes the claim: "Framing evangelical Biblicism...as a set of literate and rhetorical resources stands to contribute to...understanding how religious faith and tradition shape language and literacy learning as a socio-culturally and historically situated practice, both within and outside of formal schooling" (p. 339). American Evangelicals are a socially and historically situated group engaging with and interpreting the Bible in

identity-forming ways, and Juzwik argues that there is a “need for scholarship on how young people practice and learn to participate in...Christian literacies" (p. 344).

The above research shows the many ways in which the Bible shapes identities. However, the opposite is also true—identities shape the Bible. In other words, individuals' identities and experiences shape the way biblical texts are interpreted and re-interpreted. Scholefield (2000) discusses “women's absence from official dialogue [concerning the Bible]...Men's experiences and accounts of Judaism, Christianity and so on should not be treated as normative within inter-faith dialogue” (pp. 71-72). Scholefield (2000) tells a story about a conference where "Russian Orthodox Christians began to explore the topic of Jews and Judaism in the light of Auschwitz and the Gulag" (p. 72), but some were unwilling to hear marginalized Jewish and female voices. She argues that women move through the world differently than men, and therefore women should be engaged in inter-faith dialogue to contribute to the interpretation and meaning-making processes, and she claims, “Just as Christian feminists are struggling against patriarchal elements within Christianity, so too are Jewish feminists struggling against patriarchal elements within Judaism" (Scholefield, 2000, p. 78). Scholefield (2000) and Keary (2016) both state the importance of female stories in biblical literacy settings. Keary's (2016) study uses interviews with 13 sets of mothers/daughters and an autoethnography to explore Catholic and women identities, and states, "Over centuries patriarchal discourses have constructed and invaded the concept of motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship...including religious discourses” (p. 187). Keary (2016) discusses the ways female voices are licensed, and these stories should be invited into religious spaces to “fill the patriarchal gaps with a feminine presence" (p. 189). Keary's (2016) research is one among many calling out for femininity to be included in biblical literacy interpretation and discourse.

Feminist Readings of the Bible

There is a long history of the ways a person's gender-identity impacts the way the Bible is read and interpreted. Much of this history is still being exposed in scholarship. For example, von Greyerz (2015) writes, "Until now we have known relatively little about the role of women in Reformation movements of the early and mid-1520s" (p. 178). Von Greyerz (2015) uses Niklaus Manuel's play *Der Ablaskramer* of 1525 to expose what women were experiencing during the Reformation "because it highlights the role of seven women" (p. 178) during this time in history. "*Der Ablaskramer*" means "The Indulgence Seller", and von Greyerz's (2015) study includes two case studies—the first case study examines the play's use of women during the Reformation, and the second case study examines the play's sexual deviance. While von Greyerz's (2015) study was conducted in Switzerland, Jasper's (2015) study occurs in the United Kingdom. Jasper (2015) argues that gender bias and duality continues to exist in the western world, and religious education is often seen as "feminine" in the United Kingdom and the west—or in other words, inferior to other academic subjects. Jasper (2015) specifically states, "It is not hard then to see how the myth that "religious education" is a girl's subject might still have purchase in many people's minds, given that coding something as feminine still widely implies its lack of importance or its subordination to other privileged subjects and courses" (p. 75). These studies show that gender and religion are intertwined. Women's experiences are impacted by religious historical happenings, and religious studies itself has been gendered.

Gender has always influenced the production and the interpretation of sacred texts, including the Bible. Generations of feminists come before us, meaning there are many feminist readings of biblical texts. Pui-lan (2001) argues that "feminist theology has become a global movement" (p. 7) and that feminist theology needs to stay relevant to the younger generations

who have not experienced liberation in their lifetime. Furthermore, Bessey's (2013) work, which reads like an autoethnography, engages with biblical texts to reflect on how her experiences and her Christian education did not always match; this is true for many women reading the Bible. Bessy (2013) and Pui-lan (2001) are two among the countless scholars engaging in feminist theological research. There is no debate about the fact that gender influences interpretations of biblical texts. However, there is discussion about *how* and *why* gender influences interpretations of biblical texts.

Firstly, it is important to note that the Hebrew Bible—also known as the Old Testament for Christians—is used in Jewish and Christian faith communities. A feminist approach is used to read many of the texts found in the Bible, and there is resistance to this movement. For example, Belea (2017) uses a feminist lens to compare Orthodox Christian and Jewish women—specifically their sacred texts, the Bible and Torah—by stating, ““Challenge”, reform” or ”innovation” are not words to impress...Beyond the ritual, the intermingling between authoritative texts and the unwritten community rules, usually based on practical customs generally accepted by the community, harden the attempts to change them in favor of women” (p. 335). Feminists within some religious communities can struggle to influence change within the community. Some efforts are used to help readers see the stories in a new way. This is seen in Hurwich's (2021) study, which uses graphic novels to visually communicate stories in sacred texts. Interviews and surveys from 15 adolescents who identify as Modern Orthodox Jewish women are analyzed; these interviews and surveys center around graphic novel adaptations of biblical texts (Hurwich, 2021). Hurwich finds, “graphic novels can spark conversations concerning topics that are often explicitly or implicitly suppressed by social norms” (pp. 192-193) and the approach to “gender

equality as Jews [is different] from...gender equality as Americans" (p. 193). As Hurwich's (2021) study shows, there are many ways gendered readings of biblical texts are approached.

There is debate within feminist scholarship about what constitutes a feminist reading of biblical texts and how feminism lacks inclusion. This debate problematizes both feminist discourse and this project. Feminism lacks inclusion. Feminism as it has been constructed throughout the decades is often white feminism; that is, it does not accurately express concerns of non-white women. Collins (1996) says, "Current debates about whether black women's standpoint should be named "womanism" or "black feminism" reflect [a] basic challenge of accommodating diversity among black women" (pp. 9-10). Phillips (2006) echoes this by stating, "feminists of all colors, as well as women of color and others who question or reject feminism, have been debating the uniqueness and viability of womanism as a freestanding concept" (p. xix).

Feminism was dominated by middle-class, white women, and therefore does not speak for all women. This left many voices out, and these voices are reclaiming what it means to be a feminist. Some of this reclaiming and liberation requires new terms. Collins (1996) discusses "womanism" as ways to reclaim their experiences, oppression, and liberation. White women and black women have different histories and experiences, so "womanism" has arisen in black thought and scholarship. Similarly, Baker-Fletcher (2006) emphasizes that "a womanist is never a white woman or a white feminist, because womanism emerges from..."the real-lived experiences" of black women or women of color"" (p. 161). Emilie Townes (2006) writes a poem relevant to the way voices representing Black womanhood are rising, titled "they came because of the wailing":

they came because of the wailing
the wailing of so many voices

who had a strong song
but were choking from the lack of air
they came because of the weeping
the weeping of so many tears
that came so freely
on hot but determined faces
they came because of the hoping
the hoping of the beating heart
the fighting spirit
the mother wit tongues
the dancing mind
the world in their eyes
they came because they had no choice
to form a we
that is many women strong
and growing

With that being said, there are many strands of womanist scholarship, including womanist theology. Womanist thought at its root is connected to religion and spirituality. Phillips (2006) discusses this by stating, “womanism openly acknowledges a spiritual/transcendental realm with which human life, livingkind, and the material world are all intertwined” (p. xxvi). There is research on womanist perspectives in many religious traditions, including African American Muslim voices (see Majeed, 2006) and a Catholic womanist (see Hayes, 2006). Scholarship on womanist theology is dense with many perspectives, most—if not all—rooted in liberation and lived-experience. Harding and Harding (2006)--a mother and daughter--discuss the ways their family’s Southern African American roots impact their experiences and understandings of religion by stating, “The meaning of religion for black folks...is in the heart of our history, our trauma, and our hope” (p. 100). Hopkins (2006)--a second generation black theologian--says, “Every single theological school, seminary, divinity school, and graduate religious studies program exists to support and promote the foundations economic, political, military, and cultural way of life in the United States” (pp. 282-283). Hopkins (2006) goes on to say, “as long as we shy away from relying on...the religious institutions that helped us get over,

we remain minstrels for the white academy as it gives us exclusive backstage passes to our own black face or white face performances. This is when and where the womanist scholars enter” (p. 283). As Hopkins (2006) states, womanist theology is liberating for women of color and does what feminism does not—centers women of color and their lived experiences. Any research project using a feminist lens must acknowledge the failings of feminist scholarship—past and present.

Within feminist theological and biblical literacy research, there is a lot of research analyzing how the Adam and Eve creation story in the Hebrew Bible is analyzed through a feminist lens. Artz (2002) examines two studies—the first is Charme's study of children's reactions to the Adam and Eve narrative, and the second is Artz's study of children's reactions to Vashti in 1 Esther. The examination of both of these studies shows that the gender of children influences the way they read biblical texts (Artz, 2002). Artz states, "Girls read texts differently from boys, because they often have different experiences. Therefore, at a second level, there must be room in the religious education of children for these different ways of understanding, and that also means making it possible to work actively and come to terms with different perspectives" (p. 39). Furthermore, in Charme's (1997) study "approximately seventy grade school children from a variety of religious backgrounds were interviewed" (p. 28) about the Adam and Eve narrative. Most notably to me, when asked "Was God more angry at the woman or at the man about what they had done?" (p. 38), most of the girls and boys said "more angry at Eve" (p. 38). Adam also ate the forbidden fruit in this story, but Eve is often seen as the trouble-maker. In contradiction, when asked "Who do you think most likes to do things they're not supposed to do, boys or girls?" (p. 39), an overwhelming majority of girls and boys answer "boys do" (p. 39). This supports the idea that their understanding of this religious story does not

have a direct throughline to how they understand gender in their own lives. Charme (1997) states, "Often, children are first introduced to this biblical story at a time when their own ideas of gender and gender role identity are beginning to solidify" (Charme, 1997, p. 27), and finds that "research in the psychology of children's religious thinking has not investigated the impact of gender in any significant way, it is worth considering how the stories, characters, and plots of religious texts not only reflect the gender identities of their original authors, but also will elicit different responses from women and men as well as from girls and boys" (pp. 41-42). Similarly, Kalmanofsky (2018) discusses Adam and Eve as archetypes and argues that the Bible protects patriarchy by lifting up masculinity, but some female biblical characters break gender norms found in the biblical world--therefore showing the possibility of other ways of arranging our social selves. Rook (2007) states in relation to the Adam and Eve story, "...the portrayal of the woman is open to being read both negatively (as weakness and culpability) and positively (as independence and initiative)" (p. 171). Gebara (2002) discusses patriarchy in the church: "The church, an institutions created and dominated by men, has interpreted women's experience of evil, whether undergone or committed by women, in a way that bears little or no resemblance to what women feel or ask for, whether in theology or within the structures of the church" (p. 3). These scholars prove there is not one interpretation of the Adam and Eve story found in the Book of Genesis, but many.

Gebara (2002) also argues that "culture imposes heavy responsibility upon women--the responsibility of feeding and educating their children..." (pp. 17-18). The Bible and womanhood impact each other; similarly, the Bible and motherhood are intertwined. Like the Bible, motherhood also has many understandings. Miller-McLemore (1996) analyzes Christian feminist theologians and family values, and argues conservatives do not own family values: "feminist

theologians have been talking about family values of a different sort for longer than many people would like to suppose, though, it hardly seems that anyone has heard or listened...

reconstructions of families, work, love, and justice have simply not reached clergy and congregations, much less families and the workplace" (p. 134). Ott (2011) states, "As a feminist, I am a mother who lives out feminism in my practice of parenting. I do not see this as necessary because of my sex or gender; I see it as necessary because it is the most ethical practice of parenting in line with my Christian values of justice seeking and neighbor love that are the foundation for a vision of the common good". A person's identity as feminist and as Christian can coexist.

Stjerna (2017) discussed the Reformation and the role of women: "Women as the birth-givers have, in Luther's opinion, the noblest of callings: motherhood...Of course, a contemporary reader recognizes the deficiency in the reformer's thinking in not recognizing the wholeness and holiness of different ways of living one's life a woman" (pp. 164-165). Martin Luther's understandings of womanhood and motherhood 500 years ago are still debated today. Understandings of womanhood and motherhood are still being debated and discussed today, also in the context of interpreting biblical texts.

Motherhood as a concept in religious education exists, meaning understandings of the role of children also exist. This can be seen in the way Elkins (2013) explores the ways children are represented in biblical texts and the implications for how children may read biblical texts—which has been termed "childism" under the umbrella of biblical studies. Elkin's (2013) argues that there is opportunity for exploration in the intersections between "childhood studies" and "feminist studies" when it comes to biblical literacy research. Feminist conversations on childism are especially fruitful, because women's flourishing is deeply connected to children's

flourishing, and vice versa" (Elkins, 2013, pp. 152-153). This is where religious education spaces where biblical literacy is taught can be explored.

Biblical Literacy Spaces

Biblical literacy spaces exist across multiple spaces—church pulpits where sermons are given, Sunday School classrooms, Bible study groups in third spaces like coffee shops, non-religious classrooms, online spaces, the home, and more. Additionally, biblical literacy spaces can overlap with other education spaces. For example, De Azevedo (2019) explores how a teacher training program in faith-based media literacy influenced teachers’ practice when addressing social justice issues in the classroom. Critical media literacy is finding its way into Christian education spaces, and therefore impacting social justice efforts in these Christian spaces. Biblical literacy spaces are becoming increasingly more complex and multidisciplinary. Iaquinto and Keeler (2012) show that religious values infiltrate our educational spaces, too. They examine the sub-field of faith-based media literacy education and state "...this article will consider how many of the assumptions, motivations, goals, and pedagogies of those Christians who are operating within a media literacy framework come together to create a unique approach to teaching those skills to both children and adults that can be defined as faith-based" (Iaquinto & Keeler, 2012, p. 12).

Church is an obvious space where biblical literacy is discussed in scholarship. Haight and Carter-Black’s (2004) "decade-long research programme exploring teaching and learning within First Baptist Church in Salt Lake City, Utah...includ[ing] an ethnographic study...an oral history of a church mother...interviews and historical analysis" (p. 196) discuss the ways African American students memorize multiple books of the Bible, understand biblical metaphors, and complete biblical literacy education tasks well; however, “these obviously intelligent, loving,

motivated, and feisty children were having difficulties in school" (p. 182). The authors discuss the ways "the church, especially Sunday School, functions as a significant context for children's socialization" and state, "Programmes designed to reach children and youth might even consider modeling effective child development strategies employed by the church as they seek to develop schemes that are tailored to meet specific, culturally relevant programmes" (Haight & Carter-Black, 2004, p. 207). Similarly, McMillon and Edwards (2004) "believe that educators have paid little or no attention to the African American Church as a literacy environment" (p. 182). Church is a literacy space for many demographics and communities.

School classrooms can also be a biblical literacy space, even when biblical texts are not viewed as sacred. Skerrett (2013) emphasizes the importance of literacy educational spaces where seemingly conflicting identities--including religious identities--can coexist in our globalized culture and states, "Teachers and students [engage] with literature that awakens religious themes for students even though teachers are often unaware of these connections or were reluctant to engage" (pp. 247-248). Religious literacies have shaped the identities of some of the students in this case study, and these religious literacies impacted this secular literacy education space (Skerrett, 2013).

Elkins (2013) discusses the commandment to honor your parents and the ways this can be problematic for a child if you come from an abusive home. In this way, the family system and home is a biblical literacy educational space. Individual, family, and community values can overlap and intertwine. This can be seen in the spaces where biblical literacy practices are occurring, like in churches, classrooms, and homes.

The findings of this study focus on the concept of "third spaces." This term was made popular in the discipline of education by Homi K. Bhabha (1994) and Gloria Ladson-Billings

(1995), and it refers to a new, shared learning space where people from different backgrounds come together and transcend their original identities. Bhabha (1994) states that these spaces challenge traditional understandings of identity and create opportunities for new understandings to emerge. Similarly, Ladson-Billings (1995) discusses third spaces as bridging the gaps between a students' cultural backgrounds and curriculum. The concept of third spaces can also be discussed and examined in relation to faith education.

People with diverse religious backgrounds are forming new spaces—intentionally or unintentionally—to foster spiritual dialogue and practices. In the context of feminist thought and practice, many third spaces are emerging where women—among others—are bridging the gaps created in the historically male-dominated biblical literacy spaces, like church.

Relationship to Study

The scholarship relating to this research project has been categorized into four categories: 1) the millennial demographic and how their relationship with religion and biblical texts, 2) the connections between the Bible and identity, 3) feminist readings of biblical texts, and 4) spaces where biblical literacy practices take place. Each of these categories is directly related to a research question of this study. The first category—millennials and religions—helps inform the first research question: What are the life stories of these millennial mothers who have experienced Christian education and theological deconstruction? Understanding the research about millennials and how they relate or do not relate to religious communities and biblical texts is foundational for this research. Next, the second category—the Bible and identity—is foundational for each of the four questions:

1. What are the life stories of millennial mothers who have experienced Christian education and theological deconstruction?

2. What kind of lived experiences do millennial mothers say they have had that contribute to their understandings of womanhood and motherhood?
3. How do millennial mothers bring their womanhood to their biblical readings?
4. How are millennial mothers raising their child[ren] as it relates to religious education?

Each of these questions is rooted in how the Bible impacts a person's sense of self, and vice versa—how a person's sense of self impacts how they relate to biblical texts and Christian spaces. The third category—feminist readings of the Bible—is also foundational for each question, but it is most relevant for the second and third research questions about womanhood. The last category—biblical literacy spaces—is important for the fourth research question about these mothers raising their child[ren] as it relates to religious education.

The spaces where religious education occurs is an important theme present in the biblical literacy scholarship, and this can help inform how the next generation is or is not learning about biblical texts. The educational spaces parents—and specifically for this study, mothers—put their children in to encourage or not encourage biblical literacy is an important factor in this research project. A mother's experiences in Christian education settings and biblical literacy spaces throughout her lifetime shapes her identity, and this can impact how a mother chooses to educate or not educate her children about the Bible.

Conclusion

Understanding how mothers are choosing to educate or not educate their children about biblical texts is a pathway to learning more about how the next generation is engaging biblical literacy education spaces. Understanding millennials as a demographic, how the Bible and identity are intertwined, feminist interpretations of biblical texts, and varying biblical literacy spaces helps set the foundation for this research. This project will collect narratives from

millennial mothers to learn their Christian education experiences, how their understandings of womanhood were shaped, and how they are choosing to teach their children about religion.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the ways Christian education experiences of millennial mothers have shaped their understandings of gender, and the ways these mothers are choosing to educate or not educate their child[ren] about biblical texts using narrative inquiry methods. The research questions guiding this project are:

1. What are the life stories of these millennial mothers who have experienced Christian education and theological deconstruction?
2. What kind of lived experiences do these millennial mothers say they have had that contribute to their understandings of womanhood and motherhood?
3. How do these millennial mothers bring their womanhood to their biblical readings?
4. How are these millennial mothers raising their child[ren] as it relates to religious education?

Research Approach

This research project will use narrative inquiry as its research approach. Narrative inquiry and educational research complement each other because, as Bruce (2008) states, there is a strong “link between life history and learning” (p. 324). Furthermore, narrative as a methodological approach “begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 67). The lived experiences and stories of millennial mothers will be collected and analyzed for this project. Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) discuss narrative inquiry as a type of qualitative research that focuses on the particular. The particular and specific stories collected and analyzed will be about how these mothers have experienced and understood gender as it relates to their biblical literacy education throughout their lives.

Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) also define narrative inquiry as sometimes focusing on “conceptions from narrative such as plotline, characterization, theme, role, and other literary terms” (p. 5). The conception from narrative being used in this study is the narrative cycle rooted in feminism, called *The Heroine’s Journey* (Murdock, 1990). *The Heroine’s Journey* (Murdock, 1990) is the theoretical lens this research project will be looking through, and it is also a specific way of viewing narratives. For this reason, the theoretical lens will play a big role in the way this narrative inquiry is approached and analyzed.

Gender and biblical literacy are nuanced and complex topics; for this reason, narrative inquiry is a necessary approach to further complicate our understanding of the overlaps between biblical literacy education and understandings of gender. Narrative researchers view stories as a performance to express a person’s identity; furthermore, these stories are an expression of identity within various sociocultural contexts (Chase, 2005). Christian biblical literacy education settings are a sociocultural context within our greater culture. Bruce (2008) makes an especially strong case for the use of narrative inquiry as it relates to religious education because of its “spiritual and liberating features” (p. 324). She defines “spiritual” as our inner worlds and internalized experiences (Bruce, 2008), which is appropriate for this project because it is using *The Heroine’s Journey* (Murdock, 1990) as a narrative structure to examine the inner processes of human experience and transformation.

This project will collect data by conducting interviews with each research participant in an effort to collect stories and narratives. The most vital aspect of narrative methodology is collecting stories from individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A narrative approach is the most relevant qualitative approach because the research questions involve specific stories and life experiences concerning the research participants. As Creswell and Poth (2018) state, “Narrative

research is best for capturing the detailed stories of life experiences” (p. 71), and that is exactly the aim of this research study and its research questions.

Additionally, a narrative approach extends to non-academic audiences (Kim, 2016, p. 88). Educational settings are often thought of first as public school settings and higher education settings. However, there are many settings where education occurs. Christian education settings, as defined in chapter 1, are educational settings where biblical literacy practices exist. It is important to choose a research approach that communicates in ways that extend beyond dominant audiences of research.

Role of the Researcher

As stated in chapter 1, the axiological (what we value) assumption I make as a researcher is that objectivity does not purely exist and subjectivity can be a strength in qualitative research, if approached with a value of transparency. Additionally, I have a feminist epistemology (how we know what we know) because I believe gender identity influences how we interpret reality, and I have a constructionist ontological (what reality is really like) position because I believe social phenomenon—like our gender and the roles we play in society—help construct reality.

These positions lead me to my role as researcher/participant. Creswell and Poth (2018) state, “there may be a strong collaborative feature of narrative research as the story emerges through the interaction or dialogue of the researcher and the participant(s)” (pp. 68-69). The relationship between researcher and participants is an important variable in narrative inquiry. Additionally, the researcher in this project is situated within the same context of the research participants—meaning I am a millennial mother who has experienced Christian education.

My own intersectional identities related to this project were discussed in chapter 1. This is an effort to address any potential biases. As a researcher, I believe bias is not inherently a bad

thing, as long as the research process directly addresses the known variables that can contribute to a bias. As a researcher/participant, parts of my own story may also be shared throughout interviews in an effort to connect and build a relationship with each participant. The subjectivity, rather than objectivity, is important for a narrative approach where the trustworthiness of the researcher needs to be established with each participant. Additionally, the findings of this research project will be communicated poetically. As the researcher, I will appear in the writing and the created poems. This means my own lived experiences and perceptions will influence the poems at times. Member-checks of the poems will be conducted to be transparent about the poetic approach.

Context/Setting of the Study

Clandinin (2013) discusses the importance of paying attention to an individual's context as it relates to their narratives. The context for the research participants for this study is not a space or community, but rather a place in time. These mothers will all be millennials who have all been educated in biblical literacy at some point in their lives. The context these participants have in common is experiencing varying biblical literacy education settings during the same generation—meaning, as millennials. This is important because the issue being explored is the identity formation of women formed in the intersection between biblical literacy education and gender, especially as it relates to parenting choices in our current generation of parents. Understandings of biblical literacy and gender evolve with each generation, so understanding the generational context of the participants—meaning millennial—is essential for this project. In fact, Creswell and Poth (2018) build on this concept by saying, “Narrative researchers [can] situate individual stories within participants’...historical contexts (time and place)” (p. 72).

The specific historical context for this study is the lifetime of the participants who exist within the millennial generation, as defined in chapter 1. There is a need for additional research to explore the specific behaviors of millennials as it relates to biblical literacy practices and how parents are / are not educating their children religiously. To support this, Lemons (2017) writes, “for over a decade, scholars have called for more research about the spiritual lives of American millennials.” The behaviors and practices of this age group is argued to be paradigm shifting (Lemons, 2017), and therefore this context situated in time is an important context to study. Furthermore, the way these mothers have approached their own biblical literacy practices matters for their overall spiritual lives; this answers Lemons (2017) call for more exploration of this generation’s spiritual practices and lives.

Study Participants

The participants are five millennial mothers who have experienced Christian education at some point in their lives.. For inclusion in this study, the participants needed to be born between the years 1981 and 1996, identify as woman and mother, and have been immersed in a Christian education setting where biblical literacy was taught as defined in chapter 1. These specific terms are defined in chapter 1.

It is important to draw attention to the fact that these women and mothers are self-identifying “women” and “mothers.” This project is exploring womanhood and motherhood specifically, but this seemingly binary language does not imply that male and female are strictly binary identities. The exploration of womanhood for this project includes and encourages the fact that womanhood is complex and self-identified.

Millennial mothers who have experienced a struggle with their faith, felt like they have grown beyond the faith they were handed, went through faith deconstruction, and/or been

transformed by their faith experiences are especially of interest to me. These women's lived experiences as it relates to gender and biblical literacy understandings are significant for the exploration of each research question. One research question aims to learn how these women are choosing to educate or not educate their children about biblical texts and immerse their children in religious education, so it is necessary for each participant to be a mother currently raising one or more child[ren].

One of the limitations of the research participant selection process is the scope of my reach. I used social media to reach out to potential participants. I posted this on Facebook:

If you are a mom born between 1981 and 1996, please read this. I am working on my dissertation for my doctorate. My research is focusing on millennial (anybody born 1981 to 1996) mothers. My research is simply trying to learn the stories of women and 1) what they have learned about what it means to be a woman throughout their lives—both in their homes and in their Christian church communities, and 2) how they are choosing or not choosing to teach their children about faith/religion. Millennial moms who have experienced a struggle with their faith, felt like they have grown beyond the faith they were handed, and/or went through faith deconstruction are especially of interest to me. I am making my list of potential interviewees now. Are there any millennial moms out there who I could interview sometime next spring? If so, message me!

After this post, I reached out to ten people, and five of them were able to schedule interviews on Zoom with me.

Data Collection Procedures

This narrative research project used interviews as the primary method of data collection, as approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB documents can be found in

Appendix D: IRB Clearance Artifacts. Each research participant participated in a 60-120 minute, in-depth interview. The timeline for interviews can be found in Appendix E: Data Collection Timeline. The interview protocol that will be used for each interview, which is modeled after Creswell and Poth's (2018) "Sample Interview Protocol or Guide" (p. 167), can be found in Appendix F: Interview Protocol. The questions in the interview protocol come from Maureen Murdock's (1998) *The Heroine's Journey Workbook*, which walks through each step of the Heroine's Journey with activities and questions. The interview followed this general protocol, but the interviews will be less structured to allow for individualization for each participant and their specific experiences and narratives.

As Creswell and Poth (2018) outline, the following steps took place: 1) gather the participants' stories, 2) transcribe the interviews, 3) collect contextual data if needed (pp. 71-72). The third step will occur if students reference specific communities, organizations, or cultures that require additional data to situate their stories. This data will be collected through church websites and publicly available information, if needed.

Interviews as the primary source of data collection are necessary for this research project because this project is centered around mothers and the ways their biblical literacy educations have helped shape their identities as women. Interviews and discussions with each participant is the best way to gather this information. Smith and Sparks (2006) discuss narrative inquiry as a methodology focusing on story-telling as a means of meaning making. There is a strong connection between the research participants' stories about the events in their lives contributing to their understandings of womanhood and narrative inquiry's focus on meaning making through story-telling. For this reason, interviews are the best method for data collection as it pertains to story-telling and the collection of narratives.

Part of the interviews with each participant included an embedded artifactual interview. As Pahl and Rowsell (2010) state, “Objects call up deep emotions” (p. 49). The Bible as an artifact may bring up specific emotions; however, for this project, a specific biblical text will be used as an artifact. Excerpts from Genesis chapters 1-3 from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible will be sent to each participant a week prior to their interview. The exact artifactual text being used for the interviews can be seen in Appendix G: Artifactual Text. This text is the Adam and Eve story, which historically has been interpreted and taught through the lens of patriarchy. This text is being used because this story has commonly been linked with gender and sexuality in our society’s discourse. The research participants will be asked to respond and react to this textual artifact with memories of what they have been told and/or with immediate reactions they have to the text itself. Pahl and Rowsell (2010) discuss at length the many ways various artifacts can serve as a starting point for participants to engage in storytelling. This research project’s focus on biblical literacy lends itself to a biblical text as an artifact to encourage story-telling.

Data Analysis Procedures

Creswell and Poth (2018) list the basic steps of qualitative research data analysis as 1) “preparing and organizing the data (i.e., text data as in transcripts) (p. 183), 2) “reducing the data into themes through a process of coding” (p. 183), and 3) “representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion” (p. 183). Step 2 is broken down into two general steps: coding each segment by giving each segment a name, and combining similar names into broader themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018, pp. 183-194). This research project will be analyzed using these general qualitative data analysis steps.

More specifically, transcripts from each interview participant will be broken into smaller excerpts. Each excerpt will be labeled with the research question(s) it pertains to. Then, each excerpt will be coded using multiple coding methods—first cycle coding, second cycle coding, narrative coding, in vivo coding, and thematic coding—all of which are discussed in detail by Saldana (2021). First, two cycles of coding will be used. Saldana (2021) describes these two cycles of coding this way: “First cycle coding is *analysis*—taking things apart. Second cycle coding is *synthesis*—putting things together into new assemblages of meaning” (p. 6). As Saldana (2021) states, “Coding is not a precise science; it is primarily an interpretive act...[and comes from] my thinking, my background knowledge, and my creativity” (p. 7), and “seem[s] to mysteriously and magically “emerge”” (p. 7). As supported by Saldana’s (2021) work, the first cycle of coding is my analysis and process of taking things apart. The second cycle of coding uses narrative coding methods, described by Saldana (2021) as “when the researcher wishes to code participant narratives from a *literary* perspective...to potentially create a richer aesthetic through a retelling” (p. 195). The second cycle coding / narrative coding method for this specific narrative research will include the project’s theoretical lens—Maureen Murdock’s (1990) *The Heroine’s Journey*, which is a narrative structure. An inductive coding method involves comparing and contrasting narratives to develop core narratives; however, this method is not the best fit with the project’s theoretical lens—*The Heroine’s Journey*. Instead, a deductive coding approach will be utilized. *The Heroine’s Journey*’s existing story structure framework (see Appendix B: The Heroine’s Journey) will be applied to the stories that emerge from the interviews. Creswell and Poth (2018) validate this approach when they discuss “plot” (p. 69) as an option for narrative analysis. Reissman (2008) also discusses structural analysis as one way to

analyze narratives. The codes for this narrative inquiry project will be reduced to the narrative stages of *The Heroine's Journey* as the themes in the second cycle codes.

Then, an in vivo coding method—the use of “words or short phrases from the participant’s own language” (Saldana, 2021, p. 365)—will be used to pull out participants “I-statements.” The project will be creating I-Poems (see McKenzie, 2021) where relevant, so “I” statements will be noted in the analysis process. I-Poems are poems that use statements from the research participants that begin with the word “I” in an effort to keep the participants’ language intact (McKenzie, 2021).

Lastly, thematic coding will be used. This method will break each excerpt into codes and then larger themes. This data analysis process in its entirety is outlined in Appendix H: Data Analysis Procedure.

Plans to Structure the Findings

The reporting of this research project will follow the steps outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 106). The introduction will focus on the participant’s stories, which is vital for narrative inquiry. A person’s relationship to religious texts is often an internal process. *The Heroine’s Journey* (Murdock, 1990) is a narrative framework that looks at an internal journey an individual goes on, rather than an external journey. For this reason, the participants’ narratives will be discussed in prose using *The Heroine’s Journey* (Murdock, 1990) as a framework to structure each narrative. The description of the procedures will state the “rationale, significance of individual to experiences, and data procedures” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 106) involved in this narrative project. Additionally, each participant’s narrative will be accompanied by “I-Poems” to preserve each participant’s language in their storytelling. The research outcomes and conclusions

will be presented through poetic restorying. This is visualized in Appendix I: Reporting Research Findings.

Poetry to communicate findings

As a qualitative researcher interested in story-telling, I am most interested in reaching both the minds and the hearts of readers. Traditional academic ways of communicating are often head-centered. The poet Robert Frost states, “There are three things, after all, that a poem must read: the eye, the ear, and what we may call the heart or the mind” (Newdict, 1937, p. 298). He goes on to say, “It is most important of all to reach the heart of the reader” (Newdict, 1937, p. 298). People’s experiences with biblical literacy are head and heart processes, meaning these spaces and experiences are often mental and emotional learning processes. Pelias (2004) similarly states, “The alchemy that separates the head from the heart finds no gold” (p. 9). This project is rooted in a literacy that is both head and heart focused; for this reason, poetry will be used to communicate the research findings. Furthermore, feminist Susan Griffin (1993) writes, “Because we think in a fragmentary way, we see fragments.” Leavy (2020) mirrors this notion by discussing poetry as “evoking a snippet of human experience...in a heightened state” (p. 85). Poetry allows narratives to be presented in the same way people often remember their stories—fragmented.

Using an artistic approach is on the rise in qualitative research methods (see Leavy, 2018). Pelias (2004) says, “Science is the act of looking at a tree and seeing lumber. Poetry is the act of looking at a tree and seeing a tree (p. 9). This narrative inquiry research project is not an effort to dissect and manipulate women’s stories, but instead to present them. Using Pelias’ reasoning, poetry is an effective way to do this. Furthermore, Leavy (2020) says, “poems open a space to represent data in ways that, for some researchers, are attentive to multiple meanings,

identity work, and amplifying subjugated perspectives” (p. 85). Cutts and Waters (2019) state that poetry can be used as the “data source, the analytical and interpretive lenses, and/or the presentation” (p. 2). Poetry as a means of presenting the findings for this project is relevant because the research questions focus around how these mothers define and form their identities as women in the context of their biblical literacy educational experiences.

This project is rooted in literacy practices, not theology. However, these two concepts in many ways are intertwined. There is a field of study called theopoetics, which has components of narrative inquiry . Hopper (1992) coined the term “theopoetics” as a means of making deeper connections and understandings with our realities. Additionally, there are many scholars across disciplines using poetry in their research methodologies. For example, Liesch (2019) uses “poetic inquiry methodology [to] explore how poetry can help nurse researchers listen more deeply while publicly sharing the lives of others in a composed, re-configured way” (p. 22). She says, “Poetry uses words to create images and explore realities” (p. 2019)--realities experienced and explored as a nurse researcher, and realities explored in the project related to people’s experiences with biblical texts, religion, and gender. Similarly, Gerber et al. (2022) explored grief in the elderly using poetic research methods. They “developed research poems based on interview transcripts as a creative form of data presentation” (Gerber et al., 2022, p. 2). They go on to explain, “This approach is based on established disciplines such as ethnography that have a strong tradition in using creative and multisensory methods to engage participants and the public in innovative ways” (Gerber et al., 2022, p. 2). More closely related to this project, poetic inquiry can also be found in education research. For example, Hanley (2013) uses poetry within the context of artography as a basis for research in social justice and education. She defines

artography by referring to the work of Springgay, Irwin, and Kind (2005) as “meaning and process made in the intersections of researcher, artist, and educator.”

I am a researcher, artist, and educator. This project meets at the intersection of these identities. I am also a doctoral student. Heaton, Burnard, and Nikolov (2020) discuss artography as a methodology for professional doctoral students. Their research “investigated artography’s use, relevance and contribution as a creative pedagogy for professional doctoral students and its capacity to forge meaningful learning connections” (Heaton, Burnard, & Nikolov, 2020, p. 54). They argue, “Learning connections were formed through relationships that were established between components of affects and acts, theory, practice and research and between artographic tasks” in an effort to further establish artography as a useful creative pedagogy...in the academy” (Heaton, Burnard, & Nikolov, 2020, p. 65). Art, including poetry, is indeed becoming more established in academic discourse—as seen throughout this literature.

This project’s feminist lens makes a poetic approach highly relevant. Madison (2005) discusses this approach as having feminist roots. Feminist researchers have been utilizing this approach, including Jeong-eun Rhee (2021). Her decolonial feminist research project explores her memories of her mother, and communicates her findings poetically (Rhee, 2021). Faulkner (2017) makes the case for poetry as a feminist practice in her autoethnographic project. She states, “Poetry that gives voice to gendered experiences can be a form of consciousness-raising” (Faulkner, 2017, p. 91). This research project, like Faulkner’s, is an effort to give voice to gendered experiences within biblical literacy educational settings.

A poetic approach is the most useful for this project. *The Heroine's Journey* (Murdock, 1990) looks at a person's process of internal change from a feminist perspective in an effort to give women a space for their voice to exist. Award winning poet, Matthew Zapruder (2017)

writes about the many reasons poetry is necessary—one reason being “The desire to write anything begins out of a basic human desire to express oneself, to be heard. Writing poetry in particular also comes out of an inexplicable attraction to the possibilities...of language itself” (p. 9). To discuss these internalized processes of transformation, abstract metaphors and images are often necessary to put language to this. Examining the language used by participants is a vital step in communicating the research findings in this way. Language from the participants and language from Maureen Murdock’s *The Heroine’s Journey* will be used to communicate and structure the findings.

Creswell and Poth (2018) state that the stories collected in narrative inquiry “may emerge from a story told to the researcher [or] a story that is co-constructed between the researcher and the participant” (p. 68). The poems created to communicate the findings for this project will use the stories from the participants, and will be written by me as the researcher. In this way, the stories will be co-constructed. Langer and Furman (2004) call this co-construction of poems “interpretive poetry.”

A more specific poetic approach to communicate the findings poetically is the creation of I-Poems. McKenzie (2021) describes I-Poems as poems that derive from research participants’ statements from the data that begin with the word “I.” McKenzie (2021) goes on to discuss the creation of I-Poems as a way to potentially “reach a wider and more diverse audience than those within and connected to academia” (p. 2). Some of the poems presented in the findings for this project will utilize I-Poems in order to keep the participants’ language intact.

Strategies for Validating Findings

There are many ways to ensure the quality and trustworthiness of qualitative research. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest “that qualitative researchers engage in *at least two* of the

validation strategies” (p. 259) of the nine they present. This project will use three of these strategies. The strategies utilized for this study involve both the researcher’s lens and the participants’ lens, and they include: 1) clarifying researcher bias, 2) seeking participant feedback, and 3) collaborating with participants.

- 1) Clarifying researcher bias–Included in chapter 1 is a section of this project that clarifies my understanding of my own relevant identities. This includes “past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the interpretation and approach to the study” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 261).
- 2) Seeking participant feedback–After analyzing the data and restorying the findings into poems, the poems will be shared with relevant research participants for reactions and feedback. This process will be discussed in the findings.
- 3) Collaborating with participants–Similar to seeking participant feedback, participants will be included in the poem-writing process. When applicable, the participants’ feedback will be included in the poem-creation process.

Additionally, the findings of this project will be communicated poetically.

Communicating the findings in this creative and artistic way is a strategy of validity and reliability in its own way. Richardson (1993) used poetry to present findings from a mother’s stories, and she says this about using poetry in research: “a poem displays how sociological authority is constructed, and problematizes reliability, validity, and truth (p. 704). She goes on to state, “Poetics strips those methodological bogeymen of their power to control and constrain, [and] resituates ideas of validity and reliability from “knowing” to “telling” (Richardson, 1993, p. 704). Women’s voices have historically been minimalized, especially in the context of the creation and interpretation of biblical texts and Christian education. Communicating the findings

poetically “strips...power” (Richardson, 1993, p. 704), which is relevant to this specific group of participants.

Potential Ethical Issues

Creswell and Poth (2018) discuss the various challenges in narrative inquiry. Specifically, they state, “researchers need to...be reflective about their own personal and political background, which shapes how they “restory” the account” (p. 73). As previously stated, my known experiences, biases, and perspectives that may be of relevance for this project will be addressed in later chapters to create transparency in this study.

Additionally, Creswell and Poth (2018) state that researchers must “have sensitivity to the needs of vulnerable populations” (p. 55). Women and mothers have historically been vulnerable members of society. For this reason, I do not want to contribute to this vulnerability. Specific steps will be taken to account for the needs of many mothers. Meaning, I will be transparent and flexible when it comes to scheduling interviews. Their children will be welcome to attend the interviews, and interruptions will be not only tolerated, but embraced. A feminist research project seeking to collect life stories of mothers must allow for the mothers to show up fully and completely—whatever this may look like for each individual mother.

Limitations of study

Biblical literacy is a literacy in motion. These womens’ relationship to the Bible and the value they place on biblical texts seem to be in constant transition. This study is a snapshot of a specific moment in each of these women’s lives. In Rob Bell’s book *Everything is Spiritual*, he says that sometimes we try to pin down a butterfly to examine it. However, as soon as we pin it down to look at it, we are no longer witnessing the butterfly in its fullness. We lose something. This is what it’s like to research faith literacies. We are pinning something down that is meant to

be on the move. There are aspects of biblical literacy that are experienced more than understood intellectually. It is important to note that this research can only capture part of the nuanced experience that is faith, religious practice, and biblical literacy interpretations.

Lack of diversity is another important factor in this research project. All of the research participants are white women in heterosexual marriages. Additional research through womanist and queer theoretical frameworks would add to and complicate this project's findings in necessary ways.

Chapter 4: Analysis and Findings

Introduction

As discussed in previous chapters, Maureen Murdock's (1990) *The Heroine's Journey* is used as a theoretical framework to understand these narratives. *The Heroine's Journey* includes ten stages. These stages do not occur linearly; instead, this inward journey is typically discussed as a cycle or circle—as seen in Appendix B: The Heroine's Journey. The first cycle coding uses traits related to each stage of the journey, and the second cycle of coding uses the names of each stage. Below is a list of each stage, followed by traits notable for each stage:

1. Separation from the feminine—During this stage, the person usually struggles with their mother or mother-like figure in their life. They often devalue women and womanhood, reject anything “feminine,” and reject the female body. There is distancing of self from the mother and a desire to be unlike their mother, whether literal or figurative.
2. Identification with the masculine and gathering of allies—During this stage, the person has a desire to be like their father or a father-like figure. They often find themselves competing in traditionally male-dominant spaces, like the workplace.
3. Road of trials: Meeting ogres and dragons—During this stage, the person often faces obstacles society has placed on women.
4. Finding the illusory boon of success—During this stage, the person has succeeded in the traditionally male-dominant space, like the patriarchal society has told them they should. They overcome society's obstacles, only to find “success” without fulfillment. The person will often find themselves with the obsessive need to be busy and productive, and they may feel like they are never enough no matter how hard they work.

5. Awakening to feelings of spiritual aridity: Death—During this stage, the person may have a feeling of being out of sync with themselves or a feeling of burnout. They may find themselves desiring community, desiring the feeling of being content, or desiring to feel at home in their own body for the first time. There is often a deep feeling of mourning and liberation occurring simultaneously. The person may also begin to find themselves waking up to patriarchal norms and rejecting these expectations.
6. Initiation and descent to the Goddess—This is the person’s metaphoric dark night of the soul or belly of the whale. We may also call this depression. The person moves more deeply into self rather than out of self. This stage is when a breakdown becomes a breakthrough. The person begins to assert themselves and becomes whole. This can also be called a “self-pregnancy.” The pattern we see during this stage can be summarized as death-decay-gestation-rebirth.
7. Urgent yearning to reconnect with the feminine—During this stage, the person realizes the mind is not the only way to know. The person may learn bodily ways of knowing, gain a respect for emotions and spirituality, reclaim creativity, or reconnect to the Earth. The person will begin to value being over doing.
8. Healing the mother / daughter split—During this stage, the person will begin to challenge the narratives that were handed to them from family and culture about womanhood and motherhood. This may be a literal healing of a relationship with their mother. This often transcends the literal mother-daughter relationship and includes forgiving and letting go of resentment throughout the person’s relationships.

9. Healing the wounded masculine—During this stage, the person experiences *hieros gamos*, also known as the unity of all opposites. The person begins to see the ways culture creates binaries, and instead sees the unity of seeming binaries.
10. Integration of masculine and feminine—During this stage, the person realizes feminine and masculine traits exist in everybody. This stage exists beyond duality, and the person will begin to value a circle of power rather than hierarchy.

It is important to note the feminine and masculine, as discussed by Murdock (1990), are cultural constructs and traits that can be found within everybody. Masculine and feminine traits are not discussed in direct relation to the binary of man and woman, but instead within the context of a patriarchal society that values what has been labeled as “masculine” and undervalues what has been labeled as “feminine.”

We come from a world that teaches us to filter everything through our head and our thoughts. We are taught to explain everything. However, some things are meant to be experienced. The female life can sometimes be explained, and other times it is experienced. Similarly, a person’s understanding of faith and sacred texts can sometimes be explained, and other times it is to be experienced. Poetry integrates explanation and experience. Writing and reading poetry is an intellectual and emotional experience. For these reasons, poetry is an effective way to communicate the research participants’ experiences as women, as mothers, and as readers of biblical texts. The analysis and discussion of the narratives are presented below using a combination of prose and poetry.

Each research question will be answered for each research participant in the Analysis section below. The life stories of each participant (research question 1) will be discussed in prose using the stages of *The Heroine’s Journey* as an organizing framework. “I-Poems” (see

McKenzie, 2021) will be used to communicate each participant's understandings of womanhood and motherhood (research question 2), understandings of biblical texts (research question 3), and thoughts and practices concerning how they are raising their children with or without religious education (research question 4). "I-Poems" (see McKenzie, 2021) are poems that use the participant's statements beginning with "I" from their interviews to convey meaning using their language. The Discussion section identifies themes across the narratives, and discusses these themes using both prose and poetry.

Analysis

The data analysis procedures for this project are previously discussed in detail in chapter 3. A codebook was created, which includes coded excerpts from each interview, and each excerpt is coded with: relevant research questions, first cycle coding that includes phrases related to *The Heroine's Journey*, second cycle coding using the stages of *The Heroine's Journey*, in vivo coding using "I" statements, and thematic coding. Each research question is answered using a mixture of prose and "I-Poems" (see McKenzie, 2021) for each research participant below.

Research participant 1: Piper

Throughout Piper's life, she has experienced parts of *The Heroine's Journey*. Piper had and continues to have a close and secure relationship with her mother and stepmother. However, she found herself *separating from the feminine* and *identifying with the masculine* during moments in her childhood. She says, "There were times I wanted to be a boy because my brother got to do things before I did." She adds, "but then there were times where I'm like oh you know it was awesome being a girl too." She grew up, met the man who is now her husband, and became the stepmother to her husband's two children. Piper and her husband then had a daughter together after struggling with multiple pregnancy losses. Piper faced her own *road of trials* when

she became a mother and struggled to continue “juggling everything together.” She works from home and finds herself as a primary caregiver to her children. She tells a story of a time recently when her husband comes home from work, changes the baby’s diaper, and takes out the laundry—and then he tells her and wants recognition for the household chores he completed. Piper’s reaction is to tell him that she does this all of the time, and never gets recognition. Like in childhood, she has moments of resentment about the roles girls and women are often forced into and the expectation often placed on them.

Piper brings this experience as a wife and mother into her readings of the Adam and Eve story. She says this of the Genesis text: No! That's not how that works. No one's gonna rule over one another.” She sees marriage as a partnership. She also doesn’t see the Adam and Eve story as fully a commentary on men and women. Piper says, “It's not just females that give into temptation. Men do it too. Adam did give into temptation from his wife who said “here.” He also knew he wasn't supposed to.”

Piper’s *descent to the Goddess*, also known as the dark night of the soul, is wrapped up in her becoming a stepmother and mother. She says stepparenting is “probably the hardest thing I’ve ever done to this day.” She also discusses her difficult journey into motherhood when she says, “I didn't even think I'd actually be able to have kids, so I was going into it like—if it happens, it happens. And if it doesn't, it doesn't.” In the midst of her challenges becoming a stepmother and mother, she “had all these people pass away” in a short amount of time--her two stepfathers, her mom's best friend, her sister's dog, her grandmas, her husband’s step dad, and her husband’s grandpa. She experienced a struggle in faith during this time, but ultimately says, “I would question, but then there's always Him providing Faith to me” and “spirituality for me has helped me get through a lot of things in life.”

Piper's faith contributes to her meaning-making of this difficult time. In a period that Murdock (1990) describes as the *yearning to reconnect with the feminine*, Piper finds value in spirituality. She says, "my past experiences and my relationships and my life—I feel there are times where God literally was like I'm preparing you for this." She feels like her relationships with her stepmothers prepared her to become a stepmother herself. Similarly, when she gave birth to her daughter, she felt like, "there's a reason, like it was a miracle."

Piper's journey as a woman, mother, and step mother is intertwined with her faith. In her own *healing of the mother / daughter split*, she does not have a literal healing, but she does discuss a current reconciliation of how womanhood impacts her stepparent role by saying, "me being the female figure, the step parent role is harder than for males. I know it depends on the situation, but I feel like sometimes with stepdads it's a little bit different somehow." When asked to elaborate on this, she says, "I don't know what exactly it is. This is just something I've been trying to figure out."

Piper shows her own *integration of masculine and feminine* when she discusses her understandings and takeaways from the Adam and Eve story. The Genesis text uses the word "helper" to describe the woman. Piper says this "just shows woman provides and helps and supports the man. We're supposed to be the helper or partner." Here, she is equalizing helper as not less than but as an equal partner. She is also stating that woman also provides. In many ways, Piper is removing the binary of masculine and feminine roles from her understandings of the Adam and Eve story.

Below are "I-Poems"—poems using statements beginning with "I" from Piper's interview—demonstrating some of her experiences related to womanhood from childhood into the

present, her experiences with stepmotherhood and motherhood, her reactions to the Adam and Eve story, and her desires concerning the faith of her child[ren]:

On being a girl/woman

I was the first child.
Sometimes, I wanted to be a boy
because my baby brother
got to do things before
I did.
Now, my husband changes a diaper
and the trash.
He tells me,
wants a pat on the back.
I don't even know what to say to that.
Does he want me to say thank you?
I'm like, *thanks, honey.*
These are things I do all the time.

Step/mothering

I will say that my past experiences
and my relationships and my life—
I feel there are times when God said,
I'm preparing you for this.
There's a reason for this.
Can I just be real for a minute?
I call my mom, both my moms,
I call both of them every day for something—
from cooking to cleaning,
for all the things.
Now, I am a mom
and a stepmom.
God said,
I'm preparing you for this.
There's a reason for this.
I didn't even think I'd actually be able to have kids.
I was going into it—
if it happens, it happens,
if it doesn't, it doesn't.
God said,
I'm preparing you for this.
There's a reason for this.
Then, it was a miracle.
I had a C-section.
I feel like it's tough coming back from that.
I still had pain.

I was feeling the contractions and everything.
God said,
I'm preparing you for this.
There's a reason for this.
I wasn't worried.
I had my husband and my family.
I did some research.
I wasn't really worried about all that.
I feel like it's more about juggling everything together.
I work from home
so at least some days I get to see my daughter.
God said,
I'm preparing you for this.
There's a reason for this.
I really truly feel it takes a certain person
to be a stepmother,
a mother.
I very rarely lose my temper.
I feel the same for all of them.
I worry about them all equally.
God said,
I'm preparing you for this.
There's a reason for this.

Adam and Eve

I read the Adam and Eve story
twice this morning.
I was like *no*.
That's not how that works!
No one's gonna rule over one another.
I wonder if that's what it really means.
I feel that Adam was also in the wrong.
I feel like the males got a little bit of a
oh what are you doing? smack on the wrist.
I look at it from a woman's standpoint,
and I feel that it shows human nature—
temptations.

I want her to believe in something

I was very Roman Catholic.
I would say somewhat strict.
I went to CCD.
I was in catechism groups.
I was part of the choir.
I was brought up Catholic and did everything.
I've come to the census that I'm still Christian,

and yes there are some Catholic beliefs
I still hold dear to my heart—
like the Ten Commandments
and the Stations of the Cross
I don't remember word for word,
but I read the Bible to my daughter.
I want her to start off with something,
a low-key perspective about Jesus and Christianity.
I want her to believe in something.
I know having some spiritual background is good.
I am instilling a little bit of that right now.
I want to give her a good foundation.
I want her to believe in something.

Research participant 2: Drew

Throughout Drew's life, she has experienced the full cycle of *The Heroine's Journey*. Drew's parents separated when she was two years old, and both of her parents remarried when she was young. She grew up with two stepbrothers, a stepsister, a half brother, and one full brother. She experienced a *separation from the feminine* at a young age as a literal separation from the mother figures in her life. Drew says, "My relationship with my mom wasn't great. She struggled with alcohol and pills for most of her life." Additionally, Drew says, "My stepmom and I never really had a good relationship...She is not a nice person if you ask me."

Drew became pregnant when she was 17 years old, and it was during this time when she began to *identify with masculinity* and climb the ladder of success. She describes her father by saying, "He wanted to be so much more loving, but he was so strict it was like living with a drill sergeant...you had very much that feeling like you were loved more when you were doing all the right things and then you were just such a disappointment when you're not doing all the right things." She became close with her dad when she was pregnant and needed a better job than her part-time job at Subway. She started painting jobs with her dad after she got kicked out of high school. As discussed by Murdock (1990), many people get the message growing up that their

ability to work hard equates to being loved. Drew took over her dad's painting business and grew it. She says, " was on fire at the time." Shen went to summer school to get her diploma, and continued, and ended up growing the painting business to a six-figure business. She then began a real estate business, which was also successful. Drew says this of this time in her life: "Because of the way I grew up, I was so determined to have this perfect life for my family...Society says you need a house, you need to love your kids, you need to do this." Eventually, Drew experienced her own *road of trials*. The success she had found and the money she earned started to lose value for her. She says, "Even when I tried to be more present I couldn't turn off the working part." She started to separate her identity from her work.

Drew began to wake up to the *illusory boon of success* she was experiencing. She says, "I was doing all the things that I felt like I needed to. I owned my own business. I bought my first house when I was really young. I was my daughter's coach. I was married to an amazing man." Drew, like many people, started to awaken to feelings of spiritual aridity. She said it felt like she was "check check check—checking all the boxes. But something still felt so missing." She said she felt "like it was just honestly so empty" and "you can't deny what you're feeling inside."

Drew began to experience her *descent to the Goddess*, also often discussed as the dark night of the soul or belly of the whale. In other words, she experienced struggles—as people often do before a transition in self and perspective takes place. Her relationship with her mother continued to be difficult. Drew tells a story about a conflict with her mother: "There was one time where I know she had a couple drinks and then drove my daughter somewhere. So I stopped talking to her again and it just was kind of back and forth." She says, "She was trying. She came up to my house a couple times and wanted to play games with my daughter." While she was

building her businesses, her mother passed away from a brain aneurysm. Drew says, “We were trying, but to be honest I think that the past made it tough to connect.”

Her mother’s death is when she says her “curiosity started about what’s after.” Her curiosity about the afterlife led to her *yearning to reconnect with the feminine*. She dove into researching churches and reading the Bible to figure out what faith is all about. She was searching for something. Drew says she isn’t somebody who usually leads with feelings. She thought, faith “can’t be an emotional thing.” So she started to learn. Her pastor and mentor told her she had “such in-depth questions” and she says she “just wanted to know more.” Quickly, her yearning became not only intellectual, but also emotional. She found herself watching *The Chosen*—a show depicting the life and teachings of Jesus—and she found herself crying at the scene with the woman at the well. For context, the woman at the well was a Samaritan—a discriminated and hated group at the time. Jesus walked up to her, spoke to her, shared water with her, and showed her an unexpected kindness. Drew connected to this. She says, “I haven’t been married five times but I can relate to the past and just feeling like why would God want me and how loving and embracing that was.” She says, “I did become emotional, I’m not gonna lie.” Additionally, she states that she wants to grow a garden when she begins homeschooling her children. This desire to connect with the Earth is a calling out to reconnect with the feminine.

Drew’s integration of intellect and emotion led to her own *healing of the mother / daughter split*. Drew began to read the Bible more and more, and she says, “It’s made me much more of a compassionate person. I think that’s what made me feel like I wish I would have been able to forgive [my mom] before she died. But I didn’t have that guidance or direction before.” She sees the Bible and her faith as guidance and direction. She discusses her mother’s faith as nearly nonexistent, except for “one time she did get clean, she started to go to church and that

was honestly the most time I've ever seen her change.” Drew focused on the connection between a community of faith and change for her mother. However, her mother did end up going back to using.

Eventually, Drew gave up her businesses. She says, “I don't have nearly the income that we had and I actually don't have my business at all. I'm a stay-at-home mom and I feel more complete than I ever did having all that stuff. Isn't that crazy?” Her daughter is 15 years old and her son is two years old, and Drew plans on homeschooling both of them next year. Her experiences in faith have made her shift her entire perspective on life. She says, “I really want Christ to be our family's center...I am now a stay-at-home mom getting ready to homeschool my kids, when I had two businesses and felt like I was on top of the world six years ago. God has completely changed me and my focus.”

Her initial reaction to the Adam and Eve story was a rejection of the concept of helper. She says, “I hated the idea of woman as helper. And when I first came all this submitting to the husband stuff– I'm like you're out your mind.” However, now she has come to a new understanding of what it means to submit. She believes this text “was not that it was meant for me to be under his thumb but just to have an order because of smooth living is how I feel.” She says, “because my husband has respect for me I can submit to him...now I can embrace it without having the pride involved because I can see the beauty in it.”

Drew's relationship to faith and biblical texts have impacted how she defined motherhood for herself. She says this of motherhood: “If I can be completely honest, I used to look not intentionally or like consciously, but I think subconsciously, I kind of looked down at stay-at-home moms–like, what are you doing all day being around the kids when they can just go to a daycare? I didn't understand that personal relationship and growth and how beautiful that

can be.” Her understanding of womanhood and motherhood does demonstrate a *healing of the wounded masculine* and *integration of masculine and feminine*, especially when she says, “I don't believe that women have to stay at home by any means. I believe we have that freedom to make that choice. God has made both choices beautiful in their own way. When discussing the way her faith has changed her ideas of motherhood, she says, “I honestly didn't see the importance in the small things of mothering, like teaching and playing.”

Below are “I-Poems”—poems using statements beginning with “I” from Drew’s interview—demonstrating some of her experiences related to the Bible, her church community, her relationship with her mother, her own evolution as a mother, her reactions to the Adam and Eve story, and her decision to homeschool her children:

Checking boxes

I don't know how to explain it.
I owned my own business.
I bought my first house when I was really young.
I was married to an amazing man.
I was like, check check check—checking all the boxes.
I thought there has to be more to this.
Now, I read the Bible daily or weekly.
I dove deep.
I studied the Word to see how much He loved me.
I was doing Bible studies and meeting with people.
I just wanted to know more.
I want to feel like I'm learning the Word personally.
Like the story of the woman at the well—
I cried.
I haven't been married five times,
but I can relate to the past and feeling like
why would God want me?
I did become emotional.
So I feel like if we force ourselves to read the Bible,
then it's more legalistic
and it's more checking boxes.
I want to always focus on the heart of God—
not check boxes.

I went to church

I knew who Jesus was
but I had no history with church whatsoever.
I've always wanted to move to Florida.
I prayed on and off when I wanted something at the time.
I thought this was how it worked.
I thought, all right God—
if you get me to Florida,
I'll start going to church.
We did move down to Florida.
I felt these words playing in my head:
you made that promise, you made that promise, you made that promise.
It wouldn't let go.
I thought, I'm just gonna go to church.
I was so nervous walking in this church.
I am not a social person at all.
I'm so bad at small talk.
I'm really awkward.
But I went to church,
and I've never been around such loving people,
not ever in my life.

I wish I would have been able to forgive my mom

My relationship with my mom wasn't great.
She struggled with alcohol and pills.
We tried to start repairing the relationship.
I know once she had a couple drinks
and then drove my daughter somewhere.
I stopped talking to her again.
I woke up to find out she was feeling weird.
She went to the hospital,
and she didn't make it back.
I think that the past made it tough
for us to connect,
tough to forgive.
After she died,
I dove deep.
I studied the Word
to see how much He loved me.
I think that's what made me feel like
I wish I would have been able to forgive my mom
before she died.
I didn't have that guidance or direction before.
I have learned about forgiveness through the gospel.

Motherhood

I ended up pregnant at 17.

I got kicked out of school.
I needed a job so I went back to my dad.
I started painting for him.
I took over his business and grew it.
I had people that worked for me,
so I went and then started another business.
I was on fire at the time.
I was so determined to have this perfect life for my family.
I was doing all the things.
I can't explain it.
I thought there has to be more.
I'm doing all the things they're saying,
but you can't deny what you're feeling inside.
I feel like it was honestly so empty.
Not intentionally or consciously,
but I used to look down at stay-at-home moms.
I didn't understand how beautiful that can be.
I don't believe that women have to stay at home by any means.
I believe we have that freedom to make that choice.
I love and appreciate being a mom so much now.
I sometimes even feel guilty that I really didn't appreciate it.
I was very immature with my first child.
I wasn't as attentive.
I worked so much when she was younger.
I honestly didn't see the importance in the small things of mothering,
like teaching and playing.
I don't have nearly the income that we had.
I actually don't have my business at all.
I'm a stay-at-home mom.
I can't explain it.
but you can't deny what you're feeling inside.
I feel more complete than I ever did having all that stuff.

Adam and Eve

My natural reaction is to be rebellious.
I would have done the same.
I asked *why would Eve have done that?*
But there have been times
when I learned something was wrong,
and it hasn't always stopped me.
And I can tell you I hated the idea
of woman as helper.
And all this submitting to the husband stuff—
I was like,
you're out your mind.
But I've realized it was not meant

for me to be under his thumb,
but to have an order,
to have smooth living.
My husband has respect for me,
so I can submit to him.
If I had some overbearing husband,
I would need to defend myself.
Now, I can embrace it
without having the pride involved.
I can see the beauty in it.

On homeschooling

I had two businesses
and felt like I was on top of the world
six years ago.
I am now a stay-at-home mom
getting ready to homeschool my kids.
I really want Christ
to be our family's center.
I believe that He
is what's changed my desires.
I don't believe that we can force
religion on children.
I don't control that outcome.
I'm just trying
to encourage her towards the Lord.

Research participant 3: Annie

Annie comes from a long line of female caregivers. Her grandmother was a “main caretaker” and her mother was “a primary figure in [her] life.” Annie describes her grandmother and mother as “passive figures,” and this is where she first remembers experiencing a *separation from the feminine*. She says, “For me, the lack of passivity was the only area in which I ever looked at my mom and said I'm not going to be that way. I thought she was very much a doormat in a lot of her relationships.” Annie continues to struggle with people-pleasing in her life, and she links this back to her mother's passive nature in many ways.

Like many women in our patriarchal society, Annie tells of a time in her childhood when she remembers feeling proud of being “masculine.” Murdock (1990) would call this time in

somebody's life the *identification with the masculine and gathering of allies* stage. Annie describes this time in her life by stating: "My dad's a dirt bike rider and so I was into that...I do think it was a connection piece or a people-pleasing piece a little bit. Like this is what my dad does, my brothers weren't into it, but I was." She links this experience directly to her understandings of gender identity when she says, "the gender was flipped...we even joke about how I did way more dirt bike riding than either of [my brothers]. There was some pride in that. There was a gender awareness of being proud of the things that I did do with my dad that were normally male oriented."

Annie's *Heroine's Journey* is intertwined with her faith in many ways. She experienced a *road of trials* in middle school around the concept of purity culture. She says, "I grew up in peak 90s purity culture and was taught it." Purity culture was a concept taught in Annie's church, and she remembers it especially impacting girls. She was immersed in this church throughout her childhood and into adulthood. Annie was homeschooled and most of her social activity was through her church. She speaks of homeschooling positively, and is also aware that she was more immersed in church than many other kids may have been. She even says, "I wasn't a pastor's kid but I had a pastor's kid experience very much." This immersion in her church community continued into her adult life. Her husband attended her church, too. She says, "I'm married to my high school sweetheart. We started talking and dating we were like 16 and 15. But couldn't really actually date because purity culture. We got married when we were 20 and 21 and so we'll be married a decade next year."

There are many difficulties Annie faced at her church, purity culture being one. She describes her parents as having been heavily impacted by the "tail end of the Jesus movement," meaning "It was kind of weird and cool that a non-denominational church existed and you didn't

have to have all these rules.” She began attending her nondenominational church as a toddler. Looking back, she says, “I definitely see things that are more culty than not because it was very much built around the pastor who started the church. It was all about him and in the end.” Eventually, the church split. This caused conflict with Annie’s church community and with her family, which Annie describes as “toxic.” She says this about this time in her life: “It was the kind of church gossip that you just can't compare to anything else. It was my parents weren't Christians. It was they were demons. It was heavy and it was very intense. A lot of brokenness, specifically in my family.” She goes on to say, “It all felt very painful. It was more painful than a divorce.”

This was Annie’s path into *awakening to feelings of spiritual aridity* and her *initiation and descent*. She began to question what she was taught about purity culture, power structures, and biblical texts. She says, “I didn't begin to deconstruct until after I was married and after in the midst of the conflict that eventually split that church.” Shortly after Annie got married, she and her husband went on an international biking trip for many months. She talks about this time as the necessary geographical space she needed. She says, “During that time I spent a lot of time solo [on my bike] and spiritually having a different experience. I've always felt very connected to God and very spiritual and would have that feedback and can hear God and the Holy Spirit and believe that.” She goes on to say, “It was the first time that I felt the lightness of not being in church right, of not being connected to any of that.” She used to read the Bible more regularly, but she says during this time that her “relationship with the Bible [was] less of one than [she] did at another point in time.” She “attribute[s] that very much to the weight that the Bible was given in [her] church.” During this time, she deconstructed both her faith and her understanding of a religious community. Her parents were drawn to a nondenominational church because of their

lack of rules and procedure. However, Annie says, “Protestant churches like Methodist or Lutheran, churches under a denomination...it is good that there's some accountability there or some clarity.” She goes on to say, “It’s like politics. You can hate it and there is so much problematic, and also the whole creation of this was based on it being slow so that someone can’t come in and upend the whole thing. It's something good.” Annie continues to unlearn and deconstruct her faith and experiences in her church. She says she still “ can't be there on a Sunday” because she “will be triggered by being around people who just say whatever they want to say...I've had to deconstruct the fact that other people have more spiritual authority in my life than I do.”

After and during this time of *spiritual aridity* and *descent*, Annie began to *yearn to reconnect with the feminine*. Annie states, “I have done most of the healing deconstructive work around the concept of feminine energy. The Divine is feminine.” Annie owns multiple businesses, and says, “I feel very much like I'm still in work mode which is much more masculine energy for me. Although it's much more balanced in this season which is interesting.” Annie has a two-year-old son, and is pregnant with her first daughter. She describes this pregnancy and this time in her life as being very feminine in energy. She says that Sabbath—creating an intentional space in her family’s life for rest and connection—is her primary spiritual practice these days. She says, “If I have to choose thinking and talking about it in a community space even with other mothers, even where it could be healthy and good to have those conversations, but I only have this much energy and I have to pick one I'm going to pick being embodied on the Sabbath with my family instead.” Rest, connection, and embodiment—all seen as feminine qualities—are important to Annie. She says, “That's exactly I think the embodiment part with having really young kids. They're just in it. You're just in it. And with the

big emotions there's no choice but to be in it with them.” She also discusses gardening as something she does to connect recently: “I started gardening last year so this is my second year which is oh my God so different and rewarding. I'm not professional by any means. I don't know what I'm doing and stuff doesn't work but it's the most embodied thing I think I've ever done. It's so cliché and it doesn't matter because it's so good that it is the most embodied thing I think you can do.” She goes on to say, “This entire pregnancy, the energy, all of my feminine energy that is, is so intuitive...The feminine energy is something else with her and so I'm just holding space for that.”

Annie has done a lot of work around her understandings of the feminine, and she has done a lot of work to *heal the mother / daughter split*. She was raised by a passive woman, and Annie recalls rejecting this trait as a child. Since then, Annie and her mother have worked through this together. She says, “We talk about it now and have a good relationship and have both done a lot of therapy around the people-pleasing parts, the rejection avoidant parts of ourselves that I know I inherit... or just that I've seen modeled. Annie has experienced a lot of healing with her family at large, too. She says, “My parents still have not deconstructed the way I have by any means. So seeing that transformation and also being able to very bluntly talk about things like purity culture and the damage and what my deconstruction has looked like—having parents who have apologized for their part in it, we have a good connection there.”

Below are “I-Poems”—poems using statements beginning with “I” from Annie’s interview—demonstrating some of her experiences related to homeschooling, people-pleasing, embodiment, her relationship with the Bible and church, and her thoughts on the future of the church.

Homeschooling

I went to preschool one day in my life.

As a sensitive child,
I was completely overwhelmed.
I was standing at the gate just waiting
for my mom.
I didn't go back.
I was homeschooled.
My mom was able to be home
and that was a privilege.
I think that was empowering.
I knew that there was a
religious,
protective,
not-being-out-in-the-world
approach to homeschooling—
just a little bit.
But it was holistic learning,
organic learning.
I set my own schedule.
We were able to be ourselves.

Generations of people-pleasing women

I was a people-pleaser child
and not a strong-willed child by any means.
But I'm less passive than my mom and my grandma.
I thought my mom was very much a doormat
in a lot of her relationships
I thought,
I'm not going to be that way.
But I very much do struggle
with some of the same patterns.
I was aware of that I think pretty young.
I think I was attracted to my husband—
because he is someone who has never validated
the performance piece.
I think the church rewards it.
I can't dive into church
because if I dive in
it will trigger all the performance stuff
that I have undone.

Embodiment

I have done most of the healing deconstructive work
around the concept of feminine energy.
I've been feeling other people's emotions
this entire pregnancy.
I've had to be very careful.

I'm just holding space for that
and being very careful with who I'm around.
I can feel like I'm gonna pick up
even more than I normally do.
I started gardening last year.
I don't know what I'm doing
but it's the most embodied thing
I've ever done.

Relationship with Bible

I do trust the Bible and I will come back to it.
I did all the scripture memorization.
I have peace from Bible verses.
If someone presents the Bible as absolute truth,
I don't believe that anymore.
I lived in a space where there were adults
who debated the concept of a seven day creation.
I remember even as a young teenager wondering
what is the point of this?
I have a personality that leans very much—
if you have a scale of literal to poetic—
I am all the way over here towards poetic.
I view it as more of a story.
I don't really care about if it's literal or not.
I think the value is the story itself
and how it ties into the bigger story.
I never felt like the Bible didn't make sense to me.
I still have a little bit of separation from the Bible.
I kind of value it and seek that when I need to,
but it's not a regular practice.
I can have gratitude for the foundation that I have
I've always had peace of this being a great resource
and also there's no way that the God that I know
so intimately
made this so that we could nitpick it.

Relationship with church

I always say I wasn't a pastor's kid
but I had a pastor's kid experience very much.
I don't remember ever not being in church.
I kind of look back and definitely see things
that were more culty than not
because it was very much built
around the pastor who started the church.
I heard a lot of anti-catholic rhetoric growing up.
I was taught that connection to a process—

that also is kind of political and capitalistic—
was wrong,
and that's why non-denominational
was seen as the best thing.
I would say my church was very spirit-filled,
lots of charismatic aspects.
Even using the word charismatic—
there was some disagreement
about where that was appropriate
or not
because of people's ideas of labels.
I grew up in a box,
unlabeled,
but labeled.
I grew up in peak 90s purity culture
and was taught it.
I've never not believed in God,
but I have completely lost
my faith and attachment to people,
to the church body and the people in it.
I've had to deconstruct the fact
that other people had more spiritual authority
in my life than I did.
I can't be there on a Sunday.
I was giving to other people
and not receiving.
I can't carry and don't want to carry that.
I don't think God needs me to carry it.

Future of the church

I look at the way our generation
has had to handle conflict of bigger structures.
I think our world is so much integration.
I really think that's the future.
I don't walk around telling people I'm a Christian.
I phrase it as I believe in and follow Jesus.
What we're doing now in our community,
with the people who work for us and around us—
it is church.
Some of that is church
because of taking care of people.
I talk to people in the LGBT community
and what I know as truth—
God loves them and made them.
It's the very practical of what Jesus did.
I think it's the future of the church.

I think when you're living in a Jesus way,
they're gonna attach to that.
I really think that's the future of the church.
I just don't think we know what the rules are
or what the structure is.
I don't need to create that space
to be good
or to be doing the right thing
or to be perfect
or to be growing.
I'm just resting in what I have to do right now.

Research participant 4: Rae

Rae's experiences and understandings of womanhood come from her church environment and teachings growing up, and have been reinforced in her homelife. Rae's mother was a stay-at-home-mom—something Rae admired and wanted for herself since a young age. Her father worked as a UPS driver and was often away from home. Her mother and father, with a small group, started a nondenominational church when Rae was very young. This church was a large part of Rae's childhood and family life, and its teachings continue to impact her life with her husband and two daughters. She was handed a narrative about womanhood and sexuality from her church community, much of which she continues to struggle with today.

Rae continues to experience a *road of trials* through a process of unlearning. She continues to unlearn and challenge what she describes as the “unspoken stuff” in her childhood church community surrounding gender roles and sexuality. She says, “I had to unlearn the always submissive thing—that women are meant to be demure and quiet and follow the rules and not toe out of line.” She discusses the gender roles present in her parents' relationship by saying, “I've heard my mom say to my dad “you never helped me, never helped me with cooking or cleaning or taking care of the kids.” She goes on to discuss the gender roles in her family now. Rae was the stay-at-home-parent, and now she works while her husband is the stay-at-home-parent. She

explains that when she began working outside of the home, the division of labor in the home did not shift. For example, she says, “when we go on a trip I pack for the children. My husband only has to take care of himself.” She goes on to state that her husband plans so many other things for the trip, so she is okay to be the “helper to him.” She also says, Now he's a stay-at-home parent...but he still wants me to come home from work and to cook a meal.” When Rae worked from home, she would make dinner and take it to her husband at work so he could eat a warm meal; and then she would go home and reheat dinner for herself. However, now that she is the one working outside of the home, she says, “He doesn't even make food while I'm at work all day...He doesn't do those same things for me.”

Rae is facing these *trials* by pushing back against some of these narratives, but is struggling because the story she was given about what a woman's role is was modeled for her both in the home and at church. She specifically discusses the Adam and Eve story in relationship to gender roles by stating, “I know that the Adam and Eve story [is] a huge pillar of femininity in religion...I've heard that often too—she tricked Adam into sinning, which I think follows that men are our protectors and they have to provide for us and we have to follow them.” For Rae, gender roles and religion are also intertwined with her understandings of sexuality. She discussed this by stating, It's such a hard thing that for me to kind of figure out because there are so many things that I think were really damaging not only to me but to my marriage with that I came into because of my upbringing um in faith.” She goes on to say, “It really messes with your psyche because so much importance in religion is placed on sex” and she speaks of her own experiences with her husband. Before they were married, she felt so much guilt about having any sexual feelings, and she thought that marriage would make the guilt and shame disappear. However, she has been married for over a decade, and the guilt and shame around sexuality that

her church ingrained in her is still a struggle in her life and in her marriage. She looks to biblical stories to help her make sense of this when she says, “The only sexual women we have in the Bible have a bad connotation to them. They're stealing kings and they're using their sexuality for bad. I feel like that is something that I really struggle with.” Simultaneously, she is challenging biblical stories and interpretations by stating, “Everyone always says how woman is the downfall of humanity and blah blah blah...I just I don't believe that piece of it because Eve was with Adam. He was there too, but no one blames Adam...I just kind of disregard that piece.”

Rae's *awakening to feelings of spiritual aridity* show up in her desire for community. She says, “I have essentially been church hopping. I just haven't ever found someone that, somewhere that felt right.” She doesn't want to hand her daughters the same guilt and shame around sexuality, and she says, “I just want to make sure that like my kids don't feel that like shame because I just I feel like it's so incredibly damaging and for that to be the overarching problem in my marriage.” With this in mind, she discusses the desire for a church community and the challenges in finding one by saying, “I want [a church community] for my kids and I feel like I can't find it because I can't find the right church. I can't find the right people who are aligned with how I feel.” Rae desires a church community because, as she states, “in churches they look out for each other.” She lives on a farm, and says, “The thing about living on a farm...is it's very lonely. There's no people around.”

Rae is working towards *healing the mother / daughter split*. In other words, she is challenging narratives of womanhood and working towards reconciling these narratives. This is evident when she says, “Through extensive research, I have been able to find things—like to not have sex before marriage is not one of the Commandments. We pay so much importance to this but God didn't put it in one of the ten.” Additionally, Rae commented on her reactions to my own

posts on social media. When I posted on Facebook asking for potential research participants for this project, Rae was one of the first people who reached out to me interested in participating. Over the years, she has seen some of my posts that challenge dominant narratives of Christianity. She says this about her reactions to my posts: “The reason why I responded immediately when I saw your original post was because I see the things that you're posting and I can feel how it's different than a lot of the mainstream Christian narrative. I feel like you're challenging some of those narratives, and especially as a pastor's wife I think that that's super important. I think that really helps to change some of those narratives, which I think do need to be changed.”

Rae is challenging the narratives from her church community, and also beginning to *integrate her understandings of masculinity and femininity*. For example, she discusses Mother’s Day and Father’s Day in the church she is currently irregularly attending by stating, “Mother's Day we're probably gonna get a mug, a flower, or a book. Every single Father's Day my church has wings for the guys. Why do we get like a cookie? I love wings. Like the guys get to do campfires we get to do tea parties. I struggle with that.”

Below are “I-Poems”—poems using statements beginning with “I” from Rae’s interview—demonstrating some of her experiences related to church communities, gender roles, and purity culture.

Church-hopping

My parents started a church when I was four.
I know that the youth pastor had reached out
to say *I want to start this*.
I don't know why they wanted to start it
but my parents thought,
it sounds like a good time,
let's go ahead and do this.
I was raised in that church.
I don't know if you ever heard of Willow Creek
but it's modeled after that church.
It's kind of Billy Graham-ish.
I don't know if that's factual,
but it's linked in my brain.
That church closed when I was in college.
Now, I have essentially been church-hopping.
I just haven't ever found someone,
somewhere,
that felt right.
Right now, I go to a non-denominational church.
I struggle with the way that they do baptism
because they make a big show of it
and it ends up being all about the numbers.
I don't like the lack of transparency with money.
I have a problem with glorifying the pastor lifestyle,
like it's something that you're doing like a celebrity
in the name of furthering the kingdom.
I've had this like secret thought in my brain
that Jesus would be a Democrat
if you look at his teachings,
and the way he talks to people,
and the way he considers them as a person
instead of broad strokes.
I feel like he would align more
with caring for the poor,
with social programs.

Unlearn

I had to do most of the unlearning
around a lot of the unspoken stuff,
a lot of the gender role stuff.
I had to unlearn the always submissive thing,
that women are meant to be demure
quiet,
follow the rules
and not

toe
out
of
line.

I was never good at following the rules
and being soft-spoken.

I was four and playing soccer,
and I wanted my mom's attention
and she was ignoring me.

I marched out into the middle field,
put my hand on my hip,
and shouted,
mother!

I have to unlearn.

Purity culture

I felt such extreme guilt about it—
my sexuality.

I feel really bad about it,
like I'm gonna fall into that sin of the flesh—
that stupid phrase.

This doesn't work for me.

I was told
don't do it.

Don't even have those feelings,
especially before marriage.

I knew that my mother-in-law didn't approve.

My grandmother wouldn't approve.

I never told my mom.

Good Lord,
the great relationship that I have with my mom,
and I never told her.

I feel like a lot of that was put on me by my family
but also more so by the church as a whole.

I feel like I'm the only one
who doesn't follow the same mentality,
like I'm the one who's looking around,
like who's awake.

I thought when I'm married,
I won't have this guilt
and I'll be a totally different person.

I got married.

I still have all these problems.

I still have all of this guilt.

Research participant 5: Josephine

Josephine is working towards becoming a spiritual leader. She went to seminary and has the credentials to be a pastor in the Methodist church; however, she is more interested in using art and her poetry to create a third space, so she is currently earning her PhD in theology to continue exploring what this third space might look like. For Josephine, a lot of this exploration in spiritual leadership is wrapped up with what she has been taught in various Christian communities, and her experiences have aligned with *The Heroine's Journey* in many ways.

Josephine has *identified with the masculine* in many ways. She says, "I was wanting to be a boy my whole life...I was treated bad as a woman, so I [thought], if I was only a man I could have it easy." She goes on to say, "Whenever I was trying to feel powerful, I couldn't see being a woman as powerful based on my experiences and how people treated me and what they told me." A lot of Josephine's understandings of what it means to be a woman have been constructed by the Christian churches she has been members of.

She experienced a *road of trials* directly related to her faith communities and her understandings of gender, and she states, "My being a woman is so tied into my traumas...my therapist was actually very interested in how I was deconstructing [my faith] while healing from my traumas because as I was working through how I was treated as a woman." She explains that her witnessing to the church's mistreatment of women did not begin with her, but with her grandmother. Josephine was told stories about her grandmother's and mother's experiences in church. She says, "We came from poverty, generational poverty. My grandma was a single mom of like six kids...she wanted her kids to go to church to learn about God and she was very religious. And also there's a social stigma if she wore the same Sunday dress. She would get all of that backlash." Josephine's mom witnessed this mistreatment growing up and was not

interested in going to church as an adult as a result. However, she would send Josephine to church social events, like Vacation Bible School in the summer. As a kid, Josephine became more involved in the Southern Baptist Church. In many ways, the ways the church oppressed her grandmother and mother were being reinforced by Josephine's experiences. She said, "Basically women's role was to make brownies in the kitchen or teach Sunday School in the Southern Baptist Church." As Josephine got older, she eventually left the Southern Baptist Church and joined an Assemblies of God congregation. She says, "That's where it gets interesting because women were said to be equal in the sense that they can have leadership positions...but where they get you is they say that we have different roles and so then it comes down to okay men can do whatever role they want...but the women were definitely not allowed to take on the man's role."

Seeing this exclusion and oppression of women in her church communities was difficult for Josephine, so she began to challenge these notions for herself, *awaken to feelings of spiritual aridity*, and experience the *initiation and descent*. This started when she was a child and she learned, "if I didn't get baptized in the Southern Baptist Church that would mean that I would go to hell." This resulted in a lot of fear for Josephine. Her struggles with fear in relation to her faith is complex and intertwined. She says, "I actually dated a pastor's son for like three years and he was very abusive and the pastor was abusive to him so I'm all tied up." She eventually learned that, for many reasons, she had PTSD. She told her church this, and this is what Josephine says their reaction was: "They publicly exorcised me in front of the church...so I definitely felt that there was something wrong with me." She explains that she has a problem and was suffering, and her church proclaimed to have a quick solution. So she thought, "heck yes I'm gonna try this." Then she says, "Afterwards I felt like I wanted to feel good and I would say I made myself

believe that for about a week. And then whenever I still had my PTSD symptoms I definitely felt that it was my fault.” Josephine explains that the church leadership emphasized that it might be her fault by telling her she might not be praying enough or the right way.

This was a difficult time in Josephine’s life, and she continued to *awaken to feelings of spiritual aridity* and experience the *initiation and descent* when she went to seminary. She says seminary really changed her, especially her understandings concerning the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community. When she came back from taking one of her seminary courses, she met with her pastor to discuss the things she had learned that changed her understandings. She says, “Whenever I told him [what I was taught in church] doesn't make sense and I gave him reasons, he actually listened and he was very respectful. He gave me his side and I [said] that doesn't make sense to me.” Overall, Josephine felt like the conversation was respectful. She also states, “Of course, he asked me where my husband was over and over again and how my husband has been teaching me, like I can't learn stuff on my own and have my own opinions.” Nevertheless, Josephine felt like the conversation went well. The following Sunday, her child was sick so she stayed home from church and watched the sermon online. Her pastor was talking about the Adam and Eve story and discussed the roles of women. Josephine remembers him saying, “We have to protect the woman...and she's our backbone.” She says he was “really pumping up women, but then he made the comment that was directly pointed at me.” She remembers her pastor saying, “It's a woman and a man. It's not Adam and Steve.” She also remembers that “everyone started laughing in the church.” She says that her heart was racing and she was appalled. Her pastor then said, “Wow it feels so good to be around like-minded individuals. I've been having the craziest conversations lately talking about how man and man might get together and that's considered biblical and holy and so it's good to get validation from everyone here”

Josephine messaged the pastor telling him she knows his sermon was directed at their conversation and she was choosing to leave the church. She says, “That's whenever I started my deconstruction for good.”

After deconstructing the faith system and the construction of womanhood her churches taught her, Josephine began to *yearn to reconnect with the feminine*. A lot of this reconnection is intertwined with her connection to the Earth. She says, “I got inspired by embracing the Earth, embracing my womanhood. I did start getting into gardening. Just being able to have my kids grounded in the Earth. My womanhood and embracing the Earth run parallel somehow.” When asked what kind of faith system she wants to teach to her children, she says, “So if my oldest child, he just turned five, if he's asking about a tree or something, I want to make sure that he recognizes the personhood of the tree and that God can definitely be in the tree.” She says, “We need to respect the tree, have that relationship with the tree, and not just go and cut it down.” She goes on to say, “[When my son] sees...all the other kids are trying to kill ants or something, I'll get very upset. I'll say no, those are our friends.” This is how Josephine is teaching her children about faith. She says, “That's not a very dogmatic religious set of beliefs or anything, but in the day-to-day practical, I would say I'm teaching them to be respectful and loving toward all that we see.”

Josephine's relationship to Earth and to her own womanhood is continuing to *heal*. She is *healing the mother / daughter split* and *healing the wounded masculine* by re-constructing what it means for her to be a woman. She says, “Through my healing work with my therapist I was like, man like I don't know what it means to be a woman, and she told me you get to decide how you want to be a woman. You can just be just you.” That's when Josephine started to realize that she doesn't have to choose between the false binary of masculine and feminine. This was

reinforced by her journey into motherhood. She says, “I have learned how to embrace womanhood as powerful definitely through being a mother.” She remembers, “through childbearing, I remember imagining all these other powerful woman and powerful mothers to get through the pain of childbirth. That was one of the first times that I was like oh my goodness I'm so powerful.” She learned to respect and honor the fact that her body transformed and then became something new. She also says, “I'm not saying that you have to be a mother to be powerful, but that is my own experience. There are so many other experiences that you could have where you're like yes you know this is our power.”

This *integration of masculine and feminine* in Josephine's life has had practical impacts on her family's day-to-day life. She says that while her mother would deny it, both of Josephine's parents fell into the more “traditional” gender roles when it comes to domestic labor growing up. Josephine and her husband do things differently. Since having kids, both Josephine and her husband have been graduate students and pulling from multiple and changing sources of income. They have had to work together to figure out how to split family tasks and chores. She says, “My husband and I have conversations all the time...I do naturally do more than I should, like making appointments and all like the mental tasks, it's never ending. I do mention that to him and he's like, thank you so much for that and I'll take on this.” She discusses the ways they are working every day to break these generational understandings and to raise their kids differently. For Josephine, her identity as a woman and mother is not tied to taking on domestic and child-raising tasks alone. She talks about a time when she was working outside of the home full time and taking graduate classes full time, and her husband was the stay-at-home parent. She says, “We found that just didn't work for us at all because he was overwhelmed and I was overwhelmed because I wanted to see my kids more often and he wanted to get out of the house. We tried the

opposite way too...and I had um postpartum depression because I couldn't get out of the house.”

They continue to renegotiate how to best move forward, and she says, “This [new] system has been working more for us. He gets to see the kids and work, and I get a little bit of both worlds too.” This constant re-defining of roles has been valuable for Josephine. She states, “How we choose to be a woman and how we choose to be a Christian—there is no right or wrong.”

Below are “I-Poems”—poems using statements beginning with “I” from Josephine’s interview—demonstrating some of her experiences related to having to perform as a woman in church settings, her relationship to the Bible, and her beliefs about the future of faith spaces.

Performance and womanhood in church

I didn't go to church on Sundays
but I went to all of the Vacation Bible School.
I even went to summer camp.
The religious talk was always kind of weird to me
but I endured it.

I didn't get baptized until I chose to
and that was teenage years.
I felt more scared
learning about the concept of hell,
and I learned if I didn't get baptized
in the Southern Baptist Church
that would mean that I would go to hell.
I would say:
I'm scared about hell.
My dad would say:
I learned about that too.
They confirmed my fears
because they didn't work through
any kind of deconstruction themselves.
I convinced my mom to get baptized too
so she did it with me
just so that I would feel better.

I was growing to learn
my own religious understanding.
I went on to college.
I immediately felt that I needed to get involved in a church.
I joined the Assembly of God church.

I was learning all of this,
I would say,
very poor theology
and sexism.
It would be in the sermon,
in the leadership.
As a teenager, I didn't really understand
but I certainly felt it.

I got married during this time
in an Assembly of God church.
I was very much into wanting to be a leader,
but I was taught that
if I were to pray at the family dinner
and not get my husband's permission
that would be considered bad.
I would not be fulfilling my role as a wife.

Eventually, I went to a Methodist seminary.
I would say at first in the Methodist church,
I was like man this is boring.
Beyond that, it felt like I didn't have to put on a show,
a performance.
There wasn't this pressure to perform any more.

The Bible

I haven't looked to the Bible in quite some time,
probably since seminary.
It's a bit irrelevant to me right now.
I used to make myself read the Bible
every single day
and I read through the entire thing multiple times.
I used to be told I had to read the Bible
or else whatever would happen.
I'm still combating the people
who use the stories for their own agenda.
Secretly, I do still like the stories
and I still connect with them,
but I'm definitely in this skeptic position
and refusing that I need it.
I didn't read the Bible for about a month
and nothing bad happened.

Leadership moving forward

I wanted to be a spiritual leader.
I had this weird bizarre dream

and I really felt it in my soul.
There's no other way to explain it.
I woke up and I knew
I needed to do whatever this dream
said that I needed to do.
I always try to get my answers
from throwing it out there.
I would always feel that God was guiding me
if I only listened.
I had to decipher what "spiritual leader" meant.
I went to seminary and I really felt
God—
this sense of peace.
Whether it was my voice
or the voice of God,
I heard "use your art."
I'm a poet.
I didn't really want to be a pastor.
I'd be willing to do that for a bit,
to do whatever it took to get in that direction.
I chose to get my PhD
because I wanted to explore this idea of a third space
until I get so tired of it
that maybe I find an answer.
I don't think Christianity was ever meant
to be a dominant and powerful religion.
It started from the oppressed.
People were literally killed for being Christian,
for going against the current political systems
and those in leadership.
I think we should move in ways
to blur the lines of leadership.
Poetry and storytelling can do that.
I've always been for deconstructing hierarchies.
I think having communities
where there isn't just one figure
who has all of this knowledge and training
would bring us back to the questions of knowledge in general
and how some knowledge is seen as superior to others.
It's academic but also personal.

Member Checks

The “I-Poems” were sent to each research participant to be sure their statements accurately represent their experiences and beliefs. Each participant had the opportunity to offer clarification or any reaction to the poems to ensure their narratives were being communicated accurately. All five participants stated that the I-Poems created from their statement accurately represented what they were communicating. Annie specifically said, “It's perfect and beautiful and I'm so honored to be a part of this. I don't know if my I statements sounded like that or not but good grief you made them sound exactly as I feel them.” Similarly, Josephine said, “this is honestly so profound. It's such a strange and beautiful sensation seeing my inner thoughts (ranting/words) put together by someone else, especially in poetry.”

Findings

Each of these five women showed through their narratives the ways in which they were taught about womanhood through their biblical literacy educations and Christian communities. These experiences exposed some of the ways they relate to their identities as “women” and “Christians,” and the third spaces that are being formed where biblical literacy discussions, interpretations, and practices are emerging.

Identity as “Woman”

All of the participants expressed in one way or another that their faith literacy practices have been a meaningful part of their life at one point or another—especially when it comes to defining gender and gender roles. However, some of these women also expressed a disconnect between some of their understandings of biblical texts when it comes to their experiences of what it means to be a woman. As seen in some of the “I-Poems,” dominant interpretations of the

Adam and Eve story are being challenged. It becomes problematic when interpretations of biblical stories do not match people's embodied experiences.

For example, Rae—who I am friends with on social media, said “I see the things that you're posting and I can feel how it's different than a lot of the mainstream Christian narrative and I feel like you're challenging some of those narratives...I think that that really helps start to change some of those narratives which I think do need to be changed.” Rae discussed the ways her and her husband struggle to share in domestic tasks in contrast to what she has been taught about gender in her Christian communities.

Similarly, Piper tells a story about a time recently when her husband changed a diaper and took out the trash. Her husband wanted to be thanked for completing these tasks, but Piper said that she does these things all of the time without asking for recognition. Piper also said that she was taught that women are men's “helpers” through her Christian education. Piper is expressing a disconnect between what was taught and how her actual family operates.

Like Rae and Piper, Josephine also discussed the fact that what she was taught about biblical texts and gender roles does not inform how her and her husband organize their family. Josephine said, “I do more than I should, like making appointments and doing all the mental tasks. It's never ending.” She said when she tells her husband, he says, “Thank you so much for that and I'll take that on.” Josephine and her husband are in constant conversation about negotiating the domestic work in an effort to “break generational trauma...in how we raise our children.”

Rae's, Piper's, and Josephine's expressed experiences show that communities teaching using biblical texts have handed women and families a certain story about gender roles that doesn't work for every family. Many women who identify as “Christian” are having to redefine

what it means to be a woman for themselves. Womanhood is culturally and socially constructed in so many ways. This project emphasized the fact that many of these women's identity as "woman" is intertwined with the ways their communities taught them about biblical stories. The biblical stories they have been taught about have not fully served them in this way.

Domestic work is not the only space where gender roles are being redefined. For Rae, Annie, and Josephine, their constructions of womanhood were intertwined with purity culture within their church communities—as seen in the "I-Poems" constructed from their narratives.

Josephine wrote this poem in response to purity culture:

Softly Silent

I am so silent
that my screaming
is soft

Soft
like a woman's hands
being pulled this way
by a strange somebody

Soft
like a woman's heart
being ripped out of her own body

Soft
like a woman crying
when nobody looks

It took
everything she had
to make sure the screams
in her throat
were as soft as a rose
stem

She chokes
on the thorns
of rage
embedded in her veins

She implodes
until she is so full
of silence
that she floats away
swaying in the fierce wind
softly

Identity as “Christian”

As some of these women redefine what it means to be a woman for themselves, they are also redefining their “Christian” identity. Rae said, “I’m on some level ashamed of the title Christian because of what it means to non-Christians because Christians have done so much damage.” Similarly, Annie said she is embarrassed to tell people she is a Christian in different contexts, and Josephine mentioned that her mom used to be ashamed to call herself “Christian.”

Alongside the shame or reluctance to claim their Christian identity, some of these women also discuss remembering feeling the need to perform in their church communities. Annie, who described her childhood church as charismatic, recalls feeling the pressure to perform in her “spirit-filled” worship space. Josephine describes feeling this same pressure to perform. Josephine, who went to a seminary to become a Methodist pastor, described her first time in a Methodist church as “boring” compared to her “charismatic” childhood church. Josephine went on to say that what she was experiencing as “boring” she later learned is how it felt to no longer have to perform during a church worship service.

Third Spaces

Most of these women described the complexities involved in their identities as women and Christians. Time and time again, Annie used what I am calling “creativity-language” to discuss the practices and habits in her life. For example, when discussing her family and marriage, she said, “We both come from families of long-term marriages, no divorces whatsoever. So it’s also a little normal. This is just what you *build*.” Similarly, when she

discusses Sabbath—a day of rest—as a practice in her life, she says, “We *create* space. If we don't get a whole day or if fires come up and we have to put them out, we will *create* a couple hours.” Spiritual practices require space and form, and these spaces and forms are—like Annie helps us see—*built* and *created*. We see these spaces and forms being built and created in many ways.

Josephine's own doctoral research interests explore the concept of religious third spaces. She says, “From my research in Christian feminism, I found that there are three different paths that women take... One—you deal with it; you just ignore how the church treats you as a woman. Two—you work to reform it, whether you form your own ministry or you try to reform the church by being a leader or whatever that looks like. Three—you choose to leave it.” Josephine then said, “I was exploring those who leave [the church] and where they typically go.” In her research, she came across Chela Sandoval's (2000) book, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, and became interested in “this terminology of the third space, the lineal liminal space, as a sort of a methodology.” Josephine's take on third spaces in Christianity was especially relevant to this project when she discussed the need for blurred lines in current church leadership hierarchies. She says, “We need to kind of blur [the lines] and there's a lot of different ways we could do that.” She discusses her professor's thoughts on blurring these lines by stating, “He says we need to screw with the current system through the structure in order to bring the healing and... the change that we need because we can't just make little changes here and there. We can't just change the leadership because it's corrupt all the way down.” She goes on to say, “It's maybe in the roots of how it's currently formed.”

Josephine's exploration and thoughts on third spaces is supported by the five narratives in this project. Christian spaces are emerging in different forms and new spaces. As seen in the narratives of these women, their understandings surrounding gender are intertwined with their

Christian and biblical literacy experiences. We see multiple examples from these mothers' narratives of third spaces for their biblical literacy learning, including: the home with mothers as teachers, in a dirt biking community, in the workplace, online, through art, through gardening, and in other organized groups..

Homeschool and Mother as Teacher

As discussed in chapter 1, the Protestant Reformation resulted in mothers being able to read the Bible and educate their children related to biblical texts in the home. Drew's and Annie's experiences with homeschool supports the fact that Christianity and homeschooling continue to be intertwined for many.

Drew is now a stay-at-home mom getting ready to homeschool her kids. She says, "When I had two businesses and felt like I was on top of the world six years ago. God has completely changed me and my focus." Drew discussed the fact that homeschooling is new for her, but she has an example in her pastor's wife. Drew said, "My pastor's wife has four kids that she homeschools and they're in all different grades."

Annie is not homeschooling her children; however, she was homeschooled as a child. She said that she was homeschooled and all of her social activity was through her church. Again, we are seeing a connection between homeschooling and Christianity. Annie said that part of her homeschooling experience was memorizing Bible verses. Overall, Annie discussed her homeschool experience positively. She says, "I knew that there was a religious, protective, not-being-out-in-the-world approach to [my mom] homeschooling [us] a little bit, but it wasn't really based in that." She also discussed her mom's choice to homeschool by saying, "It is a little more popular to be homeschooled now. At the time it certainly was not. In my extended family, like my aunts, they all thought my mom was crazy and that we were all going to be really

weird.” Annie said she appreciated her homeschooling because it felt holistic. She said, “Maybe you were learning about this in history and then you were also reading a fiction book that was about the same time frame...It's the organic part of learning and homeschooling.” She also enjoyed being able set her own schedule and said it felt “more of what our life looks like now as adults.”

Drew expressed being excited about leading her children’s leading. When I asked Annie about how she viewed her mom as her teacher, she said, “My mom enjoyed it. She didn't sacrifice something she loved. She didn't really want to do anything else except be a stay-at-home mom...She was doing what she wanted to do in homeschooling us. I think that was empowering. She's a very nurturing person and was good at it.”

Dirt Bike Community

Annie’s dad became a trained chaplain during the time when Annie’s family was questioning the legitimacy of spiritual authority in their church. Her dad got ordained in an effort to have more authority in their church community. He is a member of the dirt bike community and Annie said “he's been able to use [his chaplain experience] in his...dirt bike community that he returned to after being out of it for so long because he was in church so much.” Now, her dad is a chaplain for that space and my parents are having completely different spiritual conversations with people outside of the church and not going to church every Sunday.” For Annie’s dad, his dirt bike community is serving as a third space.

Workplace Communities

Many research participants expressed their biblical literacy practices being integrated into all aspects of their lives. More specifically, Annie describes the businesses she owns and her employees as being church-like. She said, “What we're doing now in our community specifically

with the people who work for us and around us—it is church. Some of that is church because of taking care of people. It's the very practical of what Jesus did. I think it's the future of the church.” She went on to discuss this future by saying, “I just don't think we know what the rules are or what the structure is around that [yet].” She said that often the divide in people’s understandings of religion and spirituality comes down to language. When discussing her employees, she said, “Most of the people who work with and for us are gen Z [and] the language that they are willing to latch onto is much more about the reality of how people act. I think when you're living in a Jesus way they're gonna attach to that.” In the third space of Annie’s businesses, she says, “There's not really a lot of conversation around did Jesus die and raise from the dead. It is just how we're taking care of people and that's holy.”

Virtual Communities

When discussing the future of the church, Annie discussed the internet as playing a role in global awareness. Similarly, Josephine discussed the rise of online spaces where people are wrestling with what they have been taught about the Bible and religion in general. For example, Josephine said, “There's actually a podcast...called Accidental Tomatoes in Morgantown, West Virginia I believe. They bring in different spiritual leaders who talk on deconstruction.” She said they discuss “their personal story...[and about] their leadership programs that they've formed.” That’s how Josephine has learned about some of these communities and third spaces forming.

After I talked to Rae, she reached out to tell me how beneficial it was for her to have the space to talk about her faith experiences and her understandings of womanhood and gender roles. She told me that an online space to openly discuss these things with like-minded people is something she would like to be a part of. Not only are there virtual spaces emerging, but there is also an increasing desire and need for these spaces to form.

Art

There are people interested in participating in these third spaces that are emerging. Similarly, there are Christian leaders who are interested in creating and leading these third spaces. For example, Josephine is interested in learning more about how to form a third space using her art and poetry. She said, “The reason why I chose to get my PhD is because I wanted to explore this idea of third space until I get so tired of it that maybe I find an answer or maybe I drive myself crazy.” She described the church as “unjust in its very structure” and she discussed the church origins by saying, “Christianity merged with Empire with Constantine [and] I don't think Christianity was ever meant to be a dominant powerful religion...It started from the oppressed. People were literally killed for being Christian [and] going against the current political systems and those in leadership.” Josephine’s desire to create third spaces is rooted in activism for oppressed communities. She said, “Jesus could very well be seen as a political activist for the oppressed, for the poor, for anyone who is marginalized, for women.”

One way Josephine is exploring to create third spaces is by using art and poetry to blur the lines of hierarchy in churches. She said, “Poetry is very much this third space. It blurs the lines of reality and what is concrete.” She discusses poetry as “mean[ing] something different to every single person because they are connecting with it from their history, from their current situation, from who they are.” She also said poetry “reads differently...even from different culture spaces so poetry blurs the lines of not only person to person but from space and time.” Josephine views poetry and storytelling as powerful ways to form third spaces that are radically different from the current structures because it begins with the experiences of participants. She expressed the need for these spaces when she said, “We need these vulnerable groups of sharing ourselves, and that can be through poetry, that can be through um any form of art really, any way

of expressing ourselves to kind of blur the lines of what we consider to be concrete—or what others have told us is concrete.”

Gardening

Interestingly, many of these women discussed gardening and reconnecting to the Earth as part of their spiritual lives and paths into motherhood. Christianity—rooted in patriarchal values—has devalued motherhood and our relationship with Earth. Biblical literacy education and practices, for better or worse, have led some of these women to reconnect to Earth.

For example, Annie—who is currently more interested in putting her Christianity into practice and embodying her faith than in participating in a formal church community, stated, “I started gardening last year...[and it is] so different and rewarding...I don't know what I'm doing and stuff doesn't work but it's the most embodied thing I think I've ever done.” Similarly, Rae discussed wanting to raise her family on a farm, so she and her husband moved to live on a farm in Pennsylvania. She also discussed enjoying spending hours in the garden with her children. Drew is planning to begin homeschooling her children in the next school year, and she stated that one of the first things she plans on doing is planting a garden.

Like Annie, Rae, and Drew, Josephine’s motherhood and faith are intertwined with her relationship with Earth. She is raising her children with the intention to be in relationship with and to respect nonhuman nature. Josephine said, “My oldest child just turned five [and] if he's asking about a tree or something, I want to make sure that he recognizes the personhood of the tree and...not just go and cut it down.” She tells a story about a time when her son sees other kids trying to kill ants, and he will get upset and try to save the ants.” Josephine said, “I guess that's not a very dogmatic religious set of beliefs or anything, but in the day-to-day...I would say I'm teaching [my kids] to be respectful and loving toward all that we see.” Josephine was

“inspired by ecofeminism”--the links between ecology and feminist thought--in seminary, and she wrote this poem and shared it with me:

The End

it all ends with dirt you know
we all know it ends with dirt
ashes to ashes
dust to dust
euphemisms brush off the imagery
of rotting flesh
we all die you know
we all know
it all ends with dirt

the dirt collects on my knees
as i kneel in prayer
i can feel her there
in the crevices of my skin tears
i feel her healing me
once again
i gather the soil in my hands
feeling its warmth
as it spreads itself on my skin
i gently raise it to my face
and muffle my silent screams

i sat alone with the silence
of the trees
whispering to me,
“my darling,
your soul is beautiful today”
and i feel the dirt
move its way up my legs
healing the parts of me
deemed impure
she holds my hand
covering the scars of inflictions
whispering,
“i am so sorry this happened to you”
the water flowing from my eyes
nourishes the greenery that surrounds me
and we feel ourselves grow

feeling the ground
grounding down

the dirt meets the spirit
resting on the surface
of my flesh
i feel the last breath
leave the trappings of trauma
and the pain begins to rot
creating a new place
for dirt to birth art
and i am alive
and i remind myself
that i am dirt
it all ends with dirt you know

Gardening is a third space for these women. They are connecting their faith with their gardening practices.

Organized Groups

Josephine said, “there's a lot of groups that are happening with people who are kind of healing alongside each other.” She described one of these spaces called Beer & Hymns and said, “I know the people who run it and what they do is they sing these old Christian hymns that bring this sense of nostalgia and you're like, “oh, I remember singing this with Grandma or in church”—but without all the baggage.” She said they sing these humans while drinking beer with their buddies ,and everyone's welcome. Like in a church, participants in this organization give money to support an organization like an LGBTQ+ group. Josephine also discussed the Wild Goose Festival—a large festival for people interested in faith and social justice.

Piper’s, Drew’s, Annie’s, Rae’s, and Josephine’s narratives show the complexities of identity, specifically as it relates to what it means to be a “woman” and a “Christian.” These five women define and experience their own “womanhood” and “Christianity” in similar and different ways. As discussed in the finding sections, these narratives exposed the many “third spaces” emerging in biblical literacy practices. Churches are no longer the only spaces where

women and others are wrestling with these texts and the practices that emerge from the texts.
There are many ways these third spaces can be looked at in future studies and explorations.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Significance of Study

During the Protestant Reformation over 500 years ago, the Bible was translated from Latin—the language of power, to German—the language of the people. For the first time, people were given the Bible in their own language and women were encouraged to read Christian texts in their home in an effort to help educate their children. In the last 500 years, women have been reading and beginning to re-interpret texts that were historically written, read, and interpreted by men. This has an impact on biblical literacy practices and biblical literacy spaces, and on how women are defining their “woman” and “Christian” identities.

Evans (2021) states, “As our global consciousness grows...the millennial generation is finding itself confronted by rapidly changing ideas, theologies, and ways of being” (p. 37). She goes on to say, “This is a gift. But it can be confusing or scary at times, and we might feel threatened by having our paradigms challenged” (Evans, 2021, p. 38). This moment in time is—as Evans (2021) describes—confusing, scary, and paradigm-shifting. Our culture seems to be undergoing its own heroine’s journey, and Evan’s (2021) thoughts point to the descent stage of the journey—where the “descent” represents a time of confusion and wisdom before a shift takes place. The space, form, and structure of biblical literacy is, in many ways, slowly shifting.

Murdock’s (1990) *Heroine’s Journey* framework is one of many possible ways to shape these narratives. As of right now, we are still largely living in a dualist and patriarchal society that divides traits—which can be found to varying degrees in all people, despite their assigned sexes and constructed genders—into masculine and feminine. These traits that our culture has deemed feminine are often undervalued in contrast to their masculine counterparts. Murdock (1990) states, “We live in a society that sees the world from a masculine perspective...As a

result, many girls feel invisible, inferior from infancy by being assigned female at birth” (p. xvii). Looking at these narratives using Murdock’s (1990) framework is useful because this framework emphasizes the necessary and eventual integration of masculine and feminine—on an individual level and a cultural level. It helps shape and give language to an internal journey people go on—a journey which is often abstract and transcends language. Murdock (1990) helps give language and narrative shape to these internal and often unspoken experiences. Giving voice and shape to these experiences are important if we want to integrate diverse experiences into the Bible interpretation, teaching, and learning practices. Men and power structures are no longer the dominant gatekeepers to biblical texts. For 500 years, it has been increasingly more accessible, and Murdock’s (1990) *Heroine’s Journey* framework is one way to explore how women having access to these texts is beginning to shape biblical literacy spaces.

This project was an effort to learn more about how parents—mothers specifically—are, or are not, choosing to expose their children to the Bible and Christian spaces. Interestingly, the women interviewed discussed the spaces they are interested in for themselves more than the spaces they are interested in for their children. They discussed nuanced third spaces that could hold the nuance of their identities—like homeschool settings, a dirt bike community, workplaces, virtual communities, art, gardening, and other organized spaces.

Similarly, interviewing these women for this research project created a third space for me. I was able to discuss the ways we are redefining what it means to be a woman and the nuanced ways Christian teaching contributed to women’s understandings of womanhood and vice versa. The conversations between me as a researcher and the research participants became an additional, although temporary, third space.

Who is this study for?

During the months I was conducting interviews for this project, I attended a two-day event called “Lutheran Day of Advocacy”—hosted by the Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in Pennsylvania. This is a time when Lutherans—both clergy and congregational members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) meet in Harrisburg—the capital of Pennsylvania—to advocate for the rights of the unhoused and LGBTQIA+ community, to discuss next-steps to improve climate and clean energy efforts, and to work towards other social justice issues. There is a day full of speakers and workshops, followed by a trip to the state capital so everybody could meet with their elected officials to advocate for these issues.

During a workshop on the current legislature on LGBTQIA+ related bills, I sat next to a bishop of the ELCA. We began discussing my dissertation, and specifically my interest in how women are engaging with the Bible and the ways people are having “church” like experiences outside of church buildings. He told me a story about a pastor who spent a year working as both a pastor and waitress. She would begin her shift at the restaurant, and some of the other waitresses would ask her about her work as a pastor. Eventually, the waitresses—all women—would ask her to read her sermon to them. This became a weekly occurrence. She would go to work at the restaurant each week, and she would read the sermon she had planned for Sunday to the waitresses. The women wanted to learn about the Bible. They wanted to learn about these old texts, and how they may be relevant for their lives today. A “church” began to take shape—a church of waitresses, of women—at this restaurant. These women said they had no interest in ever walking into a church building, for one reason or another. But they loved hearing the weekly sermon and discussing it together.

The bishop told me this story, and then told me there is a need to learn more about these third spaces where “church” is happening. He suggested that after my research, we discuss a forum where these third spaces for biblical literacy are presented and discussed. There are communities of leaders who are wrestling with the fact that church as a space is changing and evolving. Discussions about *how* this evolution is going to impact current practices are on the rise, and research about the specific ways individuals and groups are relating to biblical texts and Christian communities is needed.

Recommendations for Future Research

“Lutheran Day of Advocacy” is a day dedicated to the fact that people’s faith and civic responsibilities often collide. Speakers at this event used biblical texts to support their fierce beliefs that we are to serve the marginalized among us. People’s understandings of biblical texts and people’s actions are not separate. People’s faith and their role as civic members of our society are not existing parallel to each other, but instead are often enmeshed. The Bible serves as the foundation for Christian faith. Furthermore, the Bible is an ancient and complex text that cannot always be read at face value. Many pastors, including ELCA pastors, are formally educated on the complexities of the Bible—about the original languages of the Bible, the original cultural contexts of the Bible, and more. Their education offers something when it comes to interpreting the meaning of the ancient stories found in the Bible. There are many alternative spaces where people are engaging with the Bible, but much of the meaning is lost without somebody with the education and knowledge necessary to begin interpreting these ancient texts. However, there are also potential downsides to this hierarchical structure remaining in place in all biblical literacy spaces.

New Questions Emerged from Study

This project raises more questions in need of further research. What does this mean for religious leaders who teach about the Bible? What are the advantages and disadvantages to having an educated leader in biblical literacy third spaces to help give cultural and linguistic context to the texts? What are the potential impacts of people reading biblical texts without educated clergy or resources to help assist them in the interpretation process? What are biblical literacy spaces going to look like in the generations to come? What is the traditional church lacking that some Christians desire? To what degree are churches as educational spaces capable of shifting towards the reinterpretations of biblical texts that are arising after the Protestant Reformation shifted literacy practices?

Future Studies

Additionally, there is more research needed in an effort to continue to understand the ongoing shifts in biblical literacy teaching and learning practices. As this project shows, there are people interested in third spaces where we can wrestle with topics related to faith, the Bible, and more—a space where we can bring our full selves and nuanced identities. Traditional spaces, like churches, do not always serve the needs of people who desire to participate in these ongoing conversations. These spaces and communities exist, but gaining access to these informal spaces can be difficult for researchers.

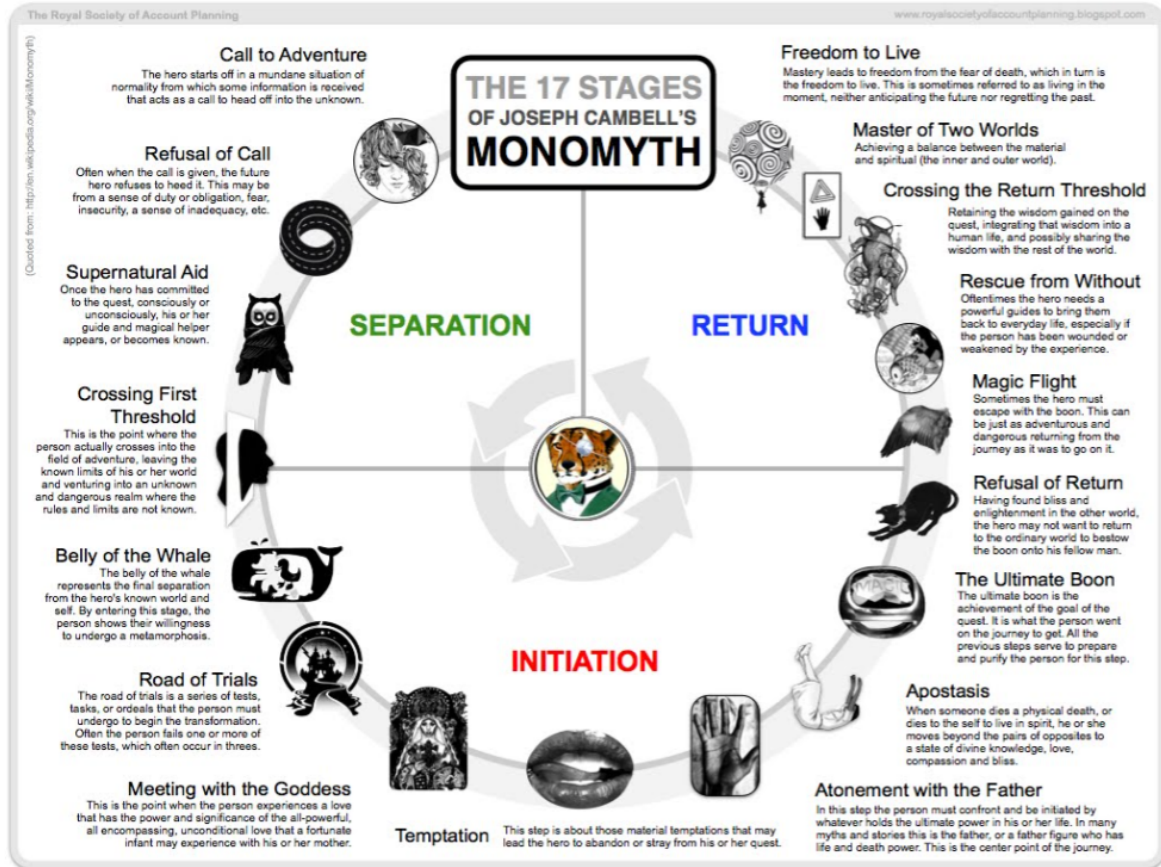
Nevertheless, additional research and stories about these informal third-spaces of biblical literacy and faith-based learning are important. This study used a specific and narrow feminist framework to explore the narratives of five women. Additional feminist projects are needed to continue lifting the voices of women and to learn what third spaces are emerging for some Christian women. However, a limitation of this study is that the five participants are cisgender,

straight, white women. A next step for this study is to take a Black feminist and/or womanist approach. Additionally, studies using a perspective rooted in queer theory is necessary to learn how individuals and communities who identify as LGBTQIA+ are challenging and understanding biblical texts, and creating third spaces where these conversations are taking place.

The most interesting part of this study for me personally is that most of these participants brought up gardening and connecting with Earth without being prompted by me, the interviewer. Drew is about to begin homeschooling her children; her homeschooling curriculum will be Christian-focused, and the first thing she told me she wants to do is create a garden with her kids. Annie discusses her current desire to get out of her head and to embody her spirituality, and she says gardening has been the most embodied practice for her. Rae moved to a farm when she first became a mother and was wrestling with her Christian identity. Josephine is teaching her children less religious doctrine and more about respecting all creatures—humans, other animals, plantlife, etc. The research analysis process of this project exposed the link between motherhood, faith, and reconnection with Earth. This is an idea I would like to explore further and deeper in future studies. Christianity, as many seem to experience it in contemporary times, lacks an emphasis on connection to Earth. In a future study, I would like to use an ecofeminist framework to explore the ways people are using biblical texts to create third spaces and new understandings where they are reconnecting to Earth.

Appendix A: The Hero's Journey

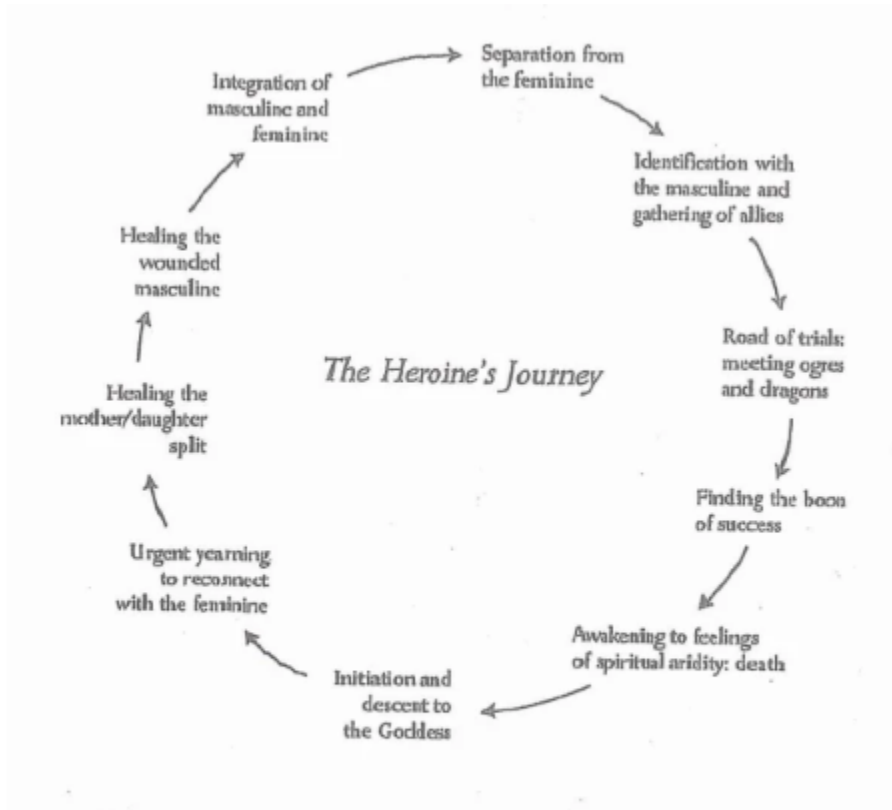
The Seventeen Stages of the Monomyth



The Cycle of Mythology

(Chase, 2016)

Appendix B: The Heroine's Journey

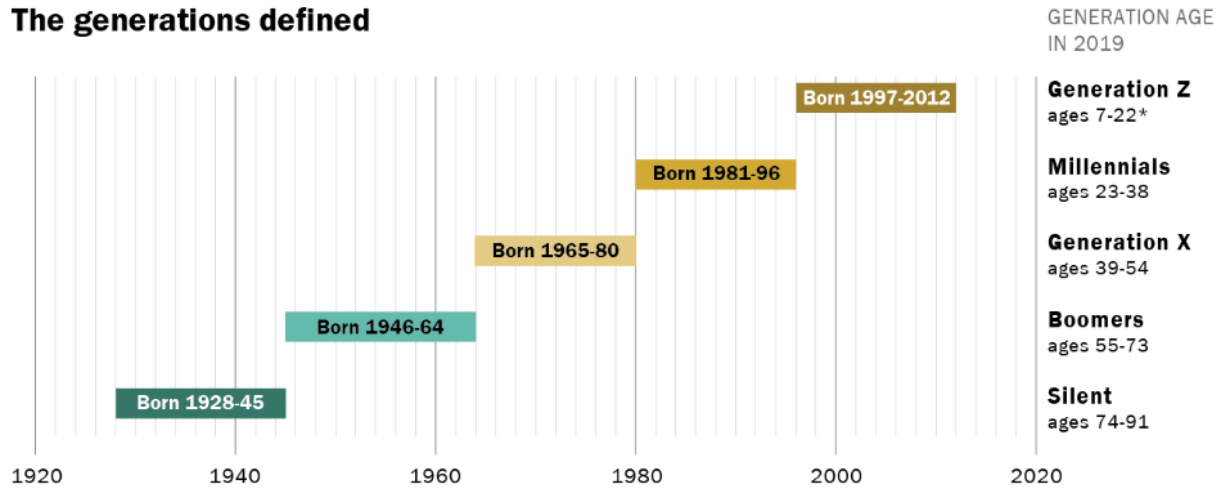


Heroine's Journey Arc by Maureen Murdock

(Heroine's Journey Project, n.d.)

Appendix C: The Generations

The generations defined



*No chronological endpoint has been set for this group. For this analysis, Generation Z is defined as those ages 7 to 22 in 2019.

(Pew Research Center, 2019)

Appendix D: IRB Clearance Artifacts

#17697 - Narratives of millennial mothers: Biblical literacy, womanhood, and the next generation of Christian education

Protocol Information

Review Type

Exempt

Status

Exempt

Approval Date

Jan 26, 2023

Continuing Review Date

Jan 26, 2024

Expiration Date

--

Initial Approval Date

Jan 26, 2023

Initial Review Type

Exempt

Feedback

Approval Comment

This research is exempt under the following category:

- Category 2(ii)

General Information

Principal Investigator

Damico, James

Lead Unit

BL-LGED - LITERACY, CULTURE AND LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Study Title

Narratives of millennial mothers: Biblical literacy, womanhood, and the next generation of Christian education

0100

Select your protocol type.

Exempt

Research Personnel

This Personnel list is for Research Personnel Only. For individuals who need access to the protocol but are not research personnel, add them to the **Permissions** tab.

For NEW studies and Amendments changing the PI, you must click on the pencil icon to complete all required information in the person record.

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Researcher Role

Co-PI

0144

IU Faculty, Staff or Student?

Yes

Permission Type

Full Access

0142

Training

- Behavioral/Social Science Researcher - Stage 2 - CITI
- 12/17/22 - 12/17/27

0109

COI Disclosure

Status: Approved

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Researcher Role

Principal Investigator (PI)

Home Unit

BL-EDUC - EDUCATION

0144

IU Faculty, Staff or Student?

Yes

Permission Type

Full Access

0142

Training

- Behavioral/Social Science Researcher - Stage 4 - CITI
- 03/04/21 - 03/03/26

0109

COI Disclosure

Status: Approved

For Expedited/Full Board or Request to rely on non-IU IRB protocol types, attach a CV for the Principal Investigator below.

People Attachments

0259

Are there any affiliated personnel you are unable to add because they were not found in the drop down list?

No

0195

Are you requesting that the IU IRB serve as the IRB of record for any *non-affiliated* researchers?

No

Conflict Of Interest

0110

Do any of the research personnel have a significant financial interest which could affect this research?

No

0114

Are any of the research personnel aware of an institutional conflict of interest which could affect or be affected by this research?

No

Research Basics

0102

Will the study be funded, fully or partly, by any of the following sources (this includes pass through funding)? Select all that apply.

No external funding

0832

Select all of the following participant types that will be included in the research.

None of the above

0800

The research includes: Select all options that apply.

Research involving data collection with subject interaction. This includes in person and online surveys, focus groups, interviews, benign behavioral interventions, and public observation when a researcher is participating in the activities being observed

Research Design

0150

Provide a brief statement (no more than 2 – 3 sentences) of the purpose of this study, in lay terms.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the ways Christian education experiences of millennial mothers have shaped their understandings of gender, and the ways these mothers are choosing to educate or not educate their child[ren] about biblical texts using narrative inquiry methods.

0812

Describe the research interactions or interventions and data collection methods for the study. Include the frequency and duration of each procedure or activity.

There will be one initial interview with each participant separately. The interviews will be 60-120 minutes in length. Follow up interviews will occur if additional information is needed, which will be between 30-120 minutes in length. Interviews will be recorded via Zoom.

0813

Will identifiable information be collected?

Yes

0814

If disclosed outside of the research, could subjects' data place them at risk of any of the following:

- criminal or civil liability
- damage to their financial standing,
- damage to their employability
- damage to their educational advancement

damage to their reputation

No

Research Settings

0116

Select all of the settings where the research interactions or interventions will take place.

Other

0121

Name or describe the school or other settings where the research interactions or interventions will take place.

Zoom

0122

Select one of the following as it relates to the other research settings.

Permission from the location is not required.

0123

Explain why permission from the location is not required.

Using Zoom will be private and accessible.

Confidentiality & Privacy

0133

Select any source of information listed below that will be used for the research, either to identify potential subjects or gather research data. Select all that apply.

None of the above

0135

Will any data generated as part of the research be entered into a subject's medical record?

No

0159

Describe where identifiable electronic subject data will be stored, and how it will be protected to ensure confidentiality (e.g. all electronic data will be collected and stored on only encrypted devices).

All electronic data will be collected and stored behind password protected and encrypted devices and accounts.

0162

Describe the procedures that will be used to ensure confidentiality of written/paper records that contain subjects' identifiable data.

There will be no written or paper records.

Transnational Research

0474

Does the research involve any of the following transnational components? *Select all that apply.*

None of the above

Eligibility and Recruitment

0816

List criteria used to determine that a subject is eligible to participate in this study.

millennial mother with biblical literacy education experience

0304

Will subjects be offered any of the following for their participation in the study? All of these are forms of payment. Select all that apply.

None of the above. No payment.

0307

Describe your recruitment process, including how subjects will be identified and contacted.

I am acquaintances with potential participants and will be contacted them via email. An initial post will be posted on my Facebook account to ask for other people who will be potentially interested. I will gather emails of possible participants.

0819

Describe how you will obtain permission from subjects to participate, which includes the following information:

They are being asked to participate in research,
What they will be asked to do,
Their participation is voluntary,
The risks and benefits of participation, and
Who to contact with any questions about the research.

This information will be included at the beginning of written materials, such as a survey, that will be completed by subjects.

0821

Will any member of the research team be in a position of authority (e.g. instructor and his/her students, manager and his/her employees) over the subjects?

No

Protocol Attachments

Select **+Add** Line to add each attachment

Select **Replace** to replace an existing document

Attachment Type

Informed Consent Statement

Attachment

[CONSENT FORM \(2\).DOCX](#)

Description

Attachment Type

Other

Attachment

[INTERVIEW PROTOCOL.DOCX](#)

Description

Attachment Type

Recruitment Materials

Attachment

[PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT.DOCX](#)

Description

Administrative Details Form

Protocol Details

9031

Protocol Type

Exempt

Billing Account #

Study Status

Submission Details

9029

Exempt Category

Category 2(ii): Interaction involving educational tests, surveys, interviews, or observation of public behavior & would not reasonably place subjects at risk

Protocol Determinations

9032

Check all determinations that need to be made.

9028

Other Determinations.

Appendix E: Data Collection Timeline

2023 January	Complete Institutional Review Board process
2023 March	Schedule interviews with participants
2023 April-June	Conduct interviews
2023 June-July	Schedule and conduct follow-up interviews if needed

Appendix F: Interview Protocol

Time of interview: _____

Date: _____

Place: _____

Interviewer: Samantha Bise

Interviewee: _____

Briefly describe project: I am interviewing a few mothers to learn how their life experiences, biblical literacy, and Christian education experiences have shaped the way they understand what it means to be a woman. I am also trying to learn how these moms are choosing to educate their children about the Bible, if at all.

Questions:

*These questions are adapted from Maureen Murdock's (1998) book, *The Heroine's Journey Workbook*. These questions will serve as the framework for the interview, but the direction of each interview will depend upon the participant. The highlighted questions are the questions I am most interested in uncovering with each participant.*

Stage 1: Separation from the feminine and Stage 2: Identification with the masculine and gathering of allies

- Describe your family growing up.
 - What was your relationship with your mother like? (p. 23)
 - What did your mother teach you about being a woman? A mother? (p. 23)

- Did you have female mentors or models in your Christian community who inspired you with the way they lived their lives?
(p. 23)
 - What was your relationship with your father like? (p. 24)
 - How did he show his love? (p. 25)
 - What message did he give you about being a woman? (p. 25)
 - Was there ever a time you didn't want to be female? Why? (For instance, maybe your brother had more freedom and privileges than you and you wanted to be like him.) (p. 24)
- Describe your family now.
 - What was it like for you to become a mother?
 - What are your roles and responsibilities in your family?
- Describe the Christian communities you have been a part of throughout your life.
 - What denominations?
 - What rites of passages?
 - What were you taught about the Bible?
 - What types of teaching and curriculum were used in your Christian education settings?
 - What was the role of women in your Christian communities?
 - What seemed to be the role of mothers in your Christian communities?
 - Was there ever a time you didn't want to be female in your Christian communities? Why? (p. 24)

Stage 3: Road of trials: meeting ogres and dragons and Stage 4: Finding the illusory boon of success

- In the context of your Christian community, tell me about a time when you were encouraged (directly or indirectly) to pursue something you wanted to pursue.
- In the context of your Christian community, tell me about a time you wanted to pursue something, but you were told (directly or indirectly) to play it safe.
- In the context of your Christian communities, what messages did you get (directly or indirectly) about what it means to be a woman? Mother?

Stage 5: Awakening to feelings of spiritual aridity: death and Stage 6: Initiation and descent to the Goddess

- Tell me about a time in your life when your relationship to Christianity was most changed and transformed.
 - Explain the descent, or the difficult stage of this transformation.
 - What did you give up during this time? (p. 61)
 - What did you reclaim during this time? How have you changed? (p. 61)

Stage 7: Urgent yearning to reconnect with the feminine and Stage 8: Healing the mother/daughter split

- What is your sense of yourself as a woman at this time in your life? As a mother? (p. 77)
- What is your current relationship with Christianity? The Bible?
- How do you balance the different roles in your life (daughter, mother, career, friend, wife, etc.)? (p. 77)
- Are you comfortable expressing your feelings? (p. 78)

- How do you express yourself creatively? (p. 78)
- What is your relationship to the Earth, to nature, to gardening? (p. 78)
- A few days ago, I sent you an excerpt from Genesis—the Adam and Eve story. What reactions do you have to this story—thoughts, feelings, experiences, etc.?

Stage 9: Healing the wounded masculine

- Who were the male leaders in your church community? What did you learn from them about what it means to be masculine? (p. 110)
 - Which of these qualities do you appreciate? Why?
 - Which of these qualities do you dislike? Why?

Stage 10: Integration of masculine and feminine

- What do you want your children to know about womanhood? About motherhood?
- How are you raising your children as it relates to religious education and biblical texts?
 - What Christian education will they be exposed to, if any?

Thank interviewee: Thank you for participating. Your confidentiality will be respected and no identifying information will be used in this project. What name would you like me to use for you in my research?

Appendix G: Artifactual Text

Excerpts from Genesis chapters 1-3, New Revised Standard Version

Chapter 1

27So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

Chapter 2

7then the Lord GOD formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. 8And the Lord GOD planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed.

...

18Then the Lord GOD said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner."

...

21So the Lord GOD caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. 22And the rib that the Lord GOD had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. 23Then the man said,

"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken."

Chapter 3

1Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" 2The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" 4But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; 5for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. 7Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. 8They heard the sound of the Lord GOD walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord GOD among the trees of the garden. 9But the Lord GOD called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" 10He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." 11He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" 12The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." 13Then the Lord GOD said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." 14The Lord GOD said to the serpent,

"Because you have done this,
cursed are you among all animals
and among all wild creatures;
upon your belly you shall go,

and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.

15I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel."

16To the woman he said,
"I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you."

17And to the man he said,
"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,
and have eaten of the tree
about which I commanded you,
'You shall not eat of it,'
cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
18thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.

19By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,

for out of it you were taken;

you are dust,

and to dust you shall return."

20The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living. 21And the Lord GOD made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.

22Then the Lord GOD said, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever" — 23therefore the Lord GOD sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. 24He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

Appendix H: Data Analysis Procedure

1. Transcribe interviews	a. Transcribe
	b. Memo emerging ideas and potential codes while transcribing
2. Reduce the data into themes by coding	a. First cycle coding: Code each segment by giving each segment a name
	b. Second cycle coding / narrative coding: Combine similar codes into broader themes of Heroine’s Journey stages
	c. In vivo coding: Locate “I” statements for later creation of I-Poems
	d. Thematic Coding
	e. Create codebook to illustrate coding process
3. Represent the data visually and/or in a discussion	a. Create a table or image to represent the analyzed data
	b. Write a discussion to setup each set of poems and write “I-Poems” (see McKenzie, 2021)
	c. Write discussion using thematic coding
	d. Send poems to participants for feedback and reactions

Appendix I: Reporting Research Findings

Introduction of written report	Focus on participants's stories
Description of research procedures	State rationale, significance of individual to experiences, and data procedures
Organization of research outcomes	Tell stories using restorying, theorizing, and narrative segments Use poetry to communicate findings
Concluding format	Interpret patterns of meaning Use <i>The Heroine's Journey</i> (Murdock, 1990) narrative patterns

(Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 106)

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- Smith, B., & Sparkes, A. C. (2006). Narrative inquiry in psychology: Exploring the tensions within. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(3), 169-192.
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- Trible, P. (1986). *God and the rhetoric of sexuality*. Fortress Press.
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- Walvord, B. E. (2008). *Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses*. Blackwell.
- Wilson, S. D. (2022). *Maiden to mother: Unlocking our archetypal journey into the mature feminine*. Sounds True.
- Zapruder, M. (2017). *Why poetry*. Harper Collins.

Curriculum Vitae

SAMANTHA BISE

Educator, writer, researcher, and published and award-winning poet with over 12 years of experience working with college students and teaching research and writing in a higher education setting. Passionate about adult learning pedagogy and teaching writing across genres and skill levels.

EDUCATION

Ed.D. Literacy, Culture, and Language Education, *Indiana University Bloomington*
2019-2023

M.S. Library and Information Science, *Clarion University of Pennsylvania* 2013-2016

B.A. English Professional Writing, Anthropology Minor, *Kutztown University* 2008-2013

WORK EXPERIENCE

Adjunct Instructor of Humanities, *Lehigh Carbon Community College* 2021-present

- Teach sociology, research, writing, and communication courses

Faculty Resource, *Lehigh Carbon Community College* 2023

- Tutored students with disabilities

Instructor of ESL, *Lehigh Carbon Community College* 2021-2022

- Taught adult learners non-credit ESL classes in grant-funded program

Adjunct Instructor of English and Information Literacy, *Central Penn College*
2018-2022

- Taught English composition and information literacy courses to first year college students online and face-to-face

Reference & Instruction Librarian, *Central Penn College* 2018-2021

- Taught course-specific research sessions
- Created and taught general education information literacy course
- Worked closely with English and general education faculty to incorporate research assignments and concepts throughout curriculum
- Conducted formative and summative assessments for information literacy instruction sessions and curriculum
- Served on college committees and task forces as needed
- Provided one-on-one research support to students

Outreach Librarian, *McDaniel College* 2016-2018

- Taught research sessions for first year students and graduate students

- Taught research methodology graduate courses
- Managed library marketing and social media accounts
- Led all programming in library

Program & Education Intern, U.S. Army Heritage & Education Center 2015-2016

- Provided historical learning resources for local educators
- Helped give museum tours
- Created research resources and online guides for researchers

Access Services Library Technician, Dickinson College 2014-2016

- Processed college interlibrary loan requests
- Supported faculty research by providing access to requested sources
- Managed circulation desk

Online Learning Program Coordinator, Capital Area Intermediate Unit 2013-2014

- Helped online educators teach effectively
- Managed program finances and online marketing

Library Resources Editor and Primary Author, Stage of Life, LLC 2012-2013

- Wrote and edited “library resources” section of weekly publication
- Edited student scholarship submissions

Lead Library Assistant, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania 2008-2012

- Managed circulation desk
- Supported students throughout their research process
- Connected students to campus resources

COMMUNITY & VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

High School Sunday School Teacher, St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tamaqua
2021-2022

- Teach high school students
- Fundraise and volunteer for community service projects

Board of Directors Secretary, Daystar Center for Spiritual Recovery 2019-2020

- Helped substance use recovery program with fundraising
- Assisted in identifying key stakeholders in community

Board of Directors Member, Perry County Literacy Council 2017-2019

- Assisted with budgeting and organizational decision-making

Poetry Out Loud Judge, National Endowment for the Arts 2019

- Judged and scored high school performers

Board of Trustees Vice President, Newport Public Library 2018-2019

- Appointed to help with finances, creation of policies, and programming

GED/HiSET Tutor, Perry County Literacy Council 2014-2018

- Taught writing and math to adult learners
- Helped adult learners break down barriers by connecting them to local resources
- Assisted students with resume writing and job applications

Book Club Coordinator, Newport Public Library 2017-2018

- Created, planned, and hosted the monthly book club at the local public library

Income Tax Assistance Volunteer, United Way of the Capital Region 2018

- Assisted low income and/or disabled members of the community complete their income taxes

Dancing with the Stars Fundraiser, East Pennsboro Education Foundation 2017

- Danced with other community members to raise funds for the local high school students

Silent Witness Peacekeeper, Silent Witness Peacekeeper Alliance 2016

- Helped members of the LBGT+ community have safe and peaceful events by providing conflict management services for event protestors

Children's Book Festival Tent Manager, Princeton Public Library 2015

- Helped organize and host book festival fundraiser

Archives and Special Collections Volunteer, Dickinson College 2015

ACADEMIC COMMITTEES AND APPOINTMENTS

Advisor of Writing Club, Knight Writers, Central Penn College 2019-2021

Member of President's Leadership Academy, Central Penn College 2019

Chair of Teaching, Learning, & Technology, PA Library Association 2018-2020

Member of First Year Writing Committee, Central Penn College 2018-2021

Member of Center for Teaching Excellence Steering Committee, Central Penn College
2018-2020

Member of General Education Task Force, Central Penn College 2018-2019

Event Planning Committee, Dickinson College, Waidner-Spahr Library 2014-2016

PRESENTATIONS

Bise, S. (2019, April 15). Professional poet visit and presentation [School presentation]. West Creek Hills Elementary School, Camp Hill, PA, United States

Bise, S. (2018, October 17). *Bringing the critical librarianship movement into the classroom* [Conference presentation], Pennsylvania Library Association Conference, Harrisburg, PA, United States.

https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.palibraries.org/resource/resmgr/2018_conference/ConferenceRegistration_2018F.pdf

Bise, S., Reed, E., Porterfield, D., Dutill, J. (2018, October 15). *A librarian poster about undergraduate poster sessions* [Conference poster presentation], Pennsylvania Library Association Conference, Harrisburg, PA, United States.

https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.palibraries.org/resource/resmgr/2018_conference/ConferenceRegistration_2018F.pdf

Bise, S. (2018, October 6). *Featured poet and reader* [Festival presentation], 35th Annual Little Buffalo Festival Writer's Nook, Newport, PA, United States. <https://littlebuffalofestival.org/>

Bise, S. (2018, April 24). *Bias in web searching* [Twitter chat moderator], CritLib. <http://critlib.org/bias-in-web-searching/>

Bise, S. (2015, October 23). *Marketing solutions for e-content* [Conference presentation], Associated College Libraries of Central Pennsylvania Conference, Harrisburg, PA, United States. <http://www2.aclcp.org/documents/program-fall2015flyer.pdf>

PUBLICATIONS

Peer-reviewed

Bise, S. (2020). The role of academic librarians in student learning: A comparative analysis of the Hogwarts librarian and muggle academic librarians. In M. P. Rovin & M. Wehler (Eds.), *Lessons from Hogwarts: Essays on the pedagogy of Harry Potter* (11-26). McFarland.

Academic

Bise, S. (2019). Learning is messy. Center for Teaching Excellence at Central Penn College. <http://blogs.centralpenn.edu/cte/>

Bise, S. (2018, August). Reflections from a young writer: Academic vs. creative writing. The Librarian Parlor. <https://libparlor.com/>

Bise, S. (2018). Citation as sport. Center for Teaching Excellence at Central Penn College. <http://blogs.centralpenn.edu/cte/>

Bise, S. (2018). Research assignments matter. Center for Teaching Excellence at Central Penn College. <http://blogs.centralpenn.edu/cte/>

Bise, S., McCulloch, S., Howard, J., & O'Brien Dermott, M. (2015). Marketing solutions for e-content. Dickinson Scholar. https://scholar.dickinson.edu/context/faculty_publications/article/1413/type/native/viewcontent

Bise, S. (2013). Library resources. Stage of Life. <https://www.stageoflife.com/>

Poetry

Bise, S. (2023). *they said*. Pennsylvania Bard's Eastern PA Poetry Review 2023.

Bise, S. (2020). *An ode to the COVID-19 quarantine*. *Write Now For All*.

Bise, S., & Epler, D. (Eds.). (2019). *Spines binded: A philanthropic publication*, Spines Binded Publishing.

Bise, S. (2018, May). *Competing colors*. *Anapest: A Journal of Poetry Excellence*.

Bise, S. (2018, May). *Collateral damage of addiction*. *Anapest: A Journal of Poetry Excellence*.

Bise, S. (2018). *The shells of marriage*. *Anapest: A Journal of Poetry Excellence*.

CONTINUING EDUCATION, CONFERENCES, & SEMINARS

Theological Graduate Certificate coursework , United Lutheran Seminary Introduction to Scripture History of Christianity	2020
American Library Association Annual Conference	2019
Shaping the Future of Libraries with Instructional Design Webinar	2019
Pennsylvania Library Association Annual Conference	2018
Research Methodologies (RSM 550) , McDaniel College	2017
Association of College and Research Libraries Annual Conference	2017
Library Marketing and Communications Conference	2017
Associated College Libraries of Central Pennsylvania Spring Conference	2016
Towson Conference for Academic Libraries	2016
Associated College Libraries of Central Pennsylvania Fall Conference	2015

PROFESSIONAL AWARDS

1st Place, Annual Awards for Poetic Excellence, Perry County Council of the Arts	<i>2021</i>
Faculty Member of the Quarter, Central Penn College	<i>2019</i>
1st Place, Annual Awards for Poetic Excellence, Perry County Council of the Arts	<i>2019</i>
2nd Place, Annual Awards for Poetic Excellence, Perry County Council of the Arts	<i>2018</i>
3rd Place, Annual Awards for Poetic Excellence, Perry County Council of the Arts	<i>2018</i>
Rookie of the Year Award, Central Penn College	<i>2018</i>
Library Employee Star Recognition, American Library Association	<i>2017</i>

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

GED/HiSET Reading, Writing, and Mathematics

100-level Information Literacy

100-level English Composition

100-level Speech

100-level Sociology

100-level First Year Seminar

500-level Action Research

500-level Educational Research Methodologies

500-level Writing and Information Literacy

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

Academy of American Poets

American Library Association

Association of College and Research Libraries

Pennsylvania Library Association (PaLA)

Pennsylvania Prison Society

PaLA's College & Research Division

PaLA's Teaching, Learning & Technology Round Table