

Highland

Continued from Page 1D

the nation but the church and the women's rights movement as well. "The Woman's Bible," as Stanton well knew, would be controversial, but like her mentor Lucretia Mott, she was unafraid of being called a heretic, an infidel and worse.

For "The Woman's Bible," Stanton gathered women scholars to join her in a close reading of all biblical passages concerning women. Raised in the Presbyterian church, Stanton knew the Bible well enough to begin her introduction with strong words: "From the inauguration of the movement for woman's emancipation the Bible has been used to hold her in the 'divinely ordained sphere,' prescribed in the Old and New Testaments." As she saw it, civil and canon laws, creeds and scriptures of nearly all denominations grow directly from this traditional view of women.

She wastes no time wrestling with the text. In Genesis she finds that God created both man and woman "in his own image, male and female." As the Hebrew text presents the story of creation, "masculine and feminine were equally represented" in the Creator. Therefore, Stanton can see no reason for not addressing prayers to "an ideal Heavenly Mother ... as well as to a Father."



Elizabeth Cady Stanton, mother of seven and a mother of the women's rights movement.

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As for the position of woman in the story, Stanton notes that "equal dominion is given to woman over every living thing, but not one word is said giving man dominion over woman."

Her cadre of scholars comment on many passages throughout the Hebrew Bible. Before they tackle the Christian scriptures, one scholar states, "Now we are coming to understand the Bible better than to worship it as an idol." It is a book that should not be "exalted

above reason" but seen "in its true light—a book in which many a bright jewel has been buried under some rubbish ... a book which is not above the application of reason and common sense."

Stanton opens her commentary on the Christian portion of the Bible with a question: "Does the New Testament bring promises of new dignity and of larger liberties for woman?" Her answer: "While there are grand types of women presented under both religions [Judaism and Christianity], there is no difference in the general estimate of the sex." Her "inferior position" even seems more pronounced in these later scriptures.

As for Mary, Stanton thinks her famous son owed his virtues to the character of his mother. Joseph has a "questionable position" in the story and "if a Heavenly Father was necessary, why not a Heavenly Mother?" After taking on the virgin birth and the trinity, Stanton explains that "Jesus taught us, as no one else has ever done, the humanness of God and the divinity of [humanity]" and because of this he deserves "the reverence of the world."

A thoughtful reading of "The Woman's Bible" is enlightening, on Mother's Day, or any day that honors our humanity and human rights.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.