



Season 11: Episode 6 | Marion Taylor | How Did Women Since 320 AD Interpret the Bible?

Hello and welcome to Scripture Untangled, a podcast by the Canadian Bible Society. My name is Joanna la Fleur. I'm a friend of the Canadian Bible Society and I'm going to be your guide for today's episode.

Today, we feature Dr. Marion Taylor, interviewed by seasoned journalist Lorna Dueck. Our guest today, Dr. Marion Taylor, is Professor of Old Testament and Graduate Director at Wycliffe College, University of Toronto. With a PhD from Yale, Marion has spent her career uncovering how people, and especially women, throughout history have interpreted Scripture.

Her award-winning *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters* and her more recent *Voices Long Silenced*, co-authored with Joy Schroeder, has recovered the stories and writings of more than 400 women whose contributions to Biblical interpretations were long forgotten. Marion is the author of many other books and outside the classroom, she loves that she's a proud grandmother and she does reading, writing, and walking alongside her family and her dog at their cottage in Northern Ontario.

Dr. Marion Taylor now joins Lorna Dueck for the conversation as we rediscover women's voices in Scripture and what they can teach us today.

Scripture Untangled

Season 11: Episode 6 | Marion Taylor | How Did Women Since 320 AD Interpret the Bible?

Lorna Dueck: Well hello Dr. Marion Taylor, lovely to meet you here.

Dr. Marion Taylor: Well, it's great to be with you today. Thank you.

Lorna Dueck: Our daughters are good friends, but you and I have never had a conversation, a good conversation.

We've had a few words, but we haven't had a good conversation. So, like so much in both of our work, we do it in these kind of formats. So welcome to Scripture Untangled.

And I'm just thrilled that we're finally visiting. Thank you.

Dr. Marion Taylor: Yes, that's great.

Lorna Dueck: Well, let's start with this wonderful book, not your latest book, but boy, it is just a jewel. It is just a jewel. *The Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*.

And look at folks, it's not a little book, but it's got many small, short biographies in it. So, you can just read bedtime stories, 180 of them. It's awesome.

Dr. Taylor, start with telling us what a Biblical interpreter is.

Dr. Marion Taylor: That's a very good question. And it's not a straightforward question, because there's the way a scholar would answer that question.

And then there's the way that I would answer that question in light of finding all these voices of women from the past, who did not have a theological education, or who were not allowed to write the kind of Biblical commentaries that the men were writing. In fact, they were forbidden from doing that in many cases. So Biblical interpretation, as I understand it, is any act of interpreting the Bible through various media.

So, most women, or many women interpreted the Bible in the letters they wrote to one another, or to their children, or to prominent university people. So, letter writing

Scripture Untangled

Season 11: Episode 6 | Marion Taylor | How Did Women Since 320 AD Interpret the Bible?

is a place, a vehicle for Biblical interpretation, where they put out what they thought about verses and texts and whole books. Poetry is something women wrote as they reflected on the Bible.

I would say even Biblical translation, or translation is a method of Biblical interpretation. If you compare, you know, if you know more than one language and read the Bible in two different languages, you know that there's a little bit of a difference, or even the multiple translations in English, that's Biblical interpretation, because the person translating is interpreting, should this Greek word mean this or this, and the choice does affect how you hear the text. So, women wrote, you know, for children, for adults.

And I think, so Biblical interpretation takes many forms, it even takes the form of the arts, right? That in, not in the handbook, but in the later book we wrote, we did include examples of women interpreting the Bible through music and art. There's a very famous quilt that's on display at the Smithsonian Institute. And it has, I think, 299 pieces of material.

And it tells many of the Biblical stories. So, this black freed slave made quilts that told the story of salvation on a quilt. That for me, that is Biblical interpretation, because you see how she's interpreting Jacob's letter story.

I mean, I think she's interpreting it Christologically. So anyway, these, I think when you expand the definition of even preaching, is preaching just what you do behind a pulpit? Or is preaching something many 19th century women did in their novels?

Lorna Dueck: Wow. Wow.

Dr. Marion Taylor: Harriet Beecher Stowe did it all the time in her *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. And then she's got this lesser known novel called *The Minister's Wooing*, where this older 18th century cleric tries to woo this young woman. But in the story, it's this young woman named Mary, who interprets Scripture in a much more effective way than the dogmatic older theologian.

Scripture Untangled

Season 11: Episode 6 | Marion Taylor | How Did Women Since 320 AD Interpret the Bible?

And Stowe is making a comment there that women are good interpreters. And she has her black character also preach to do more effective pastoral care than a white minister. So, she's saying a lot about Biblical interpretation, right?

Lorna Dueck: Yeah, yeah.

I have not seen that in those writings. But I know when you mentioned that it's awesome to look for that. Amazing.

Dr. Marion Taylor: Yeah, absolutely.

Lorna Dueck: Okay, so you're just tipping us off already to one of the 180 biography and insights that are in the book that are so beautiful. But even as an Old Testament professor, you write that you were late in your career to discover this overlooked topic of women Biblical interpreters.

Explain that for us.

Dr. Marion Taylor: Right. So, I was always interested in the history of the interpretation of the Bible.

And I did my doctoral dissertation on how the Old Testament was interpreted at Princeton Seminary in the 19th century as they wrestled with German higher criticism. So, I knew the 19th century very well. And so, when I started to look for women, I was focusing initially on 19th century women.

But I so my training is in Old Testament, right? And the history of how the Old Testament has been read. But in all the textbooks, there were no women interpreters, right? That I had never read any early woman interpreter in the Bible in all my training. And in like a handbook of a handbook of Biblical interpretation, there are no women in there.

And in the most recent ones, maybe there's Hildegard of Bingen, and two modern feminist, important feminist's, Phyllis Terbil, and Fiorenza, a New Testament scholar.

Scripture Untangled

Season 11: Episode 6 | Marion Taylor | How Did Women Since 320 AD Interpret the Bible?

So, when a student in my class asked if she could do a paper on a woman interpreter of the Bible, I thought, wow, who is before the 1970s and 80s? I didn't know any. And that I so that was when my children, I have three children, adult children now, but when they were little, right, and I thought, I'm a really busy mom, I don't have time to take on this big project.

And I was talking to a publisher, and he said, oh, Marian, this is a great idea to find women interpreters, come up with 100 women. And you could do short, medium and long entries. And I thought, right, how can I do that? But the question was just, it just gnawed away at me.

So, then I started to look for women interpreters. I found a book written by a Canadian English scholar on women interpreters of the Bible. And I thought, oh, somebody's already done it.

But her book does introduce some women's voices, but not very many. And it wasn't, she was an English scholar. So, I was looking for more in-depth Biblical interpretation.

So, then I began to discover in the works of historians and English scholars and French scholars who were already recovering forgotten women in literature, many women engaged, when they wrote, they engaged the Bible. So, I began to network with scholars in many different fields. And that's why so many of the entries are written by, what they're written by very many scholars from different countries with different expertise.

Lorna Dueck: Yeah, you put a collection of people together of scholars that wrote these for us here.

Dr. Marion Taylor: That's right. And a lot are Canadian, because I called on my Canadian friends.

And of course, nobody had ever read their work. So, I said, could you write a piece on this woman? And they did. And they did a great job.

Scripture Untangled

Season 11: Episode 6 | Marion Taylor | How Did Women Since 320 AD Interpret the Bible?

Lorna Dueck: Okay, I think we got to give an example here of a word.

Dr. Marion Taylor: Okay.

Lorna Dueck: Tell me one of your favorites from the book, one of your favorites.

Dr. Marion Taylor: I have too many. There are many women in that book that really changed my life or gave me inspiration. And one of them is Harriet Beecher Stowe, actually.

Because, you know, I knew her as an author. But I had not read her Biblical interpretation. But as I, but we know a lot about her.

I mean, her diaries, or we know sometimes too much about her private life from her diaries. But she was a woman with many children who had to multitask. And when I read the story of how she wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she talked about being in the kitchen with an apron on that had a big pocket.

And in the pocket was the manuscript of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. So, between breastfeeding, and she was, you know, answering the door, where the fishmonger was selling fish, she could buy for dinner, she wrote, you know, paragraph by paragraph. And then she made a lot of money on the book.

And what did she do but build an extension to the house where she could have an office. And she could hire a nanny to look after her kids, so she could write more.

Lorna Dueck: I hear you were a young mom researching yourself going, yeah, got to get published.

Dr. Marion Taylor: Absolutely. And she was married to an Old Testament scholar. And they have lovely stories about sitting around the stove at night.

And she'd be she has a book on women in the Bible. And he would say, well, have you thought of this, you can include this. So, in her writings, there are a lot of insights from Biblical scholars.

Scripture Untangled

Season 11: Episode 6 | Marion Taylor | How Did Women Since 320 AD Interpret the Bible?

So, she benefited from his wisdom and used his wisdom. And she was also actually critical of her husband, and Old Testament scholarship. And she would say, she would say, you know, you are spending too much time reading all these German scholars and critical scholars, you need to spend more time with Jesus.

So, she was a very powerful woman. So, you know, I didn't have very many female mentors. In my journey toward becoming professor, I had one female teacher at Yale, and she died of cancer, but she was important to me as a model.

But then when I found all these women in the past, they were dead mentors to me. And they did things that I did not know women in the early generations did. And when, you know, I went to Robert's library in Toronto, and I had found a book, a grammatical analysis of the *Hebrew Psalter*, written by Julia Gresswell, in the 1860s.

And I thought, wow, and it was used as a textbook at Oxford. And I thought, wow, women were writing textbooks in the 19th century. And then when I found commentaries, whole commentaries on the Bible written by women in the 19th century, I was astounded.

Lorna Dueck: You know, you mentioned Robert's library for our listeners that set the University of Toronto, and it's not an easy access place, it is for you, because you live there. But you did many mystery hunting's, sort of like, you took some very far-reaching steps, you sent, you flew research assistants out to go find original books that couldn't cross the ocean. Tell me a little bit about that, about how far reaching the research is for women interpreters.

Dr. Marion Taylor: Well, and in the early days, especially, it was very far reaching, because, like, I would find a name of a book and think and look on the library website, and they didn't have it interlibrary loan didn't have it. So, I thought, how do I get it. And that's when I started to use bookstores and started to buy books, right? I didn't want first editions or anything like that, because I knew I would have to photocopy them, and use them like so they would probably get wrecked.

Scripture Untangled

Season 11: Episode 6 | Marion Taylor | How Did Women Since 320 AD Interpret the Bible?

But so, I did, I got some grant money, and two women, one was a Scottish woman was going home for the summer, and she went to the libraries in Scotland and photocopied things for me. And another one went to the British library and photocopied things. But since the early 2000s, libraries have been digitizing their holdings.

So now, on Google Books, you find many women interpreters, right? And you can access their writings. And I think this summer, well, this past I've been on sabbatical, and I'm working on the 16th century German women who are, yeah, most of them are not in this book, because I didn't know any of them at that point. I guess a few were in the book, but not very many.

So even libraries in Germany are now discovering things in their archives that they didn't know about, right? There was, and so they're scanning them, they're putting them up for open access to the public. And they're often in, like the ones I've been working on, it's Gothic handwriting, handwritten books by women.

Lorna Dueck: That's incredible.

And I was so encouraged as I was understanding where your research is all going, how deep and rich and, you know, truly historic the application of women's minds to understanding the Bible is.

Dr. Marion Taylor: Oh, absolutely.

Lorna Dueck: Okay, tell us how these women were devoted to that call of, of interpreting the Bible.

I love what you said about Harriet Beecher Stowe, you guys got to spend more time with Jesus. Tell me just what kind of sacrifices these women made.

Dr. Marion Taylor: Well, many women, certainly from 500 to 1500, the women who were interpreting and writing were women who were in the monastic tradition,

Scripture Untangled

Season 11: Episode 6 | Marion Taylor | How Did Women Since 320 AD Interpret the Bible?

because that's where women were educated, right? So, a woman chose to be a nun, and many of the monasteries were places of education.

We have women, they knew Latin, they read the Church Fathers. So, these women in the monasteries were ones who had a very fine theological education. And they wrote a lot about Scripture.

So, we have those women. And a lot of them chose that as a privileged life, and they knew their life was privileged in that way. Other women, the early women, they were like all women who were literate, were privileged, right? So, they had wealthy fathers, clerical family members who thought, or who realized that my daughter's really smart, right? I should give her a theological education.

Or the women who realized my brothers are getting an education, why am I not? And they would sneak under the table and learn what their brothers were learning. So, women had a thirst for knowledge. And they're exceptional women who just, you know, they were recognized as very smart and had something to say.

Lorna Dueck: This, you have collected women from the year 320 to 2002 in this volume.

Dr. Marion Taylor: Yeah, you had to be dead to be in the book.

Lorna Dueck: Yeah.

I guess I just wonder what happened to, well, we have so many women interpreters, but their path seems, we can't even begin to compare it because of just the difference, but I just, the zeal that I see in these early women interpreters kind of just blows my mind. So, let's, let's dig into some more examples. Let's, give us another one of your favorites from the book.

Dr. Marion Taylor: Katarina Schützel is a German woman who, I'm very inspired by her. She was from a privileged family and was given a beautiful Bible at age 10. It was handwritten and, illuminated.

Scripture Untangled

Season 11: Episode 6 | Marion Taylor | How Did Women Since 320 AD Interpret the Bible?

And she read the Bible, but the priests in her, like this is pre-Luther, right? So, the priest did not think she should be reading the Bible. And she was discouraged from reading the Bible, but she had a very deep struggle, spiritual struggle, and really wanted to find peace with God. So, when in the early, like Luther's, we're talking about the early decades of the 16th century, a reform, many Catholic priests were sort of influenced by Luther and Matthew Zell was a Catholic priest and had a church.

And she started to go, was a member of his church. And as he introduced things like salvation by faith and faith alone, and the importance of Scripture and Scripture reading, she became an ardent reader of Scripture because now, like this is the time when the Bibles were translated into the vernacular. So, she could read the Bible in German, and she knows the Bible very well.

And some Catholic priests were influenced by Luther's teaching that you didn't need to be celibate. So, she and Matthew decided as a testament to her, to their faith, they would marry. And he decided that she would be his co-minister, my partner in ministry.

This is in the 1600s, right? And so, they had a parish, like they lived, they must have lived in a big hall because there were, at one point she had 60 men living who had been expelled from their town. She was serving them in meals and things like that. And she wrote a letter to the wives who were left alone on the farm saying, be courageous, be like Abraham, like, you can do this, right? And you should be there for your husband.

So, she wrote pastoral letters. And she wrote, it's the daring pamphlet she wrote to the university, to the bishop to say, you know, clergy marriage is okay. And where do you see in the Bible that, you know, clergy have to be single and she's using all these verses that Paul says marriage is good, you know, and she said, if clergy were celibate, if clergy married, they wouldn't have all these unlawful marriages and children.

Scripture Untangled

Season 11: Episode 6 | Marion Taylor | How Did Women Since 320 AD Interpret the Bible?

So many clergy in Germany had their, had live in housekeepers who are really like a concubine. And there were a lot of children born to those marriages. And there was a tax to support the children of priests.

So, she shows she writes a letter saying no, this does not is not supported in the Bible. So, she's a very good Biblical interpreter. And, and when her husband dies, she preaches at the graveside.

Oh, so it's like, wow, these women are doing things that we didn't know women could do or should do. And later in her career after she takes on the role of a widow and widows, and Timothy have an important role. So, she, she embraces that she's very respected.

She knows Luther, she goes to conferences. And she, the men, this is the time later in the 1560s and 70s, when denominations are splitting up. And she goes to, she buries two sisters, who are Anabaptists that the other men refuse to bury.

And because she had the sense that we are all Christians, we shouldn't be dividing up like this. So, their stories inspire me. They made me I think, wow, I want to meet these women, right? Because they were very courageous.

They were. Yeah, and a lot of the men, of course, didn't think they should be writing. And, you know, some women wrote and they, you know, one woman, the people fired her husband because he allowed her to write these things. And they said, you know, you should cut her fingers off so she can't write. So, women had a lot of challenges, right?

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Scripture Untangled

Season 11: Episode 6 | Marion Taylor | How Did Women Since 320 AD Interpret the Bible?

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And the link for this and everything else, as always, is down in the show notes.

Lorna Dueck: You write in your other in your earlier work or your later work, sorry, your later work *Voices Long Silenced*, you wrote, prior to the 1400s, almost every woman who wrote a book believed she was the first woman to do so.

Dr. Marion Taylor: That's right.

Lorna Dueck: So, they were all they all felt like they were breaking ground as they were interpreting the Bible.

Dr. Marion Taylor: That's right. Because they didn't have access to the writings of the previous generation.

Because women's writings were not passed on. Women's writings are not part of the great books' tradition. Because the great books are the great intellects, the great ministers, but they're not women.

Lorna Dueck: I want to just pull out a controversial person out of the *Handbook of Women's Voices* here. And that's Florence Nightingale.

I was surprised you included her. But because she doubts the Christian faith, she puts a scientific mind into what was very literal Biblical interpretations of her day. Tell me why you included Florence Nightingale.

I wouldn't describe her as a believer, would you?

Scripture Untangled

Season 11: Episode 6 | Marion Taylor | How Did Women Since 320 AD Interpret the Bible?

Dr. Marion Taylor: I would.

Lorna Dueck: Oh, you would. Okay.

Dr. Marion Taylor: I would. A heretic. So, when I was putting together the handbook, Lynn MacDonald, who lives in Toronto, was putting together and publishing 17 volumes of Florence Nightingale's work.

Lorna Dueck: Wow.

Dr. Marion Taylor: And one of the early books she published was her annotated Bible. So, Florence Nightingale had a Bible that in between the written pages were blank pages.

And she wrote her notes. She was very devout in terms of reading through the Bible. And she knew many languages because her father gave his two daughters the equivalents of a Cambridge education.

She knew French and Italian and German. So, she was actually reading the recent scholarship coming out of Germany. So, she appropriated some of the more critical attitudes toward the Bible, historical criticism, for example.

So, her ideas about the Bible were influenced by scholars. And an English scholar, Benjamin Jowett, who was at Oxford, was a very good friend of hers. And they communicated.

So, we have her Bible. And so, I went through it looking for how she as a woman responded to all the passages in the Bible on women. And she did not.

So, unlike most women, most women are very interested in what the Bible has to say about women, especially like Genesis 1 to 3, if Eve caused all sin and the Catholic tradition was like, we all women are like Eve, you're sinners and so on. And not that we aren't sinners, but you're responsible for sin, right? All women are responsible for sin.

Scripture Untangled

Season 11: Episode 6 | Marion Taylor | How Did Women Since 320 AD Interpret the Bible?

Lorna Dueck: She was more scientific.

Dr. Marion Taylor: She was scientific. But if you read her comments on the Psalms, she'll have a date and say, December 3, Scutari. So, when she was a nurse in the Crimea, caring for all these dying soldiers, she identified with the suffering servant in Isaiah and with the lamenting psalmist.

So, Scripture, God was a big part of her life and spoke to her even. So, I think her experience of life made her doubt, like her love of all people made her doubt teachings about hell.

Right? So in that way, she's not orthodox, but she continued even in her, ... Lynn MacDonald would say she had post-traumatic stress. And so she was very isolated later in her life. But she had Benjamin Jowett come to, you know, give her communion.

And she wrote sermons that he preached. So, she continued on in her Christian life and struggled, you know, in the 19th century, there are many issues that came up like evolution in the Bible, right? The geology.

Lorna Dueck: And she was encountering them all with a scientific mind.

Dr. Marion Taylor: Absolutely, she was. I mean, she created the pie chart. I didn't know that.

Lorna Dueck: Yeah. Okay. I could go down the rabbit hole with you with each one of these amazing 180 women.

Let's jump several centuries to Henrietta Mears, who stepped into the public eye in California, 1928. You write 400 men entered full time Christian ministry. As a result of her teaching, Billy Graham, there was Bill Bright, who founded Campus Crusade for Christ and Jim Webern, who founded Young Life.

Tell us about Henrietta Mears.

Scripture Untangled

Season 11: Episode 6 | Marion Taylor | How Did Women Since 320 AD Interpret the Bible?

Dr. Marion Taylor: It was very interesting. I found on my bookshelf a book.

This is a book I had very early on. And I hadn't thought about this before, that probably she's the first, like when I read this book, she would have been an example of a woman Bible teacher. So maybe in some ways, she influenced me directly.

But her story is really interesting, because she was well educated. She went to university; she became a schoolteacher. And then she moved to Hollywood, where she became a Sunday school teacher.

And it must have been a very big church, because I think they had what 650, like this, the number of children in their Sunday school was 1000s. In the end, she developed Sunday school curriculum, the gospel light series, like Sunday school material, she was she was very important. Her whole life was educating children, youth and adults.

And she was very involved in this mentoring young men. And so, she really was pushing men to study the Bible and take the gospel message seriously and go into ministry. So, I looked in the intro to her book.

And there is a quote by Billy Graham, that says, I've known Dr. Henrietta for approximately 15 years, she is remarkable influence both directly and indirectly on my life. In fact, I doubt if any other woman outside my wife and mother had such a marked influence, her gracious spirit, her devotional life, her steadfastness for the simple gospel, and her knowledge of the Bible have been a continual inspiration and amazement to me. And his last line is, she is certainly one of the greatest Christians I've ever known.

That's Billy Graham. So, I had forgotten that quote, but her Bible, like she taught these adult Bible classes. And she was not a scholar of Greek and Hebrew, she read the English Bible, and she focused on the content of the Bible, the shape of books.

Scripture Untangled

Season 11: Episode 6 | Marion Taylor | How Did Women Since 320 AD Interpret the Bible?

And she believed that the Bible continued to speak to the present. So, she would apply it devotionally to the lives of her peers, and people in the day like she was born in. Well, I have her dates here...

But I mean, she's 20th century. And she considered herself an equal to the men, even though she didn't seek ordination, but she was a very powerful woman.

Lorna Dueck: Okay, great example.

Henrietta Mears, yes, your book tells us she was 73 years old when she passed away, born in 1890. So absolutely used her career in a phenomenal way. What are the lessons today for us as we go through that history, like all the way back, and you go as to the earlier centuries, right up to, you know, 1973? What are the lessons overall for us about the history of women interpreters?

Dr. Marion Taylor: Well, I think on a personal level, when women encounter foremothers of faith, it empowers them.

It's like, I am not the first one. People who look like me did this before, right? You, if you see it, you can be it. So that's why in the in *Voices Long Silenced*, we included as many global voices as we could.

And I remember, we were having a lecture at Wycliffe, the power to change, and that I showed pictures of some of the early interpreters. And there was a black woman, a Chinese woman, and other people who were not white. And the woman who was the chair was a black, young black student.

And she said, I had no idea about these 19th century women who preached and were daring. And it was so inspiring to her. And I think if you knew that women before you were ordained, and did social justice work, it's like, I can do it.

So, that's on a personal level. And I feel and I teach a course on women interpreters of the Bible, and it does, it changes you. It's like, wow, I'm not alone, it gives you a history, right? It connects you to the past.

Scripture Untangled

Season 11: Episode 6 | Marion Taylor | How Did Women Since 320 AD Interpret the Bible?

You're not alone. And that's empowering. But in the bigger picture, I think this is where it has huge significance in the contemporary debates in the evangelical world, anyway, about roles of women.

And the narrative put out by certain groups is, it's always been this way. Like women should always be, women were created to be subordinate. And that's the way it is.

And it's called in some circles, the new patriarchy. But that's not true. It has not always been this way.

Right? That there have been great women who've come before us, who have been blessed by God, and done all kinds of things that they think women shouldn't do. Right? Yeah. And so, all our history books have to be rewritten to include women.

Lorna Dueck: Okay, last, last question. I know we're almost out of time here. I could, we could talk for much more.

But give us some advice for going personal with the Bible in our homes, in our lives with our children.

Dr. Marion Taylor: Well, I've been very inspired by the 16th century figures, Luther, in particular, who believed that, like he spent a lot of time making sure that the Bible was in the vernacular, but also his sermons were available. And he wrote songs, right, that Scripture based songs, and believed that in the home, you should have family worship times when you're reading the Bible and studying the Bible and teaching the Bible to your children.

And I found a woman, Hamar, who put the lessons, like they were using, Luther used the lectionary, right? She put the lectionary readings of the epistles into song for children, so that kids could sing the gospel. And a guy had done it for put all the gospel lessons in into rhymed songs using great memorable tunes for children to learn the story of God.

Lorna Dueck: In the 1600s.

Scripture Untangled

Season 11: Episode 6 | Marion Taylor | How Did Women Since 320 AD Interpret the Bible?

Dr. Marion Taylor: In the 1600s. So, you wonder how, why did the faith get passed on so effectively, because it was being done in the home.

And Luther said, when women are, you know, rocking their babies to sleep, and singing lullabies, they should be singing Scripture. So, I was just so inspired, because a lot of the little ditties I learned in Sunday school, they were silly little ditties, right? But these were not these were Scripture based songs. So, anything we can do to teach Scripture in the home is really important.

Lorna Dueck: All right, I think that's a clarion call to us at the Canadian Bible Society to think about that. Thank you for your more than 30-year career as a leader in Biblical studies. Enjoy these years of mentoring kids as you go back to school or back to the classroom in fall.

And thank you so much. Just encourage our audience that this is a wonderful, good bedtime volumes. And you have you have more recent books.

And Marianne, we will have all the links to us in this one.

Dr. Marion Taylor: This one is the latest one. And it it's in an audio form, which is kind of cool, right?

Lorna Dueck: Yeah, you know, we will put the link in the show notes.

Okay. Professor Marianne Taylor at Wycliffe College in Toronto. Thank you so much for spending this time with us.

Dr. Marion Taylor: Okay, it's my privilege.