

BIBLE WOMEN

ALL THEIR WORDS AND WHY THEY MATTER

EXPANDED SECOND EDITION



LINDSAY HARDIN FREEMAN

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**Forward
Movement**

inspire disciples.empower evangelists.

BIBLE WOMEN

ALL THEIR WORDS AND WHY THEY MATTER

LINDSAY HARDIN FREEMAN

Forward Movement
in partnership with the
Episcopal Church Women

*Dedicated to all women and girls
who have been beaten, used, abused, raped, thrown away
who have died on street corners
in lonely fields
on their doorsteps
in refugee camps
who have spoken, screamed, or cried
whose words were not remembered or understood
and to those who could not speak
who were silenced, beaten back
their cries known to You alone.*

*Restore them, Lord
renew them
make them whole
on earth
as it is in heaven.*

WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO:

Susan Webster

Christy Stang

Joyce White

Leonard Freeman

Richelle Thompson

WHAT READERS ARE SAYING

Author and visionary Lindsay Hardin Freeman brings us another great leap forward in comprehension of the realities of women in the Bible, coupled with some of the greatest theologians across the centuries. Her diligent analysis of every line uttered by women in scripture delivers startling insights never before analyzed, nor understood, as parts of a deeper message regarding the female half of the human species. This gender, as we all know, is in desperate need of a healthier level of interaction and with *Bible Women: All Their Words and Why They Matter*, Lindsay Hardin Freeman offers us hope for a fresh platform of progress.

Barbara Forster

Human rights activist

A thoroughly researched, biblical resurrection of women in scripture, *Bible Women: All Their Words and Why They Matter* excavates what the church has too often buried—the words and deeds of women. Profoundly, this new edition elevates women at the margins and pairs them in conversation with women throughout church history. It's brilliant! Thank you, thank you, thank you!

Mimi Haddad, PhD

President of CBE (Christians for Biblical Equality) International

Lindsay Hardin Freeman makes visible the women in the Bible who are in plain sight, and she lets us hear them speak. Their voices resound with courage, humor, lamentation, and faith.

The Very Rev. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge

Dean and president, Seminary of the Southwest

Reading *Bible Women* is an opportunity to get reacquainted with not only the stories of biblical women but also to reflect anew on their words and actions. Included here are some of the most familiar biblical women and, importantly, some of those not frequently the focus of study but introduced here with devotion and respect. An excellent resource for individual and group prayer and reflection.

The Rev. Dr. Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, PhD, EdD

Professor of practical theology and religious education

Claremont School of Theology

Editor-in-chief, *Anglican and Episcopal History*

Author Lindsay Hardin Freeman deftly coaxes into high relief the muffled voices of women in the Bible. We see ourselves in their anguish, estrangement, and life-giving passion and meet them in those very places in our lives. Each page calls us to be a daughter of God by stepping out of the past to share our own stories of transformation and learn the ways of God from one another.

Cynthia Cornett Carson

Daughters of the King

Lindsay Hardin Freeman has provided a great gift to the women of our church and to all people searching for relevance in even the smallest of words and action. As she writes in her introduction, “Their words are meant for us.” Here is a fascinating offering for group study and personal reflection from this consummate storyteller and teacher.

The Rev. Nancy R. Crawford

Former president, Episcopal Church Women

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*Women are listed the first time they speak in the Bible. Women who speak in more than one book of the Bible are listed again in parentheses. See individual chapter descriptions for full descriptions.

SUGGESTIONS FOR USE

IF YOU ARE READING ON YOUR OWN...

Find a quiet spot, perhaps over coffee in the morning. Make reading this book and/or other theological books part of your spiritual journey each day. Talk to God first, then read. Underline any surprises or issues that come up. Fold down the page corners of those stories which inspire you, make you angry, or leave you in tears. Put sticky notes in your favorite stories for future reference. These bold Bible women would want you to respond to what you are reading; make the book a dog-eared friend.

IF YOU ARE READING WITH A GROUP...

While not essential, try to read the assigned chapter and Bible reading before gathering; doing so will give you more time to process each story. Start with a check-in (“How was your week?”) and an opening prayer, perhaps something like this:

God, we have come together in your name to study your Word as it is revealed to us in scripture. Guide our hearts and minds so that we are open to your Spirit and to each other. Help us to hear what you would have us hear and see what you would have us see. As we share our burdens and joys, we ask that you send your Spirit over this troubled world, healing all strife and binding up all wounds. All this we say in the name of your Son, who leads us to wholeness, freedom and peace. Amen.

Read the assigned chapter out loud in the group, either with one person narrating or going around the room with different readers for different sections (probably the best alternative). When it comes to the “For Reflection” section, ask the suggested questions out loud. Discussion, especially in a group of women, will come easily. You may be surprised at the depth of issues that people will share. Be open. Be a good listener. Refrain from passing judgment. Keep confidences. And end with the suggested prayer at the end of each chapter.

THREE PATHS

There are three ways to use this book, developed by and used with Bible study groups around the country. Whether reading on a solitary basis or sharing the stories with others, there are questions to ask, prayers to be said, and issues to be raised. On the top of each chapter is the actual Bible reading. Open your Bible and read those verses first, then move onto the chapters themselves.

Straight Through (appropriate for groups or individual use)

Read the book from cover to cover, beginning with Eve in the Book of Genesis, and ending with the last female to speak (the freed-from-slavery girl in Acts 16:16-19). The historical progression of events through the Bible will become clear on this path, whether read on your own or in a group.

Thematic study (best for individual or group use)

Trying to develop a deeper prayer life? Check out the listings in the index, starting on page 567, for Power of Prayer. Healing from violence and/or abuse? Look up Healing from Sexual

Trauma. Want to see how Bible women worked their way through tricky situations? See Acumen. Either on your own or with women who have experienced loss and trauma, explore the Sorrow and Anguish chapters. Gather a group of friends to talk about Bravery/Decisiveness and Persistence/Tenacity. Or perhaps you heard a particular woman's story in church and want to learn more about her; you can find an alphabetical listing in the index, starting on page 577. There are almost 100 women sharing words here, all with insights and nuance from which we can learn.

Affinity study (best for group use)

Think about how you might start a limited-time gathering, prayer group, or class dealing with a particular issue. Explore Girls in the Bible with a youth group for ten weeks. Meet for lunch with women friends to explore Faith and Business issues. Or suggest an Advent or Lenten program for your church, using the suggested chapters. Find the suggested list in the index, starting on page 574.

Bible stories seem to come alive the most when shared aloud in small groups. Deep emotions bubble up. Sorrows and joys are shared, embraced by the group, and loving wisdom emerges. Brokenness. Grief. Humor. Vulnerability. *Chesed* (Hebrew for sacred kindness). Joy. Love. When read with contemporary issues in mind, the stories of our spiritual ancestors hold deep and transformative meaning.

PREFACE

Since *Bible Women: All Their Words and Why They Matter* was published nearly a decade ago, much has happened. The war in Ukraine. The murder of George Floyd, only a few miles from my home. Desperation at the border. Global warming. Floods, fires, and parched lands. Mass shootings in churches, temples, schools, theaters, and grocery stores. International instability. Food shortages in our neighborhoods and across the world.

And yet it is still God's world. That's the main point here. It is still God's world—and the words of Bible women speak more clearly than ever. Their stories, like ours, emerged from pain and struggle and survival—and yes, faith and joy.

Yet through no fault of their own, those stories continue to be massively overlooked, dismissed, and twisted. We fail to remember how much the experiences of Bible women might mean for us. To date, this is the only book that answers the following questions: What did Bible women actually say? Who were those that talked (or rather, which women had their words recorded?) How many were there? What were the broad themes among those who spoke? What are the surprises—those things that have been under our noses for centuries but largely dismissed until now? And most important, what might their words mean for us today?

Still buoyed by those key questions, this updated release explores more deeply the contemporary ramifications of what these women, our spiritual grandmothers, might have to share with us in these difficult times.

Here, you will find ninety-three Bible women who collectively gave birth, loved, journeyed far from home, experienced rape, mental illness, famines, political strife, and persecution. Women who were sold or even given away. Women who stayed with Jesus when the men had left. Women who brought out his best, sparked his argumentative side, and challenged him in ways that men did not. Women—and one in particular—whom he entrusted to bring the stunning news of his resurrection to the world.

THE RESEARCH

Thousands of hours of old-fashioned around-the-table Bible study with my colleagues formed the basis of this book, as well as scouring seminary bookshelves, websites, and new scholarly offerings. We used sticky notes, spreadsheets, and wall charts as we pinpointed the women who spoke, analyzed the historical eras in which they lived, and identified the personal characteristics that may have inspired their actions.

This research was done using the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible rather than working from the Bible's original Hebrew and Greek. Our choice was to work within a text that provided accessibility to contemporary readers. We believe that any group or individual can take a Bible off the shelf and get to work; our effort proves this is possible.

This edition also includes the contributions made by numerous Bible study groups across the country, many of which I met with in person. It is there, in small groups, that deep contemporary stories emerge—stories of pain and loss, grief and anguish. And it is there, through faith and reflection, that real transformation occurs. To the best of my ability, I have woven those moments of solidarity between past and present into this book.

PRAYERS

At the suggestion of Forward Movement, I have added a prayer to each chapter. Selected from hundreds of offerings including age-old psalms, they represent a wide range of voices and cultures. In these pages, you will find words from King David, Julian of Norwich, Thomas Merton, Catherine of Siena, Black Elk, Hildegard of Bingen, Francis of Assisi, contemporary clergy, and more.

In times of distress, whether personal, national, or international, it helps to remind ourselves that prayers are not just heard by God one time; they do not drop from the universe after being said. Because they are forms of love and love never dies, they continue to aid in the struggle against principalities and powers, sickness and fear. Like ever-widening circles, they still plead their case; they still make a difference. At once and forever, God hears it all: the prayers that were said for us before we were born, those that are said today, and those that we will say tomorrow.

Words. Words of prayer and words said by women of the Bible. As you journey through these pages, I wish for you the same gifts that these women have given me: courage, faith, and the knowledge that God will never abandon us, even in the darkest of times.

Lindsay Hardin Freeman

INTRODUCTION

FRESH WATER: HEARING FROM BIBLE WOMEN FIRSTHAND

Why study the words of Bible women? Because they have been ignored for centuries and we are lesser people because of it. The words of many Bible men seem almost second nature: familiar, identifiable, commonplace. Examples:

Moses: “Let my people go!”

David: “Absalom, Absalom, O my son Absalom!”

Peter: “I tell you, I do not know him!”

The centurion: “Truly this man was the Son of God!”

Paul: “And now abide faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love.”

What about women and what they said? There are some, for these are familiar words to many:

Mary to Gabriel: “Let it be to me according to your word.”

Mary Magdalene to Jesus: “Rabbouni!”

Yet Bible women in particular are an endangered species. Trapped in dry and dusty literary caskets for centuries, they are easily dismissed because they, more than men, are often viewed as simply “good” or “bad.”

Mary, the mother of Jesus: she’s “good” (and usually wearing blue). Mary Magdalene, Jesus’s companion and the first witness to the resurrection: she’s “bad” (although there are no references

to prostitution in the Bible, she's been accused of it through the centuries). Eve bad. Jezebel bad. Martha of Bethany: too busy. Old Elizabeth is good; the inquisitive woman at the well is bad, because of her many marriages. So it goes.

Do all the stories of women in the Bible matter? Absolutely. Should we care? Without question. Would we be lesser people without them and their stories? Totally.

Some of the most (alternately) courageous, funny, brave and faithful women in history, the words and witness of Bible women speak through the centuries, and guide and instruct our hearts. Their words are part of God's word (the Bible) for a reason. Their words are meant for us.

MOMENTS OF GRACE AND VIOLENCE

Read this book and you will see moments of grace and high moral ground. You will also be horrified at intense brutality and violence: some of it *by* women, but most perpetrated *against* women.

Yet, repeatedly, their stories are ones through whom God spoke, intervened, changed, illustrated, and proclaimed the story of redemption. Like a great reservoir of wisdom, a pond of undiscovered, deep nurturing waters, they are here for us.

FRESH WATER, FRESH VOICES

Take it a step further. Visualize one of the great water resources of the world: Lake Superior, the western-most lake in the chain of Great Lakes, holding the world's largest reservoir of fresh water.

Perhaps you can hear the beating of the waves or hear a gull's cry; perhaps you see under your feet basalt and granite-based rocks, about a billion years old. Without its clean water and raw wildness, we would be short an authentic and unpolluted place with which to connect with creation and with God. It is like that with women of the Bible whose words are recorded. Without them, we miss the benefits of a fresh, nurturing, foundational reservoir of people central to God's story.

WRITTEN FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

This book is written from a Christian perspective. We see the sweep of religious history here: we see the foundation of our faith in our Jewish forebears, and we see Jesus as the fulfillment of many prophecies revealed in pre-Christian days. More, we come at this from a within-the-faith perspective. We hope we have used the best tools of scholarship—but not from an “outside” judging perspective. Our intent is not to stop at counting words—but to learn from, and be fed by, our sisters and our foremothers in the faith.

For that reason, the terms “Old Testament” and “New Testament” are used, rather than “Hebrew Scriptures/the First Testament” or the “Christian Scriptures.” The thirty-nine books of what we call the “Old Testament” reflects our Protestant Christian version of these texts. In Hebrew scripture (the *Tanakh*) combines these texts differently, into twenty-four books.¹

In Hebrew, the first language in which the Bible was developed, the word “testament” means “covenant” or “contract.” That covenant was based on the Law, or the Ten Commandments. With the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross, we have a new

covenant, a new testament that promises eternal life to all who believe. We can never measure up. Yet God promises to love and redeem us.

Women from the Apocrypha who speak are also included here. Accepted canonically as part of the biblical canon of Holy Scriptures in the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches, the Apocrypha is considered important teaching material (edifying), but not doctrinal in the Protestant arms of the Christian faith. Yet the stories of women within are essential to a comprehensive understanding of the Bible. Full of wisdom, drama and horror, they jump off its pages like firecrackers.

PRONOUNS, DEMONS, AND THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE

Although intentionally limited throughout, the pronoun “he” is used a handful of times here to refer to God. Some readers may find that offensive; however most, including me, a religion writer/editor for thirty years, find the use of no pronouns or gender-neutral pronouns to be awkward, especially when it comes to sacred story telling. I have also come to believe that helping others to develop a relationship with God—and with these ancient women of faith—is more important than gender protocol in every instance.

Another sensitive topic: demons and mental illness. In ancient days, demons were understood to be the cause of emotional and physical ailments. We understand both differently today, but even Jesus seemed to place the blame of many ailments on actual demons, and once he called them out, people were healed. Truth be told, emotional and physical illness are often the work of outside influences—from cancer-causing environments, trauma suffered as a child or as an adult, poverty, genetic imbalances,

or the work of the Adversary—*all of which separate us from God*. Therefore, and with all respect, we stay with the language used in the Bible.

Language and human beings have their limits. God does not. This book uses all available language tools, and especially the tool of storytelling, to explore the lives of Bible women and their words. It is not perfect. It does not cover everything, but is a foundation for learning more about women of faith—and for drawing all of us closer to God.

STORIES: A WAY OF STUDYING THE BIBLE

Stories don't tell us what is true, they tell us what must be true.
Author Unknown

Real truth is eternal, pointing us to the heart of God. Truth cannot always be seen or recorded; sometimes it is beyond words. Sometimes it lies unspoken, expressed in actions or events. Sometimes we see only edges of the truth that point to a larger whole. We see the stars; we know they are there. We cannot see other universes, but we know they are there. And that knowledge leads us to a deeper, more reflective understanding of God.

That is the way it is with Bible stories as well: they point us to the heart of God and to our spiritual ancestors. Yet for some, the stories happened so long ago that they appear to be far from the truth, useless, easily dismissed, even stumbling blocks to faith.

Take the Garden of Eden, a somewhat troublesome story over the ages. Believe in the biblical stories of creation and we, supposedly, ignore science. Believe in evolution and we somehow don't believe the Bible. You're in. You're out.

But not here.

Here we walk the *via media*—Latin for “the middle way.” We use the time-honored premise in the Anglican Communion of applying scripture, reason, and tradition.

In that context, the following truths can be learned, for example, from the creation story:

- Adam and Eve are the first man and the first woman because they realize they are different from other life forms, and that as humans, female and male, they are made in God’s image;
- They find they are free to separate from God;
- They explore independence, free will and failure;
- They discover that their actions have consequences not only for them but for their children;
- They discover that work brings benefits, such as food and clothing;
- They experience grief and the beginning of faith;
- They find they must leave the Garden—the place of innocence—before they have children;
- They learn about pain and death as part of maturing and being on their own.

Such are the truths of the creation story, and the process for discovering the truth in every Bible story. With such an understanding, the word of God is always alive, not a crusty document with its people buried under layers of dust and restrictions. It is, rather, a collection of life-giving stories of our spiritual ancestors and, more important, an exploration into the nature of God.

TOOLS FOR BIBLE STUDY

The best book for Bible study is...the Bible! Get one if you don't have one. Get two if you have one; three if you have two. Unless otherwise noted, this book uses the New Revised Standard Version in all of its official Bible quotes. When needing contemporary clarity, though, we often turn to *The Message* by Eugene H. Peterson to gain fresh insight. Or, if we want lofty language, we go to the King James version.

Just read the Bible, whatever the translation. Meditate on it. Leave it out on the coffee table. Read it in the daytime; read it when you can't sleep at night. Share it with your children, your grandchildren, your friends. Make it a lifelong habit. Join a group, preferably a women's Bible study group. Use this book to get started.

Anglicans have a particularly rich tradition of Bible study with the forenamed tools of scripture, tradition and reason, and it is that framework we use here:

- Scripture: As the inspired word of God, the Bible is the essential reference for knowing God and the story of God's people.
- Reason: How can our human intelligence, gifts, and skills best inform and draw conclusions from what we study and experience? How can we best appropriate what we read and study for the times in which we live?
- Tradition: What has the Judaeo/Christian community understood over time? What have we learned from scholars, from history, from the common man and woman, in interpreting and applying the wisdom of scripture?

DEFINITION OF TERMS

This is a user-friendly book, designed to be free of intimidating words and phrases, in the hopes that Bible women will be more accessible to more people. Each section highlights a specific woman and what she said. Her actual words are in boldface.

NAME AND DESCRIPTOR

Named or unnamed, if a woman or group of women spoke without a male voice accompanying them, they—and their words—are here.

PROFILE IN HISTORY

Each woman is given a “bracket” here, defining how well she is known. You might be surprised to discover how many new Bible women step out of the pages—and what new things you learn about the ones you thought you knew.

BRACKET TERMS

High: She is known in both religious and popular culture. Most people know Mary was Jesus’s mother. Most know Delilah had something questionable going on with Samson, and that hair was involved. Most know Eve was the first woman in the Bible.

Moderately high: Fairly good name recognition, although specific life accomplishments may or may not be known. Example: Jezebel. While most people have a sense of Jezebel being wicked and seductive, they might not know why she acted the way she did, and how she was eventually murdered. Other examples in the “moderately high” group include Mary and Martha of Bethany. The names are familiar...but why?

Moderate: The name is familiar, but the action may not be. Example: Hannah, who begged God to give her a son. Or Miriam, Moses’s sister, who stood on the banks of the Nile, watching baby Moses float away in a basket and praying that he not be put to death.

Moderately low: Should ring a bell, but doesn’t always. Example: Herodias, who told her daughter, Salome, to ask for the head of John the Baptist. The beheading is known by most Christians, yet nine out of ten people do not know that this deadly conversation is the only full dialogue in the Bible solely between a mother and daughter.

Low: Bare visibility, as in a heavy fog. Try Rachel’s midwife, who gave comfort in the midst of both life and death.

Very low (blink twice and you’d miss them): They seem to be strangers, even for those who are well-studied in the Bible. Like the woman in 2 Kings who ate her son (tragic but true). Or Athaliah, who killed her grandchildren and then, when a surviving grandson was restored to the throne, shouted, “Treason! Treason!” You may not have heard of her. And there is little reason to hear from her again.

CLASSIC MOMENT

Here we name the main event for which the woman is known—for example, Eve took the fruit and ate it; Sarah gave birth at age ninety; Mary Magdalene was the first to see the risen Christ.

DATA

How many words does she speak? Where does she fit in the progression of Bible women in terms of words and message?

WHO WAS SHE?

Was the woman in question a prophet or a healer or a warrior or a mother? To whom was she related? Was she widowed? Never married? Did she have children? (While some of these questions may seem pejorative today, they determined much of a woman's life in biblical times.) What stands out about her? What could you keep in your heart about this woman to guide and comfort you?

WHAT DID SHE SAY?

Nuts and bolts. These women are in this book because their words are on record. What was it that they said? No misappropriation; no “he said, she said.” If she said it, if she was a real person, and if her words were recorded, then she, and her words, are here, in bold text.

LIKELY CHARACTERISTICS

Was this Bible woman generous? Selfish? Animated? If she had been your neighbor, how would you describe her? Note that neighbors can be beautiful, smart, irritating, insulting, obnoxious—and adulterers or murderers as well. Bible women exhibit a variety of opinions and behaviors; our goal is to be honest about both strengths and faults.

HER STORY

What is her context? What brings her into the Bible? What is her background? Here we employ the five “Ws” of journalism: who, what, when, where, and why.

CONSIDER THIS

Why exactly did Jael slip a tent peg into the enemy's head? Did it have anything to do with a warrior, not her husband, being in her tent? And when King Solomon threatened to slice a baby in half, how did that determine the baby's real mother? And what about the prostitute thing that always shadows Mary Magdalene? Is there any truth to that? This section explains each woman's actions in her context, and provides additional thoughts, much like an op-ed piece.

WHAT MIGHT WE LEARN FROM HER?

Dust-balled for too long, these women have much to teach us. How might their experiences inform our lives? What rings true about their values (or lack thereof)?

FOR REFLECTION

For those of you using this book for Bible study, the questions are to help spark your discussions. If you are reading this book on your own, let the thoughts lead you as a spirit guide might.

LET US PRAY

New to this edition are prayers for us to use as we conclude our study of each woman. Some of these prayers are thousands of years old, hearkening back to the psalms, while others are newly written by modern followers of Christ. The prayers invite us to cherish the words of Bible women and offer them—and our lives—to God in faithful service.

WHO'S IN? WHO'S OUT?

In deciding which Bible women should be included in this book, here are the questions we asked:

Did the woman speak on her own?

She's here.

Did the woman speak in a group, with other women?

She's here.

Was the woman only quoted by someone else?

She's not here.

Did the woman speak only in a group with men, saying the same exact words?

She's not here.

Was the woman real or could she have been real—or was it an idea of a woman, such as in a vision or parable?

We kept with our rule of flesh-and-blood women. If she's in an image or parable, we did not count her.

If a woman said something twice, are those words counted twice?

She is counted once; her words twice.

CHAPTER 1

FOUNDATIONAL FINDINGS

WHAT ARE THE NUMBERS?

WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

By our count, using the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible in English about 14,000 words are spoken by women—or to be exact, 14,056. While the NRSV is, of course, translated from Hebrew and Greek, we used the ancient texts for occasional reference questions but kept our analysis consistent by using the NRSV for word counts.

Fourteen thousand words is not much. Anne Frank wrote some 80,000 in her diary.² Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series clocks in at over half a million words.³ And just one Harry Potter book is almost five times the length of recorded women's words in the Bible. Using the average speaker's pace of about 120 words per minute, the words of Bible women could be said in less than two hours.

THE FORTY-NINE NAMED WOMEN WHO SPEAK IN SCRIPTURE

Eve, Sarah, Hagar, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel, Tamar, Shiphrah, Puah, Miriam, Zipporah, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, Tirzah, Rahab, Achsah, Deborah, Jael, Delilah, Naomi, Ruth, Orpah, Hannah, Michal, Abigail, Bathsheba, (Young) Tamar, Jezebel,

Athaliah, Huldah, Esther, Anna, Sarah (in Tobit), Edna, Judith, Susanna, Salome, Herodias (mother), Herodias (daughter), Mary Magdalene, Mary (mother of James), Elizabeth, Mary (mother of Jesus), Martha, Mary (of Bethany), Sapphira, and Lydia.

The NRSV version of the Bible, including the Old and New Testaments and the Apocrypha, is some 928,000 words long (928,100 to be exact).⁴ Ballpark total, then: about 1.5 percent of the words in the Bible are said by women.

Obviously this is an incredibly small number. There are two ways to look at that sum. We could be angry and dismiss the whole thing, or we could pay more attention to what the verbal minority says. This book chooses the second option.

In the Bible, such words as “small” and “least of them” often mean, “Pay attention; something is happening here.” Note these examples of biblical minimalism:

- Gideon says he is the least of his tribe, and therefore not worthy to be called as a judge or warrior in Israel—yet he goes on to be both (*Judges 6:15*).
- Hagar, a servant, is the only person in the Old Testament to name God and one of the few to talk directly with God (*Genesis 16:13*).
- King David, the youngest of eight brothers, is recognized by Samuel as the future king of Israel (*1 Samuel 16:12*).
- Mary, a young adolescent girl, is chosen by God to give birth to Jesus (*Luke 1:31*).
- Elizabeth, an older childless woman, is chosen by God to give birth to John the Baptist (*Luke 1:13*).

And from Jesus, the same:

- When two or three are together in his name he will be in the midst of them (*Matthew 18:20*).
- If his disciples have the faith of only a mustard seed, they could move a mountain (*Matthew 17:20*).

- The widow put into the treasure only two small coins yet was lauded by Jesus because it was all she had (*Mark 12:42-44*).
- We hear this theme from Judith as she prays to God in the Apocrypha: “For your strength does not depend on numbers, nor your might on the powerful. But you are the God of the lowly, helper of the oppressed, upholder of the weak, protector of the forsaken, saviour of those without hope” (*Judith 9:11*).

Clearly, God’s vision does not place high value on quantity, but on quality. And the quality of words spoken by Bible women—whether they were said out of love, fear, passion, or frustration—is strong indeed.

WOMEN WHO SPEAK: HOW MANY?

We can identify ninety-three specific women who speak in scripture. Seventy-eight of them do so individually, both named and unnamed. Of these, fifty-one are in the Old Testament, twenty in the New Testament, and seven in the Apocrypha. There are also fifteen who speak only in groups of women. Together, these ninety-three make a small group, one that could fit in a large bus, or a train car or two. (A full list of the women may be found on page 579).

Those are the ones who are counted. There are other women who speak in groups of unnamed women in the Old Testament. But they must remain uncounted, for who knows how many “women of Israel” lined the streets to cheer the victorious King David on his way home from slaying Goliath? Or how many women jeered

at poor Jeremiah? No matter; the important thing is that their voices are here. Just maybe these uncountable ones stand in for the rest of us.

WORD COUNTS: WOMEN IN THE BIBLE

The ten women who talk the most in the Bible, in order (including the Apocrypha), are:

1. Judith	(Judith)	2,689 words
2. Shulammitte woman ⁵	(Song of Solomon)	1,425 words
3. Esther	(Esther & Greek additons)	1,207 words
4. Mother of seven sons	(2,4 Maccabees)	616 words
5. Hannah	(1 Samuel)	474 words
6. The woman of Tekoa	(2 Samuel)	437 words
7. Huldah	(2 Kings, 2 Chronicles)	416 words
8. Naomi	(Ruth)	411 words
9. Abigail	(1 Samuel)	316 words
10. Rebekah	(Genesis)	293 words

The ten women who talk the most in the Bible, in order (not including the Apocrypha), are all in the Old Testament:

1. Shulammitte woman	(Song of Solomon)	1,425 words
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6. Naomi	(Ruth)	411 words
7. Abigail	(1 Samuel)	316 words
8. Rebekah	(Genesis)	293 words
9. Rahab	(Joshua)	255 words
10. The Queen of Sheba	(1 Kings, 2 Chronicles)	228 words

Surprisingly, or not, given our present culture, a good number of the women who spoke in the Old Testament and the Apocrypha—including the two women with the most words—are not particularly well-known today. Judith, for example, may have a recognizable first name, but most people could not recount her deeds. Such is also true of the Shulammitte woman of the Song of Solomon—and that is particularly tragic, for she is different from all other women in the Bible. Beautiful, erotic, and sensual language flows from her lips as she describes the search for her missing lover. That depth of physical and emotional passion has no equal in the rest of the Bible—and she speaks more than any other woman in the Old and New Testaments!

Some of the most well-known women speak very few words:

Ruth	(Ruth)	212 words
Mary, mother of Jesus	(Luke, John)	191 words
The Samaritan woman	(John)	151 words
Sarah	(Genesis)	141 words
Jezebel	(1 and 2 Kings)	108 words
Eve	(Genesis)	74 words

Mary Magdalene	(John)	61 words
The bleeding woman	(Matthew, Mark, Luke)	22 words
Mary of Bethany	(John)	12 words
Woman caught in adultery	(John)	3 words

Another surprise: Think of the impact that these women have had through their very few words. Knowing that most people speak an average of 120 words per minute, more than half of the people on this list would qualify for speaking less than a minute, overall. Less than a minute! And yet their words have changed the world, particularly Mary's. If she had not said, "Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38), the world would be very different.

Words can also name great and wonderful truths. Think of Mary Magdalene, sharing the extraordinary joy of Jesus's resurrection: "I have seen the Lord!" (John 20:18) The world was transformed by the greatest miracle of all—the resurrection of Christ. Once those simple few words were spoken, nothing would ever be the same.

CHAPTER 2

COMMON DENOMINATORS

From the individual study of each of these women, the following themes emerge:

BIBLE WOMEN ARE BOLD, especially those who speak.

In many circles, Bible women are seen as subservient and passive—but that is as far from the truth as saying the earth is flat or that it's the center of the universe.

Shrinking violets they are not. Immoral or moral, most Bible women step up and say what they think, what they need, or what they want. Most take fearless actions and accept daunting risks. Women in the Bible do not shuffle onto its pages; they stride across, with their heads held high and their hearts full of passion.

Eve is an example when she does what God says not to do. Sarah, out of grief at her own infertility, sets Abraham up with Hagar so that a son of the covenant will be born. The Egyptian midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, risk their lives saving Hebrew babies. The woman of Bahurim hides two men in her well—and then lies. Pharaoh's daughter saves Moses. The wise woman of Abel arranges to have a man beheaded to save her town. Even Job's wife ("curse God and die!") was outspoken.

In the Apocrypha, Sarah (a different Sarah than the one in Genesis) loses seven husbands by the hands of a demon and prays for God to take her life. Judith chops off King Holofernes's head and tucks it in her bag.

In the New Testament, Mary agrees to bear God's son (an action largely taken for granted by the rest of us but a huge risk for her). Mary of Bethany pours extravagant oil on Jesus's feet and wipes them with her hair—a clearly outrageous act. Mary Magdalene and the other women witness the crucifixion, and by being present, they identify themselves with Jesus, the revolutionary.

Some of these women are well-known in history. Others have been largely ignored for two thousand years. But one thing is true: None are passive. None are quiet. And for that, thanks be to God.

BIBLE WOMEN PUSH AGAINST RESTRAINTS, using their God-given gift of free will. From the first woman to speak in the Bible (Eve) to the last (the fortune-telling girl in Acts), Bible women knock on doors seeking healing, redemption, and freedom—or, in the case of some—control, revenge, and power (think Jezebel or Delilah). Sometimes the doors for moving ahead open graciously; other times they are locked and must be battered down. Thankfully, most—but not all—move themselves and the world ahead in God's name, although there are a few who seem to bang on the doors of Hades (and to be prime candidates for long-term residency there).

And within the two compass points of Eve and the fortune-telling girl, dozens of other women push on traditional boundaries to be healed, freed, heard, and redeemed. The daughters of Zelophehad battle Mosaic law. Pilate's wife sends a secret missive, trying to save

Jesus from death. The bleeding woman fights her way through crowds to touch Jesus's garment, and Mary Magdalene and other women hit the road with Jesus, leaving their safe homes behind.

They are always pushing outward, not knowing what lies on the other side. Pushing outward, giving birth. Pushing outward, like the universe did from the moment of creation. The blueprint found in the heavens, that of the ever-expanding universe, is the same spirit women deploy in the Bible—and is a God-given gift.

BIBLE WOMEN COME IN “OVER THE TRANSOM,” as God’s surprise agents. In the days before central heating and air-conditioning, hotel rooms sported a large pane of glass over each guest’s doorway that could be opened for heat or fresh air. Old movies were famous for showing thieves, con men and lovers propelling themselves up and over the transom, through the open space.

That sense of coming in over the top in surprising—and often, scandalous—ways is also true of many girls and women in the Bible.

Take for example the five women—the only women—listed in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus. Rahab, a prostitute, shelters Hebrew spies and helps their people cross into the Promised Land. Tamar seduces her father-in-law, exercising her right to have a child with “family” sperm. Ruth, a foreigner, helps set the stage for King David to be born. Bathsheba will always have a question mark hanging over her head for bathing in sight of David—yet their son, Solomon, becomes Israel’s second-most important king. (For the record, this author believes Bathsheba was entitled to bathe on her roof without kingly interference.) And Mary, a young peasant girl, accepts the most challenging

choice of all: to bear a son—God’s son—without having known a man.

Yet it is not their actions alone that make such a difference. Clearly, the Holy Spirit, that same Spirit that moved over the murky depths of chaos at creation, was alive and at work in the souls and hearts of these women—delivering them from bondage and encouraging the light in their souls to grow brighter.

MOST ARE UNMARRIED. Most people might see the women who speak in the Bible as quiet, married women. Such an understanding might consciously or unconsciously be attributed to some New Testament passages such as “women should be silent in the churches,” (1 Corinthians 14:34) or “wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:22-24).

While those passages tend to be widely quoted in some circles, they need to be examined in context, as does all scripture. There is also the amazingly efficient and productive “good wife” in Proverbs 31. She does not speak. Perhaps if she did, she might offer a slightly different view of her world.

Surprisingly, the majority of women, when called to a task by the Holy Spirit, are on their own, outside the bounds of a traditional marital relationship. Old Testament examples include Rahab, Ruth, the witch of Endor, the Queen of Sheba and more. In the New Testament, consider Mary and Martha of Bethany, or Mary Magdalene—all, as far as we know, were single. Take Lydia in Philippi—an affluent merchant on her own. The servant girls the night before Jesus was crucified were most likely single. Mary, Jesus’s mother, was unmarried at the time Gabriel approached her about the birth of Jesus, and likely widowed when she stood at the foot of the cross.

The point is this: Bible women, especially those who were single, had much more power than is admitted in many religious circles today. And it wasn't a matter of being given power; it was a matter of finding and using the power they had.

BIBLE WOMEN SUFFER HORRIBLE LOSS, and at times are like pawns moved on a patriarchal chessboard, but they remain bright lights in sacred history.

Being a woman in ancient times, especially in the violent pre-monarchy years, was tough. Women were assigned marriage partners by their fathers or brothers for economic and political reasons. They were considered property and treated as such; love was not part of the equation.

Outside of the father/brother machine, other ways of obtaining women for marriage included taking a captive maiden or two as victory "spoils" in war or entering into a marriage contract with concubines (girls and women from lower-class families with little bargaining power) for the purpose of bearing children. A third way was raping a girl or woman, making her permanently "unfit" and undesirable for other men and, ironically, leaving the rapist as the best potential husband material.

While clearly a number of presumably solid relationships did exist (Sarah and Abraham, Rebekah and Isaac, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Deborah and Lappidoth), marriage was built on the social structures of the day, including the importance of having children. Without children, it was believed, an individual's life and worth would dissolve into the desert sands, leaving nothing for the future, or for God. As always, historical and social context must be noted. Concubines, for example, had some protection, in that they were given food and shelter and a family name for their children. Raping a girl and then marrying her, in those

times, was seen as more beneficial than condemning her to a beggar's life or a life of prostitution, one of the few ways women could support themselves.

And there is the concubine in Judges 19, one of the most violently abused women in the Bible. She is not on record as having spoken. Thrown out the door by her master one horrible night to satisfy the demands of desert hospitality (which demanded that the head of a household must share everything with his “guests”), she is gang raped until daybreak by a group of men. As the sun rises, she is found clinging to the doorposts, but when her master says, unbelievably rudely, “Get up, let us be going,” she does not move or speak. (Sadly but not surprisingly, she has died.) The master divides her body into twelve pieces and sends one piece to each of the twelve tribes of Israel for help in avenging her death.

This is a thoroughly sickening story, hard to stomach. We can only hope that God has granted this unnamed woman eternal peace. Even though her words were not recorded, she is remembered here because in our search for truth, we cannot ignore parts of the Bible that leave us cold.

Life in biblical times for women was emotionally, spiritually, and physically treacherous—and that makes their accomplishments even more extraordinary.

WOMEN IN THE BIBLE COVER ALL THE STATIONS OF POWER AS DO MEN IN THE BIBLE, just in fewer numbers. Examples:

- Women were not known as warriors or judges, yet Deborah was both.
- Women were not known as killers, yet Jael and Judith killed top enemy leaders.

- Women did not serve as priests, yet when they—including Hannah, Hagar, Rebekah, and Sarah (from Tobit)—cried out in prayer, God answered.
- Women were not known as diplomats, but the woman of Tekoa and the wise woman of Abel were two of the best, and the Queen of Sheba was a skilled and prudent ambassador on behalf of her nation.
- Women were not named in the twelve-disciple group, but some of Jesus’s closest allies were women, including Mary and Martha of Bethany and Mary Magdalene.
- Women were not known as merchants, but the “good wife” of Proverbs 31 and Lydia in Acts were clearly successful in business.
- Women were not seen as political advisors, but King Saul sought out the witch of Endor (who told him, correctly, that he would die in battle the following day), and King Josiah’s assistants sought out Huldah to explain the spiritual and political meaning of scrolls, newly found in the temple at Jerusalem.
- Women were not seen as prophets, yet it was Anna who recognized Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah when he was only eight days old.
- Women were not seen as negotiators, yet Abigail negotiated with King David not to slay her household, and the wise woman of Abel negotiated with Joab to save her town. Both were successful.

- Women were not seen as poets, but some of the oldest and most beautiful poetry is found with women's names attached (the Song of Miriam, the Song of Deborah, the Song of Hannah, and Mary's *Magnificat*).
- Girls were not seen as particularly useful, but Jesus's mother was probably about fourteen when she bore him; the servant girl of Naaman's wife suggested a cure for Naaman's leprosy; Pharaoh's daughter saved little Moses while young Miriam stood guard; and Rebekah was just a girl when she greeted Abraham's servant and married Isaac within a few days, sight unseen.
- And finally, women were not seen as reliable witnesses, but there is the whole Resurrection story, where Jesus did not appear to his disciples first, but met Mary Magdalene at the tomb.

BIBLE WOMEN WERE THE PRIMARY SOCIAL MEDIA OF THEIR DAY. Today a substantial part of the world has access to Twitter, Facebook, and Google. Obviously this was not the case in biblical days, when women were often the ones who shared the news. Consider the women who lined the streets after David slew Goliath, intensifying their growing dislike of Saul in favor of the young and vibrant David. "Saul has killed his thousands...David his ten thousands" (1 Samuel 18:7).

Women and girls met each other at the town well, a particularly welcome chance to get out of the house. The seven daughters of the priests of Midian drew water for their flocks there. They were so excited when they reached home, talking about the young Egyptian they met at the well that their father had them ask the

man to dinner—and he turned out to be Moses, who married Zipporah, one of the sisters.

Consider the girls who were also on their way to draw water when young Saul walked through town, head and shoulders above the crowd, and very handsome. Asking for how he might find Samuel, the prophet and judge, the girls seemed quite responsible in answering, and no doubt enjoyed sharing the news.

And in Jesus's time, the word about the young healer and his miracles spread quickly, most often via women. Picture the five-times married woman at the well in John 4, running back to town, saying that this man told her everything about herself! Could he be the Messiah? Or Jesus telling the women at the empty tomb (Mark 16) to “go tell his disciples and Peter” that he had risen. Jesus knew they would make sure that the word was known.

Whether they took actual steps to claim and build the kingdom of God, or whether they supported others in this work, women of the Bible gave endlessly of themselves and their resources to engage the world with God's love—much like women of faith today.

Step now into God's sacred circle of mothers, grandmothers, warriors, prophets, witches, prostitutes, and murderers. You won't come out the same.

THE WOMEN WHO SPEAK IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

“The serpent tricked me, and I ate.” —Eve

Have you ever harbored any notions that Old Testament women are weak? Passive? Unworthy? Put those ideas in concrete shoes and deep-six 'em. Now.

Old Testament women are powerful and compelling examples of what it means to live in exceedingly challenging days—historically, spiritually, and emotionally. They express emotions in a way that men do not, solve problems behind the scenes, and use their intuitive and intellectual skills to be God's people—all despite the fact that they live in a world where they are seen as property, and it is rare to be loved, truly loved.

Without exception, they are purpose-driven, their goals ranging from saving a nation to scavenging a last meal. Most are faithful. Most are bold. Some, with due cause, are irritating. A few are evil.

We must know their stories to know our own. Let's get started.

CHAPTER 3

WOMEN WHO SPEAK IN GENESIS

Of the eleven women who are on record as having spoken in the Book of Genesis, there's not a spineless one among them. Some are skeptical and defiant. Others make somewhat unbelievable sexual decisions. One laughs in God's presence. Eight of the eleven are fiercely committed to bearing children, or bringing them safely into the world (six become mothers and two are midwives).

Women say more in the Book of Genesis (some 1,100 words) than in any other book in the Old and New Testaments, save one, and most of their comments have to do with life: helping to make it happen, sustaining it, protecting it, and grieving it.

In reading their narratives, remember the old saying that stories don't tell us what is true, they tell us what must be true. Look for deep truths, the meaning behind the actions.

BY THE NUMBERS

WORDS SPOKEN BY WOMEN IN GENESIS: 1,117

NUMBER OF WOMEN WHO SPEAK: 11

Eve, Sarah, Hagar, Lot's older daughter, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel, Rachel's midwife, Tamar, Tamar's midwife, Potiphar's wife

Eve *Over the line, out the gate*

- PROFILE: High
- READ HER STORY: Genesis 3-4
- CLASSIC MOMENT: Eating the fruit that God forbade her and Adam to consume
- LIKELY CHARACTERISTICS: Curious, Non-compliant, Gullible, Lonely, Intelligent, Subversive, Willful
- DATA: 74 words

WHO WAS EVE?

The first woman and the first mother // The first person to sin and the first person to walk away from God // The first mother to experience the murder of her child (and this by the hand of her firstborn son) // The only woman in the Bible to talk with an animal // The only person other than Jesus to talk with both God and Satan (i.e. the serpent as the representation of evil in the Garden)

WHAT DID EVE SAY?

The woman said to the serpent, **“We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but 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.’”** *Genesis 3:2-3*

Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, **“The serpent tricked me, and I ate.”** *Genesis 3:13*

Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, **“I have produced a man with the help of the LORD.”** *Genesis 4:1*

Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, for she said, **“God has appointed for me another child instead of Abel, because Cain killed him.”** *Genesis 4:25*

EVE’S STORY

Adam and Eve are in the garden of Eden: a place with no evidence of death, demise, or even bad weather. Adam often walks in the garden with God in the late-day sun; the animals are friends; all live peaceably. Eden appears to be a place where all is perfect... forever.

God has, however, placed a fruit-laden “tree of knowledge” in the midst of Eden—and warns Adam not to touch it or he will die. Note that God spoke directly to Adam regarding the tree; Eve was presumably informed about God’s mandate after her arrival (perhaps God should have talked directly with Eve). Alone with a crafty serpent one day, Eve is lured by the serpent’s words: “You will not die...your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:4-5).

She sees that the fruit looks delightful, and it would be good for food. She thinks it will make her wise. Reaching out and snagging a piece of fruit from the forbidden tree, she eats it, offers some to Adam...and all goes downhill. God is angry and expels them from the garden, Adam is sentenced to hard labor, and Eve is told that Adam will rule over her and she will experience pain in childbirth. Fleeing the garden, the exiled companions come to “know” each other and have children. The older, Cain, murders his brother, Abel.

CONSIDER THIS

Let's enter Eve's story, at least initially, as people who walk beside her without judgment. She knew the boundaries that God had set and rejected them, allowing herself to be duped as the serpent broke through her defenses.

Eve had questions and the capacity, yet in many ways, she, like Adam, was a child: innocent, trusting, curious. Somehow the serpent gained Eve's confidence—perhaps like child molesters who move slowly toward that day when trust will be forever abused.

Into what vulnerability of Eve's did the serpent tap? Eve speaks of the desire for knowledge. Loneliness is another possibility. Was life infinite at that point for human beings? Did Eve know anything of death? Had she even seen it? Did plants and animal compatriots die, or did life seem to stretch out endlessly? Was boredom a factor? In the midst of such questions stood the tree of knowledge. The serpent, apparently drawing from some invisible well of authority, convinced Eve that she would be wise—just like God—if she ate the fruit. And so it happened.

Some see Eve as a mythical figure. Others see her as the first woman on earth. Either way, Eve seems to get the blame for leading humankind astray, forever.

But how valuable is Eve for the twenty-first century? Believe her story and you can't possibly believe in evolution. Believe in evolution and she remains an entertaining, almost fairy-tale like character.

Remember that stories don't tell us what is true; they tell us what must be true. Look for the deep truths here, as with any Bible

story. Live into it. Trust your instincts, intellect, and reason as you descend deeper into its many levels.

What about sin? Did Eve sin? Yes, because she walked away from God and separated herself from God. In fact, the word “sin” in its root means “separation.” She did what God had forbidden Adam to do—and tempted Adam to do the same. Interestingly, however, the word “sin” is not used in the Genesis story.

Should she have stayed away from the fruit, the serpent? Yes, because doing so was God’s desire. But without her, we’d still be in the garden. Actually, “we” probably wouldn’t be here at all. Adam and Eve did not have children until they left the garden; it was only after their exit that they became parents. Yet despite their sins, and perhaps because of them, Christians also see in this passage the first clue of a redeemer, the presence of evil, and the meaning of maturity.

Did God expect Eve to take the fruit? Did God design things so she would be tempted? Most likely. Either way, Eve used the divinely given gift of free will to reach out, press on, experiment, and grow—as do most women in the Bible. Keep an eye out, in the pages to come, for ways in which both God and women work toward restoring that circle of love and trust.

Good and evil. God and Satan. (Some would say that the serpent was only an agent of Satan, but Wisdom 2:24 implies they are the same being.) These are truths we need to come to terms with on our own, after we’ve left our own childhood gardens, sorted our beliefs, reached maturity, come to know God. It is not an easy thing to do. Yet even when we fall, God is there for us as he was for Eve—seeking reconciliation, setting boundaries, encouraging healing, providing companionship, introducing love.

WHAT MIGHT WE LEARN FROM EVE?

- ▷ Stay away from those who tempt you, even if the temptation seems innocent. Ask God for support.
- ▷ Do not take a crafty snake's word for things, even if said figure does not appear in snake attire. Most snakes don't.
- ▷ You may be forced out of the garden, but perhaps it wasn't the best place for you.
- ▷ Decisions, healthy or unhealthy, may affect generations.

Eve is the only person in biblical history, other than Jesus, to talk with both God and Satan. That's an impressive resume.

FOR REFLECTION

1. The garden is described as a stress-free, protected environment. What might have been missing for Eve? Why did she take the fruit?
2. Eve became a mother only after leaving the garden (Genesis 4:1). What does that imply about motherhood and maturity?
3. Do you share any of Eve's traits? How have they helped you? How have they hindered you?

4. What would our world be like if Eve had not eaten of the forbidden fruit?
5. Eve acted before she spoke with God. What temptations are you struggling with today? How might you ask God for help?
6. If you are moving out of what has been your comfort zone, what would the angels advise? Continue or turn back? Retreat or forge ahead?

LET US PRAY

You appointed the moon to mark the seasons, and the sun knows the time of its setting. You make darkness that it may be night, in which all the beasts of the forest prowl. The lions roar after their prey and seek their food from God. The sun rises, and they slip away and lay themselves down in their dens. Man goes forth to his work and to his labor until the evening. O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. *Amen.*

—Psalm 104:20-24

Sarah *Proud and powerful*

- PROFILE: High
- READ HER STORY: Genesis 16-21
- CLASSIC MOMENT: Laughing to herself behind a tent wall when three desert travelers tell Abraham that she will bear a child within a year
- LIKELY CHARACTERISTICS: Faithful, Blunt, Enterprising, Cantankerous, Loyal, Tenacious, Jealous, Loving
- DATA: 141 words

WHO WAS SARAH?

At age ninety, the oldest woman in scripture—and possibly in human history—to bear a child // The first woman in the Bible to send her husband into the arms of another woman // The only woman in the Bible to be on record as laughing // The first Israelite to be buried in the Promised Land // The spiritual foremother of Judaism // The only woman in the Bible to talk of the “pleasure” of sex in later life

WHAT DID SARAH SAY?

Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, **“You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.”** *Genesis 16:1-2*

Then Sarai said to Abram, **“May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!”** *Genesis 16:5*

So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, **“After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?”** *Genesis 18:12*

But Sarah denied, saying, **“I did not laugh”**; for she was afraid. *Genesis 18:15*

Now Sarah said, **“God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”** And she said, **“Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”** *Genesis 21:6-7*

So she said to Abraham, **“Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.”** *Genesis 21:10*

SARAH'S STORY

Picture Abraham and Sarah about the time that God intervenes in their lives. She is sixty-five; he is seventy-five. Despite their long marriage, they have no children—and that would have been heartbreaking for both, but especially for Sarah.

Then, one night at Mount Haran in present-day Turkey (some four hundred miles northeast of Aleppo, Syria), history changes. God calls Abraham aside, telling him that he will make of him a great nation, providing him with many descendants and much land, blessing those who bless him and cursing those who curse him (*Genesis 12:1-2*).

Abraham and Sarah head out with their relatives, servants, and sheep. They spend years in the wilderness and cover hundreds of miles. Not knowing their destination, they trust God to reveal the Promised Land. Dangers and isolation surround them. Survival becomes all-important.

Yet despite God's promise, no child arrives. And then, like one who walks into a lake with weights tied around her neck, Sarah perceives a terrible possibility: that God has promised descendants to Abraham, but not necessarily to her.

She takes action (Genesis 16:1-2). Believing deeply in the covenant God has made with Abraham, she sends Abraham into the arms of her servant, Hagar—for any child born to a servant would, under ancient law, belong to the slave's master and mistress.

Who knows how much time it took Hagar to conceive? It could have occurred with one liaison or taken several years. Once Hagar becomes pregnant, Genesis says that she "looked with contempt upon her mistress" (Genesis 16:4). Sarah dealt harshly with her, and Hagar fled into the wilderness, where God told her to return to Sarah. Hagar did—and gave birth to Ishmael.

Only after the birth of Ishmael does God tell Abraham that Sarah will conceive—and that Sarah's child, not Hagar's, will be heir to God's covenant. Yet God also tells him that Hagar's descendants, starting with Ishmael, will be blessed and will multiply, becoming a great nation (Genesis 17:20).

Finally, when Sarah is ninety, she overhears (while listening through a tent wall) three strangers tell Abraham that she will give birth to a son the following year. In one of the most endearing moments in the Old Testament, Sarah laughs to herself, not

believing that at her age, pleasure—both sexual and maternal—will come her way.

It turns out that the strangers were angels—and one was God. As predicted, Sarah gives birth. She names her son Isaac (which means “laughter”), and all is quiet...until Ishmael is about fourteen and Isaac is about three. Sarah becomes increasingly agitated with Ishmael, banishing the boy and his mother to the wilderness. They do not return.

CONSIDER THIS

Sarah was strong-willed, felt matters of the heart deeply, and spoke seven times (seven is a fortuitous number in biblical language). Like most biblical women, she was a survivor.

Here is where many contemporary Christians miss an important key to understanding Sarah’s actions: she was fully dedicated, actively committed, to helping God’s plan happen. She did not shirk from her calling to produce a child who would, in turn, produce as many descendants as there were stars in the sky. She would risk all to make that God-given promise happen.

Although Sarah was legally within her rights to suggest a child from an Abraham/Hagar union, many readers may find her actions immoral. But in her mind, her intervention was divinely inspired in response to God’s word. And without this feisty woman, there would have been no Isaac, no Jacob, no Mary, no Deborah, no Jesus. We’d have no great example of a woman laughing in the Bible. We’d be short one tough old woman.

Despite the dramatic moments and perhaps because of them, Sarah and Abraham represent a “vivid and enduring love story”⁶ in the Bible. Their bond was unbreakable, their lives forever entwined.

WHAT MIGHT WE LEARN FROM SARAH?

- ▷ You’re never too old to serve God—or to enjoy intimate relationships (and in this story, they go hand in hand).
 - ▷ If you don’t laugh, you might as well be dead.
 - ▷ Maturity, wisdom, and perseverance are powerful tools.
 - ▷ Stay strong despite difficult circumstances. It will all make sense one day, even though that day may be beyond your lifetime.
-

FOR REFLECTION

1. Why did God choose Sarah to be the spiritual matriarch of the Jewish people? What gifts did she have that helped bring God’s covenant to fulfillment?
2. Angst, despair, and joy are all reflected in this story, and Sarah and Hagar are revered figures in Judaism and Islam, respectively. The common link is Abraham, and therefore, the Abrahamic religions are Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. What does this say about world religions today, and how might we take steps take today to reconcile any differences?

3. Sarah overheard the angel and found that she was to have a baby late in life—and laughed. How would you have responded? What does her laugh mean to you? How might you find holy laughter in at least one event today?
4. What does Sarah's story say about the range of gifts that older people bring to the faith community?
5. Read Genesis 17:17, where Abraham laughs when God says that Sarah will bear a son. Has your spouse or partner ever lost faith in you? What was your response?

LET US PRAY

O Lord my God, be not Thou far from me; my God, have regard to help me; for there have risen up against me sundry thoughts, and great fears, afflicting my soul. How shall I pass through unhurt? How shall I break them to pieces? This is my hope, my one only consolation, to flee unto Thee in every tribulation, to trust in Thee, to call upon Thee from my inmost heart, and to wait patiently for Thy consolation. *Amen.*

—*The Imitation of Christ*
Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471)