

Chapter 1

Women of the Bible at a Glance

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding God's wish for unity of the sexes
 - ▶ Becoming acquainted with women and biblical culture
 - ▶ Turning to biblical women as good examples
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The Bible contains many more stories of men than of women . . . and in much greater detail. Although most of you probably know the stories of biblical men — Adam, Moses, Noah, Jesus, and Peter, to name several — many biblical women remain mysteries. Yet women play critical roles in the Bible and in salvation history. Some are famous, and others are unknown; some are powerful, and others are powerless. Like their biblical male counterparts, some women used their gifts and abilities for good, and some for evil. But no matter what their individual personalities and contributions, their stories are often crucial to understanding salvation history. They also provide a multitude of examples for readers today. From the original woman on earth (Eve) described in the first book of the Bible to the “woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet” (Revelation 12:1) mentioned in the last book, we discuss all the notable and noteworthy women in sacred scripture. Their examples provide a perspective on history, as well as enlightenment on the modern-day world.

Unifying Man and Woman

The best-selling book of all time isn't some John Grisham thriller. It's the Bible. But like any Grisham novel, the Bible is also chock-full of drama and excitement. Yes, the Bible has its fair share of adultery; it has sin, and it even tells many tales of love, romance, and kindness. The Bible has it all, and its importance throughout history can't be underestimated. Many world religions regard it as the inspired, inerrant, and revealed Word of God.

The Good Book, as it's often called, describes the words and deeds of the good, the bad, and the ugly of our species in their relationships with the Almighty and with each other. These stories and people cross every line — gender, race, class, ethnicity, age, and more. There is no good gender, class, or other group portrayed in the Bible, and on the flip side, there's no “bad” group, either. Even the Bible's greatest heroes are portrayed as real — and flawed — human beings.

The bigger picture in Genesis

The Bible tries to teach unity within diversity. Just as every man and woman is a unity of body and soul, and human nature is a unity of intellect and will, humankind is both male and female. Men and women are not inherently rivals, one against the other. According to Christian and Jewish theology, it was the devil (whose name means “adversary”) who tempted Adam and Eve to commit sin, an action that brought disunity into the human equation. The Bible teaches that grace unites and sin divides.

This unity is shown in two passages in Genesis. Genesis shows that both genders are equally human and are equally made in the image and likeness of God.

Genesis 1

“So God created humankind in his image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). This key passage from the first chapter of the first book of the Bible underscores the idea that both men and women are made in the image of God and that both genders together reflect the divine. Though the masculine pronoun is often used to describe God (he, his, and him), it isn't because men more resemble the Almighty than women do. (See Chapter 2 for more on translating what the Bible says.)

Because the scriptures also reveal the idea of God as both Father as well as Creator, the masculine is used in the same way we use the feminine to speak of mother earth (*terra mater* in Latin) or holy mother church. Yet, theologians point out that even the notion of God as Father is not to say that God is male. They say God is a spirit — pure spirit to be exact — and therefore has no gender in terms of divinity. Human beings, on the other hand, are either male or female, while at the same time both share the same human nature. Interestingly, though, the Bible does describe wisdom as if speaking of a woman by using the feminine pronoun (see Chapter 4 for more about Lady Wisdom).

Because of the human need to make God approachable, accessible, and lovable, people use a personal pronoun to describe him. Although the neutral “it” could be used to refer to God, that word sounds cold, unemotional, and disrespectful. Bible versions use “he” in reference to God, but that’s not meant to demean or diminish women or femininity, because God made both “male and female” in his own image and likeness.

Cooperation, rather than competition, between the sexes is encouraged because both were created in God’s image. Through the creation stories in Genesis, the Bible seeks to show that differences between men and women can be complementary and not necessarily adversarial or contradictory. For example, while there is a difference between how God created Adam (from the dust of the earth) and how he created Eve (from the rib of Adam), both are said to have been made in the image and likeness of God. Both father and mother are to be equally honored, as mandated in the Ten Commandments. Murdering a man or a woman incurs the same guilt and punishment.

Genesis 2

“Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). Whereas Genesis 1:27 (see the preceding section) speaks of male and female beings made in the divine image, this quote now speaks of unity, the two becoming one flesh. Scripture scholars point out that Genesis 1 has a slightly different Creation story than does Genesis 2. Both describe the same event, but each has a different perspective and purpose.

The passage from Genesis 2 shows that husband and wife are united in marriage in the same way that new skin is grafted to the old, the two becoming one. You experience the dual aspects of your human nature already as body and soul, flesh and blood, and mind and will. Male and female are just two more levels of ways to distinguish each other. The two passages together give the whole picture.

Two genders, one history

Both genders have a part to play in salvation history. When Exodus describes the Ten Commandments, both sexes are explicitly mentioned when it says, “honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12).

Although most of the people listed in the Bible are men, the women aren’t just window dressing or background scenery. Women like Sarah (see Chapter 9) are not just wives and mothers; they’re also matriarchs, prophetesses, teachers, and leaders, as in the case of Deborah the Judge (see Chapter 10) and Esther the Queen (see Chapter 8).

The Lord worked through both women and men in the Bible to teach, to save, and to protect. They may have been assigned different roles and responsibilities in this ancient culture, but they were both given one objective: to serve the will of God as best they could.



Equal *dignity* doesn't always translate into equal duties and responsibilities, whether cultural or religious.

This book looks at the significant women of the Bible, including Sarah (Chapter 9) and Miriam (Chapter 10), controversial women such as Delilah and Jezebel (Chapter 16), misunderstood women such as Mary Magdalene (Chapter 7), and famous women such as Eve (Chapter 5) and the Virgin Mary (Chapter 6).

Societies have, over time, chosen to embrace, embellish, adapt to, or reject boundaries placed on men and women. (And some societies, as discussed in Chapter 2, have even misinterpreted the Bible in order to protect their perceived powers.) The Bible explains how humans were created with the same rights, and its tales describe many women who, united with their men, made quite a difference in the history of the world.

Getting to Know the Women

Though men outnumber women in the Bible's stories, the book doesn't neglect the importance and influence of women of faith and the invaluable contribution they have made. The Bible shows from the very beginning of creation that women are not incidental but instead essential to the main stories being told — in spite of the patriarchal system in which they lived.



A *patriarchal society* is characterized by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the importance of carrying on the male line.

Chuckling the stereotypes

You won't find a stereotype of women in the Bible. You come across mothers (Chapter 19) and daughters (Chapter 20), wives (Chapter 18) and widows (Chapter 21), queens (Chapter 12), matriarchs (Chapter 9), and the poor and destitute. Other stories discuss harlots (Chapter 10), witches and soothsayers (Chapter 16), prophetesses (Chapter 15), a Judge (Chapter 10), and a military leader (Deborah in Chapter 10). Brave and courageous biblical women

are forced to contend with cowardly and unscrupulous ladies. Some are shy; others are outspoken. Some are known for their beauty, wisdom, and grace; others for their fidelity, loyalty, and courage. Biblical women aren't cookie-cutter characters — not a Stepford wife in the bunch.

Yes, most of the women of the Bible are wives and mothers, just as most men are husbands and fathers. The males are identified primarily through their occupation (Joseph the Carpenter, for example), whereas most women are identified by their relationship to someone else (mother of Jesus, Peter's mother-in-law, sister of Moses, and so on). You still see that type of identification today to some degree, such as references to the First Lady of the United States. But you also see this in the reverse, such as in the case of Sir Denis, the late husband of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

Despite these identifying characteristics, scripture doesn't imply that mere relationships to others (sister, wife, and widow) made these women great or holy. Instead, their faith in God made many of them important. What these women did or did not do and what they said or did not say is the bottom line, even though some are nameless and merely referred to by titles such as Lot's wife, Jairus's daughter, or the widow of Zarephath. Being faithful to God, doing the right thing, and showing courage in times of adversity are the actions that make the nameless and the named women in the Bible truly remarkable and worthy of attention.

Like their male counterparts, the heroines of the Bible aren't perfect any more than the villainesses are totally corrupt. People such as Naomi (Chapter 11) have some really hard knocks in life, yet they remain faithful despite their weaknesses. The good ones made mistakes just like the men, but they never stopped trying to do better, and they never gave up on God or on each other.

Understanding their circumstances

The sacred scriptures offer a glimpse into how women were treated in Old Testament and New Testament times in the Jewish and Christian traditions. The Bible also portrays the tension between the religion and culture and the effects that tradition, custom, and society had upon women. Women weren't the only group treated unfairly in the Bible; the poor, the foreigner, the unlearned, and those conquered by the predominant power at the time were often treated as less than human, as well as less than equal.

Understanding the culture and beliefs of the times is critical to understanding the women of the Bible. Human failure caused the inequality of those days. How do you know this? Consider Abraham (see Chapter 9 for the full story). He treats his wife Sarah disrespectfully by passing her off as his sister rather than as his wife just to protect his own skin. But God intervenes and protects her by getting her out of the sticky situation her husband got her in.

These women had normal human origins and lived ordinary lives. But when their faith was tested, they overcame enormous obstacles by their own human nature endowed by God's grace.

Many of them suffered, but they continued to keep their faith. For example, Elizabeth had no trouble believing that she would become pregnant, even when her husband, Zechariah, doubted the Angel Gabriel (for more on Elizabeth, see Chapter 13). Although she was eventually rewarded with a child, Zechariah's lack of faith was punished when he was struck speechless until the babe was born.

Widows, such as the one of Zarephath (Chapter 21), who was about to starve to death but was miraculously saved, are mentioned in this book. You also have the story of the wise woman of Tekoa (Chapter 19) from whom King David seeks advice. Unlike the witch of Endor (Chapter 16), whom King Saul consults, the woman of Tekoa gets her wisdom not from nefarious occult knowledge but simply because she is a good woman known for her insights that are believed to have come from God.

These and other women exhibit great strength of character and, most important, rock-solid fidelity to God. During a troubled time, had Jochebed not believed, she would never have placed her infant son Moses in the Nile River (see Chapter 10). And the early Christian church owes a debt of gratitude to the kindness, generosity, and assistance of women such as Phoebe, Priscilla, and Dorcas (Chapter 14).

Translating the Stories in Terms of Today



This book includes the theological and religious contributions some women made despite the injustices and inequalities they faced. While their culture and society treated them as second-class citizens at best and domestic servants at worst, the spiritual reality was that these women were just as holy and as important in the eyes of God as many of their male counterparts who receive praise today.

Knowing more about the women of the Bible is good not just for women but also for men, because both genders are made in the image and likeness of God. Despite the patriarchal structure in which they lived, women of strong faith still emerged and were used by God to continue the *covenant* (the sacred and permanent oath between the Lord and his Chosen People). Women readers can be empowered by the examples set by the women of the Bible, and everyone can perhaps better understand how women impacted salvation history.

Accepting our flaws — by reading about theirs

Unlike the old movie Westerns in which the good guy always wore a white hat and the bad guy wore a black hat, the heroes and heroines of the Bible are more complicated, mysterious, imperfect, and unpredictable, which makes them far more realistic. The women of the Bible are not unduly sanctified or vilified within its pages. They, too, struggled with good and evil, vice and virtue, sin and grace.

The Bible is essentially a book of nonfiction. The people portrayed aren't figments of the authors' imaginations; rather, they're real people who had to overcome real weaknesses and shortcomings. Those who persevered and never gave up the struggle are honored as saintly, holy persons, while those who gave up trying to be better — or ultimately succumbed to evil influences — are remembered as villains.

Although no Bible character is sinless, many of them repented and remained faithful. Perfection wasn't the way the Bible personified fidelity. Rather, true biblical faith meant never quitting no matter how many times one fell. The women of the Bible who realized this were as crucial to the story of faith as their male contemporaries.

Of course, individuals in the Bible were flawed to different degrees. There were good examples and bad examples in both genders, and you can take something away from the stories of all these people. Notorious women, such as Delilah (Chapter 16), Salome (Chapter 17), and Lot's wife (Chapter 15), show that the female gender can harbor just as much evil as their dastardly male counterparts.

Other women of the Bible fall somewhere in the middle — they weren't as evil as the Wicked Witch of the West or as holy and virtuous as Mother Teresa of Calcutta. These women weren't by any means spiritually mediocre; rather, they started out a little lukewarm or tepid and later on caught fire with love and zeal for God. Think about Mary Magdalene (see Chapter 7) or Bathsheba (see Chapter 16) or even Rahab (Chapter 10), who definitely was a woman of the evening and ran a house of ill repute only to later give sanctuary to Joshua's spies and thus allow a victory for the Hebrews over the city of Jericho. These women prove that despite a bad or slow start, God can use anyone who is willing to accomplish his will if they but trust and take a chance.

Recognizing the heroines — and drawing inspiration

Superheroes are purely fictional, so you don't find any of them in the Bible. What you will find, however, are heroes and heroines. A superhero may have special powers, abilities, or equipment, but the heroes and heroines you read about in the Bible do the best they can with mere mortal characteristics. They're ordinary people who do extraordinary things under extraordinary circumstances. The holy women in the Bible are true heroines who can serve as inspiration for all human beings, male or female.

Today, both sexes can benefit from knowing more about the impact made by many biblical women, such as the prophetess Huldah (Chapter 15), the Judge Deborah (Chapter 10), and Queen Esther (Chapter 8). Powerful, influential, and faithful, these women preserved the faith when many of their male compatriots abandoned God's will for paganism. Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus, were close friends of Jesus, and he often visited their home during a time when most Jewish men kept a safe social distance from women. Their platonic friendship was just as real and as important to Jesus as his relationships with his male disciples and friends.

When Jesus was arrested, condemned, and crucified, most of his apostles and disciples abandoned him. With the exception of John, all the big, manly men, such as Peter, James, Thomas, and Matthew, fled. The only other family members and friends who remained at the foot of the cross on Calvary as Jesus suffered were the faithful women in his life. The Virgin Mary (see Chapter 6), Mary Magdalene (see Chapter 7), and Mary, the wife of Clopas (see Chapter 13), are listed by name in the Gospels. Eleven other male apostles and more than 70 disciples were conspicuously absent.



Although secular history may not recognize many of these women, their presence in the Bible is a sign that they had something to do with salvation history — good or bad.

In most cases, their stories demonstrate the resilience and reliability of womanhood. And because they're merely human, their courage, sacrifices, commitment, wisdom, trust, and faith are characteristics to which everyone can truly aspire.