

OLD TESTAMENT

WOMEN OF THE BIBLE

SARAH AND HAGAR

TAMAR

MIRIAM

RAHAB

DEBORAH AND Jael

BATHSHEBA

NAOMI AND RUTH

ESTHER



ROSE
PUBLISHING



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THE BIBLE is full of women who became unexpected heroines and surprising instruments in God's story. Women played many crucial roles in Scripture, though it is easy to miss their significance. Following are brief, illustrated word portraits of ten women from the Old Testament. Each sketch includes hidden meanings such as names, ironies in the stories, and the culture of the times. What the Bible does not say about someone or something is often as important as what the Bible actually says.

WOMEN IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

When reading such ancient texts, it is easy to forget how different things were in Old Testament times. In some ways, the role of a woman depended on her social status: Married women with children were more highly regarded than single or childless ones. In some ways, women were treated as property, to be used as necessary according to the situation. In other ways, they had a powerful influence on those around them. Notable women in the Old Testament navigated life using faith, discernment, and good judgment as their main tools. They were, like we all are, a mixture of strength and weakness, of sin and goodness. Their circumstances, struggles, hopes, and dreams have much to teach about living a life of faith with God.

SARAH AND HAGAR

	Sarai, later known as Sarah	Hagar
BIBLICAL REFERENCES	Genesis 12, 16, 17, 18, 21, 23	Genesis 16 and 21
LOCATION AND DATES	Canaan, around 2100 BC	Canaan, around 2100 BC
MEANING OF NAME	Both forms of the name mean "princess"	Hagar probably means "stranger"
KEY EVENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barren wife of Abraham • Abraham passed her off as his sister in exchange for safety—twice • Offered her slave, Hagar, to Abraham as concubine • Laughed at God's promise of a son • Bore a son named Isaac (meaning "laughter") at age 90 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sarah's Egyptian slave • Given to Abraham as surrogate wife • Bore Ishmael (meaning "God hears") • Visited by the Angel of the Lord • Abraham expelled her from the household • Received promises from God
HOW GOD USED HER	Sarah's life showed that God is faithful to his promises. Although her life was in danger and her barrenness made it look impossible for God to fulfill his word, Isaac, the son of the promise, was born.	Although Hagar was considered a piece of property and used for her child-bearing abilities, God blessed her and her child. The birth of Ishmael, "God hears," is an encouragement to all who suffer.

KEY STORY In her culture, Sarai's barrenness was what defined her. Sarai's lot in life was to be used as a piece of property, subjected to the whims and fears of her husband. While traveling through foreign lands, Abraham gave away his wife to guarantee his own survival and, as it turns out, enrichment. However, if Abraham was quick to give her up, God was not. He protected her and, eventually, restored her back to her husband.

God promised a son, but the years passed by and Abraham and Sarah were still childless. So Sarah decided to follow custom and gave her slave to her husband to have children through her. We can only imagine Sarai's suffering and longing leading to her decision to move aside. Sarah gave Abraham her own slave, Hagar, so he could have children. Hagar was also used as property; her existence was confined to the needs of her master and mistress. She became a surrogate for Sarah. Hagar gave

LIFE APPLICATION

- ☞ A reminder that even in moments of doubt, suffering, and when facing what seems impossible, there is nothing impossible for God.
- ☞ God keeps his promises in his own time.
- ☞ God protects the weak.



birth to a son, Ishmael, and her new child and new social standing gave her boldness. Much as Sarah had used her social condition of owner before, Hagar used her new concubine position and her child-bearing ability against her mistress. Sarah severely punished Hagar (Genesis 16:9). Although we do not find out what happened to Hagar after she fled with her son, we do know that God promised to bless her and Ishmael in a special way.

In a miraculous intervention, God fulfilled his promise to Sarah by giving her a son, a future, a new reality. Many years later, Sarah was the first person to be buried in the Promised Land.



TAMAR

BIBLICAL REFERENCES	Genesis 38; Matthew 1:3
LOCATION AND DATES	Palestine, northern border of Judah, around 1880 BC
MEANING OF NAME	Probably "palm tree"
KEY EVENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Married Judah's first son, Er • Married Judah's second son, Onan, after Er died • Judah sent her away after Onan died • Had twins with Judah • Perez, one of the twins, was an ancestor of King David • She is mentioned in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew 1:3
HOW GOD USED HER	God used Tamar to confront Judah with his sinful ways and convict him to change. Such a change was important for the leadership role that Judah was to have in his family and in the future of God's people (see Genesis 43-45).

KEY STORY After marrying Tamar, Judah's eldest son, Er, passed away, leaving Tamar widowed and childless. Following biblical law, Onan, Judah's second son, married her but died soon thereafter. Instead of continuing the same practice and giving her to his third child, Judah blamed Tamar for the deaths and sent her away to her family. Tamar went away dejected and robbed of her future. She was a widow, childless, tied to Judah's family and unable to marry again. Although Judah promised to give her to his third child, he had no intention of keeping his promise, "for he feared that he would die like his brothers..." (Genesis 38:11). What is a person with almost no value, power, or influence to do in this unjust situation? Tamar still had her desire for justice. She used it to deal with her deceitful father-in-law.

LIFE APPLICATION

- ☞ God blesses people who seek righteousness.
- ☞ God can take what began as evil and turn it into good.



We know more about Judah than Tamar. We know that he was impulsive, like his brothers, and scheming (Genesis 37:26-27). Moreover, he was a man for whom God seemed to play a secondary role, his own interests being in the place of honor. Tamar knew all of this and kept tabs on Judah's whereabouts and doings (Genesis 38:13). She made a plan that God used to straighten what Judah had twisted. It was a desperate, dangerous plan with little possibility of success, except for the fact that God was still in charge.

Her plan was deceptively simple. She disguised herself as a prostitute and sat by the road at the entrance of Enaim. The Hebrew *petab enaim* means "eye-opener," giving the reader a clue for what is about to happen. It turned out to be an eye-opener for both Judah and the reader! As the story continues, Judah realized he had been trapped. His initial reaction of indignation evaporated when he saw his own seal, cord, and staff. Judah justified Tamar and her actions with the words, "She is more righteous than I...." Judah's words were not only his recognition of his own failing, but they also imply God's declaration that Tamar acted more in the spirit of the law than did Judah. The text continues narrating the birth of yet another set of twins, in which the second, Perez, was to be highly favored. Perez turned out to be David's ancestor and Jesus' own ancestor (Matthew 1:3).

MIRIAM

BIBLICAL REFERENCES	Exodus 2:1-10, 15; Numbers 12, 20
LOCATION AND DATES	Egypt and Sinai Desert, around 1400 bc
MEANING OF NAME	Either "bitterness" or "rebellion"
KEY EVENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moses' sister, who tended Moses in the basket and cleverly reunited the baby with their mother • Led Israelites in song and dance after crossing the Red Sea, celebrating God's victory over Pharaoh • Called a "prophetess" (Exodus 15:20) • Rebelled against Moses; God severely punished her (Numbers 12) • Died before entering the Promised Land (Numbers 20:1)
HOW GOD USED HER	Miriam is a good example of humanity: She combined good and bad characteristics. She displayed great leadership qualities for the people, but she also rebelled against God's authority—just as the Israelites would in the desert and during the rest of their history. Yet, God chose her to rescue Moses, to lead the people, and to speak for him as a prophetess.



Rahab believed without having seen God in action, and she anticipated God's promises without being part of God's own people. She was able to confess, "I know that the LORD has given you the land" (Joshua 2:9). Rahab became the messenger of the Lord to Israel to infuse strength and courage. Rahab was three times vulnerable: she was a woman, she was Canaanite, and she was a prostitute. She had taken a great risk, and she had demonstrated surprising faith and courage. Joshua received her and her family as members of God's people. But that is not all. We must wait until the New Testament, Matthew 1:5, to learn another fact about Rahab: She is also named in Jesus' genealogy. Jesus, the savior of the world, is descended from this brave Canaanite woman.

LIFE APPLICATION

- ☛ God uses unexpected means to encourage his people.
- ☛ Rahab understood who God was and was willing to abandon all to become a member of God's people.
- ☛ God can use any person for his own purposes.

Jesus' Genealogy

Most genealogies from the time of Jesus did not even mention women. But Jesus' family tree is unique. It includes:

Tamar	Widowed twice, humiliated, and sent away; yet the Lord gave her children and honor
Rahab	A prostitute who was not an Israelite, but from Jericho, a city at war with Israel
Ruth	A foreigner from Moab, a country that often warred with Israel
Bathsheba	Became pregnant by King David; her husband was murdered
Mary	Mother of Jesus, from a poor area of Israel, probably a teenager

Notably, several of the women were non-Israelites, whose efforts for a future and whose courage and wisdom God blessed and prospered. Even the list of Jesus' ancestors reminds that Jesus is the Savior for all people: Jews and Gentiles, male and female.

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