

# Women in the Old Testament

Part One

## **Discussion Tips for Facilitators**



LITURGICAL PRESS

Collegeville, Minnesota

[littlerockscripture.org](http://littlerockscripture.org)

## **LESSON ONE**

1. The first question not only allows group members to speak about expectations and hopes for this study, but also allows the members to hear themselves in the group and begin to know a bit about each other.
2. Rabbinic tradition remembers Sarah as a teacher and leader of the other women in her community—she instructs them about the God of their faith. Her influential role might have increased her own faith, even as she followed her husband to an unknown place, and might have revealed the ways that God worked through her to guide the people.
3. The situation that Abraham created by passing Sarah off as his sister may have seemed logical in an ancient culture, given the dangers of travel through others' territories. Still, we are right to have mixed, or even angry, feelings about the dangers Sarah faced and could not control. There are many places in today's world where women are still used as barter—traded or sold for some benefit to those in power. Perhaps not as dramatically, women may often feel that they have little control over situations not of their making or out of their control to change. From the first book of the Bible to the last, God stands with the vulnerable, suffering with them, lifting up their dignity.
4. By sharing some examples of God's presence or intervention in our own life circumstances, we begin to recognize that our failure to imagine what God can do will not prevent God from acting! It's often in hindsight and upon reflection that we recognize that nothing is impossible for God.
5. Sarah first laughs in response to the visitors' promise—later revealed as God's promise—that she will bear a son. She is ninety years old! How could this possibly happen? But Sarah next laughs when her son Isaac is born—when God's promise has come true. Her laughter moves from disbelief to joy. As her story unfolds, Sarah doesn't know the path ahead of her. Yet, she trusts in God even when God's promises seem outright comical! Group members may have additional insights about Sarah's laughter and personality.
6. a) Lest we let ourselves think that the women of the Bible were always virtuous and pure, Sarah's story corrects us. Her blatant envy causes her to abuse Hagar, the Egyptian woman who bore Abraham's child (at Sarah's urging) but did not receive Sarah's gratitude or respect. Given the circumstances, it would be natural for Hagar to feel some harshness toward Sarah.  
  
b) In contrast to Sarah, God's gaze is merciful and compassionate, seeing in Hagar her own inherent dignity.
7. While some might associate being "seen" with a sense of guilt or shame, it is clear that Hagar experiences being seen by God as affirming and promising. It is God who knows us through and through, and loves us by extending mercy and hope. Group members may have a variety of ideas about the notion of being seen by God.
8. Paul uses the two women as symbols of the covenant with Moses at Sinai, which is the basis of Judaism, and the covenant in Jesus, which is the basis of Christianity. Paul believed that first covenant had become a kind of slavery (symbolized by the slave Hagar) to the letter of the law, and the second a freedom (symbolized by Sarah) from restraints of the law. Nowell points out the irony of this analogy, where Hagar (a foreign woman) becomes a symbol of Judaism, and Sarah (the mother of the Jewish people) becomes a symbol of Christianity.

9. This question allows readers the opportunity to imaginatively enter into the stories of Sarah and Hagar.
10. Hagar can easily remind us of ourselves—unsure about the life that God lays out for us, and afraid in the face of suffering. It can be troubling to read how God encourages her to return to Sarah, who abuses her. In Hagar's story, though, we might also be inspired by her dependence upon, and relationship with, God. Despite her suffering, she remains confident of God's love and care for her, and she plays a key role in Israel's story.



## **LESSON TWO**

1. Group members can bear witness to their experiences of God in a variety of ways. This is the heart of evangelization. By sharing our stories, we encourage one another to give witness to what we know and believe.
2. Rebekah takes advantage of one son's absence to promote the other son, makes clear that she favors one over the other, puts in place a plan of deception and encourages the favored son to carry it out, fools her husband on his deathbed, and creates another lie to send the favored son away before he can be killed by his brother. In short, she creates a rift in her family that will not be fully healed.
3. It seems particularly cruel to deceive a man who is dying. People may feel angry, sad, surprised, etc. Reading about the deceptions of biblical patriarchs and matriarchs reminds us that these figures are humans like us, with flaws and ulterior motives. We, too, can be part of God's story, even as imperfect as we are.
4. By talking together about how God works in and through (and in spite of) our maneuvers to be in control, we become more aware of God's faithfulness and of the grace we need to cooperate with God.
5. Although the maids' children are counted as Jacob's children, the mothers are treated as mere servants with no rights over their own bodies. The fact that the maids and their sons were placed at the front of the caravan when approaching danger shows that they are not regarded in the same way as Rachel and Leah. Jacob's son Reuben sleeping with Bilhah also shows no regard for her and reminds us that she remains a servant.
6. The story of the rape of Dinah and its consequences illustrates that Dinah's pain is not considered nearly as important as the shame brought to her family through no fault of her own. We can try to put ourselves in her place and hope that she cried out to God, who heard her distress and accompanied her in her suffering (as God does with Hagar and many others who are left without defense).
7. The practice of a deceased man's brother marrying his widow is known as levirate marriage and is intended to provide security to both sides of the arrangement. The husband's family receives the benefit of children to perpetuate the family/clan. The woman receives continued protection and provision within the family, essential in a time when there were few social safety nets.
8. Each of Judah's sons who married Tamar died. To protect his youngest son from the same fate, Judah puts off the levirate marriage that would have been usual and proscribed by law, and sends Tamar back to her father's house. After a long delay, Tamar wants what is rightfully hers. She sets a trap for Judah, who is now a widower. Judah sleeps with Tamar, believing she is a prostitute, but then denies being with her, and ultimately would have denied the babies they conceived together had she not had proof. As the commentary explains, despite her deception, Tamar is more righteous than Judah because she has honored the traditional demands of her relationship with her dead husband (by continuing his line), while her father-in-law did not intend to.
9. This question allows for discussion about how we cooperate with God's grace and what causes us to be impatient.

10. Group members may have varying opinions on this picture of Israelite women's authority. Rebekah acts decisively within her family, but is limited in outright authority and must deceive in order to ensure her desired outcome. Rebekah is like other women of her time—her authority ends at the door. Yet, her household influence preserves Israel's covenantal identity—she is a pivotal influence, indeed!



### **LESSON THREE**

1. First, it is important to understand the distinction between feeling afraid or scared (like Pharaoh) and “fearing God” (being in awe of God). Second, by sharing some personal examples of courageous decisions, even seemingly small ones, we can nurture in one another a true desire to know and follow God’s will.
2. For the mother of Moses, the Nile became a cradle of safety and protection.
3. Like God, Pharaoh’s daughter acts with compassion, love, and justice, rescuing a child to protect him from death.
4. These examples could be local or global. As an example, women’s cooperatives in many Central American locations help women foster small businesses for greater financial security, or aid them in finding their husbands or children who have been abducted. A local church may have a women’s ministry that serves the community in various ways. Group members may share examples ranging from world leadership to family ties.
5. a) The prophets of Israel speak and act for God. They call their fellow believers to adhere to the covenantal requirements to love God and neighbor by acting justly and loving with tender mercy. They help their own people develop hope for a future that God desires.  
  
b) Deborah was discerning in battle; Huldah was an advisor to King Josiah; Isaiah’s wife mothered his son; Anna recognized Jesus as the Messiah.
6. Allow time to share examples of how God’s presence or direction became clearer because of another person’s witness to you or actions on your behalf.
7. Although there are plenty of examples in Scripture that encourage Israel to protect itself from those outside the community and their practices, even in these early stories there are also examples of Israel benefitting from the compassion and justice of those outside of the covenantal community.
8. Allow time for discussion on Miriam’s legacy. As a prophet, Miriam might have been a threat to those uncomfortable with female leadership. Miriam reveals how God works through all people. She also demonstrates authentic worship and inspires our own praise of God.
9. That Miriam’s song is one of the oldest biblical passages reminds us of the power of music. Music connects us—our voices all become one in praise of God. Music is a joyful manifestation of all that we believe and solidifies our relationships with others and with God.

## **LESSON FOUR**

1. Rahab hides the Hebrew advance soldiers, lies to protect them, and helps them escape. Based on what she has heard about the God of the former slaves, she is inclined to put her life on the line to assist them.
2. We can only speculate, but once again someone that might be considered “unworthy” by society’s standards comes to the aid of God’s people. Rahab is judged by her actions—protecting the traveling Hebrews—rather than by her occupation.
3. Deborah is a judge in Israel, and her authority comes from God. Unlike other Israelite judges, she is not a military leader but a prophet. She is also the only one of the judges who functions as a judge in the sense of listening to and settling disputes.
4. Israel is aided by a vast volunteer army from several tribes, and by the level and condition of the water in the Wadi Kishon (a river that runs through the plain of Megiddo in northern Israel). But most importantly, Israel’s victory is credited to God.
5. Even knowing how different the time and culture were when these stories were originally told, many of us might feel a certain repulsion about the graphic descriptions of Jael’s actions. The song of Deborah praises deliverance from enemies but also puts “salt in the wound” by picturing Sisera’s mother’s expectation of her son’s return. The Israelites might have heard in these stories how God never abandons them and delivers them in often-unexpected ways.
6. Jephthah bargains with God in a way that could sound familiar to us. While we may not hold that such a promise to God must be fulfilled (especially at the cost of a family member’s life), we can still learn that it is better to ask for and seek God’s will rather than assuming that our momentary desires are for the greater good.
7. Samson is indeed a tragic figure, but most of the tragedy in his life is of his own making and creates tragedy for many others in the process. In the biblical accounts in this lesson, Samson instills fear in those around him, and could be described as rash, indifferent to human dignity, etc.
8. While it is often hard to admit, our “tribal” values and affiliations are often more important to us than the complexities of what may be true and valid. It is easier to get into the routine of thinking or acting in our group’s interest than to explore reality from a different perspective.
9. Allow time to discuss these questions. We often consider situations through the lens of choosing one way or the other without realizing that with prayer, creativity, and consultation of others, we might discover or create a solution that does not include choosing one evil over another.
10. Jael’s violent actions might be more understandable when read in their original violent context. Jael is a woman who takes her safety into her own hands, whether out of courage or fear. No matter her motivation, in her story we see the God of Israel working for deliverance through those on the margins.



## LESSON FIVE

1. The biblical examples indicate that migration occurred due to limited natural resources, (e.g., water), oppression, the threat of violence or war, etc. Some of these same situations account for migration around the world today.
2. Personal responses will vary. Discernment is necessary because life situations are rarely cut-and-dry.
3. Gleaning is allowing crops to be picked by those in need once the first harvest is complete. The landowner and his servants harvested by hand, naturally leaving some of the produce on the vine (what was either unripe or missed in the efficiency of the first harvest). Israel's law providing for such sharing indicates that Israel recognized the communal nature of living with others and the responsibility to care for the vulnerable.
4. The words of Ruth to Naomi as they trek through the desert show a profound sense of devotion and obligation to the older woman. This passage is often heard at weddings, but in its original context, it is about the covenantal love that should define relationships of all kinds. By using these words in prayer, we may also come to know the importance of deep bonds in our communities.
5. When we look around our parishes, it is fair to say that, for some period of time, most of its members have looked much like us—they are from similar national, economic, and racial backgrounds. Throughout history, however, parishes have gone through radical shifts as neighborhoods change, the population shifts, and immigrants join in worship. These are opportunities to value the diversity of our church and the various cultural priorities that enhance our faith, and to expand our ability to work together toward the kingdom of God.
6. Sometimes the situations we pray about do not change, or do not seem to change quickly enough. But every time we pray, something in *us* changes; we might become more patient or less rigid, more convinced about right or wrong, or we might even find a new way to accept or handle a particular situation, etc.
7. a) When we speak of God "remembering," it does not mean that God forgets or needs to be reminded about something. Rather, asking God to remember is a way of asking God to be actively engaged with God's people. God comes to the aid of Noah, assures Rachel and other infertile women that they will become pregnant, liberates the enslaved Hebrew people, etc.  
  
b) We are also invited to be a remembering people, to become more engaged with living the covenant that God has established with us. The referenced Scriptures remind us of the ways we interact with others, trust in God, and rely on the grace of God to abide in divine mercy.
8. We may want to offer God praise for health or access to effective healthcare, for a job situation that is turning around, for lessons in patience, for the care and kindness of others, for healing in a relationship, etc.



9. This interpretation of Naomi's story might feel more authentic to lived human experience, since our motivations are never purely good or bad. When multi-dimensional characters like Naomi are seen as realistic role models, the biblical text can also become more inspirational for us today. Even in our own complexities, we, too, can become instruments of God's will, and work for the good of those around us.
10. These questions allow group members to spend time reflecting back on their study and looking forward to Part Two of *Women in the Old Testament*. Responses will vary as biblical women speak to each of us in unique ways, and the lessons we draw from their stories change throughout our lives.

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New American Bible, revised edition* © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

© 2024 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the written permission of the copyright holder. Published by Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 56321. Printed in the United States of America.