

What can people learn from Women in the Hebrew Bible? Old stories, new perspectives? (8 – 12 years)

Learning Outcomes

Emerging

- Retell one story of a woman in the Hebrew Bible
- Explain the original meaning of the story
- Offer a view as to how the story could be of use today

Expected

- Explain how the qualities and personalities of two women from the Hebrew Bible helped them in their stories
- Offer a view as to whether we can learn anything important about studying women's stories

Exceeding

- Explain what sort of truth can be gained from reading stories in the bible
- Offer a supported view as to the value for today of biblical stories

Key words

- **Women in the Bible:** Approximately 188 women are referred to by name in the Christian Bible. Several others are implied. They are considered minor figures in the majority of stories they appear in. This banquet uses familiar stories and explores them in light of the female character.
- **Hebrew Bible:** The canonical collection of Jewish texts known as the Tenakh. This corresponds closely to Anglican and Protestant versions of the Christian Old Testament.
- **Qualities:** Here we are referring to aspects of human character that we admire; e.g., caring, loving, forgiving, honest, humility, willingness to help, courage, self-discipline, compassion, modesty, sense of humour, determination, perseverance, loyalty, etc.
- **Serpent in the Garden of Eden:** a symbol of evil power. 'Nakhash' in Hebrew.
- **Divine:** coming from (a) God.
- **Sin:** an immoral act, against God's laws.
- **Stranger:** someone that is not known to anyone, alone.
- **Ishmael:** 'God hears'; so called because God heard Hagar's prayers. NB 'God' is often written by many Jews as 'G-d' or 'L-rd' as a way of avoiding any misuse of the name.
- **Moral dilemma:** an ethical question where choosing one answer is detrimental to the other. A choice between equally undesirable alternatives.

- **Leader:** someone who leads or commands a group of people.
- **Freedom:** the right to act, think, speak as you wish.
- **Slavery:** a system where people are bought and sold and forced to work. They are often held against their will. Common practice in the times of the Hebrew Bible.
- **Isolation:** lack of contact between individuals or groups of people.
- **Exclusion:** to expel or keep out.
- **Friendship:** mutual affection.
- **Loyalty:** being faithful, committed.
- **Justice:** fair behaviour or treatment.

Learning activities

This teaching resource could be used as a **transition unit**, with pupils learning about some of the women in Year 6 and the rest in Year 7.

You will need several passages from the Bible. Choose a translation that children can engage with, such as the New International Version, the Message or Good News, all available on biblegateway.com.

Passages used:

Genesis 3	Genesis 21:1-21	Genesis 27
Exodus 15	Ruth 1-3	
Esther 2:19-23	Esther 3:8-14	Esther 8:15-17

Explain that there are different views about the role of women in society, communities and families. Inventions and development in the modern world have had an impact on the role of women, but that many people believe that there is much wisdom to be gained from studying how women are portrayed in religious texts. Explain that, for many people, such texts carry important messages for the world today. According to many believers in the Bible, for example, such messages have a *divine* origin.

Eve

- Read the story of 'The Fall' in **Genesis 3** and ask the pupils such questions as:
 - What *qualities* do each of the characters in the story have (God, Serpent, Adam, Eve)?
 - What do you think about the way Eve acted?
 - Were Eve's actions positive or negative?
 - Why does something bad happen in the story?
 - What would life be like if Eve had not done what she did?
 - What does the story say about human nature?

Arrange pupils into groups and debate: 'The story of Adam and Eve contains no truth whatsoever.' Give own opinions and suggest possible Christian / Jewish views in response.

Keep a summary sheet / make a poster at the end of each session about what pupils feel they have learnt from the story of this woman and what it teaches about Christian / Jewish belief about human beings. Encourage pupils to answer: What qualities does this woman portray? What impact does she have on other characters in the story? What might be her influence on Christian / Jewish believers today?

Hagar

Read the story of the Expulsion of Hagar in **Genesis 21:1-21** and conduct a circle time discussion: Remind pupils that Hagar became a stranger in a new land and ask such questions as:

- In what situations are we strangers?
- How does it feel to be a stranger?
- When might it feel like a good thing to be a stranger?
- What can we do to welcome strangers?
- What qualities might strangers appreciate? Why?

- Focus pupils' attention on what happens to Ishmael in the story. Explain that Ishmael means 'God hears' and ask pupils for their views on whether they think there is a God that hears people's cries for help in any way today?
- Outline the concepts of: Freedom, slavery, isolation, exclusion (see 'Subject Knowledge' section above) and ask pupils if they can give modern examples of each.

- Having checked in advance for suitable material, show pupils on the whiteboard what the BBC and Channel 4 News websites are featuring currently in relation to the four key terms of Freedom, Slavery, Isolation and Exclusion. Ask pupils to identify any behaviour or human qualities in the stories that shows (a) bad behaviour and (b) admirable behaviour. Point out whether and in what way there are any women featured in the stories.
- Divide pupils into groups and encourage them to make a presentation based on some online research on how freedom, slavery, isolation and exclusion feature in the media. Encourage them to feature women as well as men in their presentations.
- Ask pupils to present their findings to the class.

Rebekah

- Read the story of Ruth in **Genesis 27** and bring out points about how Rebekah duped Isaac, her blind, ageing husband to get justice for the son he favoured least. Ask pupils such questions as:
 - Should Rebekah have done what she did? Draw up points for and against her actions.
 - What, if any, desirable qualities does Rebekah show?
 - How might this story influence how Christians and Jews respond to dilemmas today?
 - Have you ever faced a moral dilemma? What was it? How did you decide what to do?
- Divide pupils into groups and make a 'conscience alley'. Choose a pupil to be Rebekah and walk the alley. Pupils on one side should try to persuade her to dupe Isaac whilst pupils on the other side provide reasons to deter her. When Rebekah reaches the end of the alley, she should decide what she will do and try to provide reasons to support her argument.

Link to literacy by suggesting pupils write a persuasive or balanced argument.

Miriam

- Read the story of the escape of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt in **Exodus 15** (particularly verses 19-21) and explain that Miriam led her people in search of a new land, a land of freedom. It is likely that she wanted them all to have a better life in a country far from the home they had always known. Ask pupils such questions as:
 - Why do you think the people followed her? What qualities do you think she must have had?
 - What effect did she have on the people around her?
- Take pupils on the journey. Freeze at different points of the story and interview different people, with questions such as: Who are they? Why did they come? What did they hope to find? What was their first experience in the new land like? Why? What difficulties did they encounter? Why? Did they receive any good welcomes? What were they like? How did they make them feel? Why did they leave their land? What did they hope to achieve in your/their life?
- Record the journey with a video camera, photographs or using sound postcards. Photographs could be taken which emotion vocabulary could be added to. Pupils could make an emotions graph to accompany the story.
- Point out that Miriam is remembered in the story for leading the dancing. Ask pupils what would they would want to be remembered for and to give some reasons for their answer.
- Ask pupils to rewrite the event in the form of a newspaper report or to film a news bulletin. They could include comments they think the followers would have made or interview them and explain what made them follow Miriam.
- Pupils could include responses from believers and non-believers and explain how they think following / not following Miriam to the new land has effected them.

Esther

- Read the story of Esther in **Esther 2:19-23**, **Esther 3:8-14**, **Esther 8:15-17** and point out that she was a queen, a leader of her time. She saved Mordecai from Haman. It was risky but she did it to get justice for her people. Ask pupils such questions as:
 - What do you think being a Queen would have involved in her situation?
 - What *qualities* were needed for her role?
 - What qualities do female leaders need to have today? Do you think female leaders today need to have different qualities to male leaders? Why / Why not?
 - What do you think you would have done in Esther's situation?
- Provide small groups of pupils with information sheets about women who changed the world, e.g., from *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* and encourage them to identify and write down their *qualities* and the *impact* they had on the world.
- Show pupils some job adverts and person specifications and encourage them to write a person specification for a female queen / leader today. Can they identify the qualities needed for the role?

Ruth and Naomi

- Read the story: **Ruth 1-3**, and bring out points about Ruth and Naomi being loyal friends. Explain that friendship can have significant effects on people. Ask the pupils such questions as:
 - What is your definition of a good friend?

Show pupils these two paintings (available online):

- Ruth and Naomi by He Qi: and
- Whither Thou Goest by Sandy Freckleton Gagon
- Ask pupils to offer suggestions about what these paintings may be saying about friendship.
- Tell pupils that you want to run a competition to find the best friend and that you would like them to nominate someone. Encourage them to write their nomination form explaining why theirs is the best friend you can get.
- Ask them to follow this up by composing an interview for a Christian and one for a female relative or family friend to answer about their life. They should write questions about the person's role as a woman in their family and what influences their beliefs and actions.

Summary activities

- Put copies of the paintings of the women pupils have been learning about up on the wall – spread apart as far as possible.
- Arrange pupils in small groups and provide them with some sticky notes. Ask them to write single 'quality' words on each note that they think apply to the women in the Bible stories and to then stick the notes to the appropriate pictures around the room.

- Encourage them to stand by the picture of the woman they most admire and ask a few pupils for their reasons. Can they suggest what Christian or Jewish believers may learn from these stories? Can they say what they have learnt from these women?
- Do pupils have any questions they would ask the characters if they could? Can they think of any questions that Christian or Jewish believers might want to ask?
- Back in their small groups, ask pupils to design an internet meme (an idea, style or action that spreads from person to person via the internet; this may take the form of an image accompanied by a slogan, video, hyperlink or hashtag) to share in a simple way something new they have learnt from the old stories.
- Memes that can explain what they have learnt about (a) Christian / Jewish beliefs (b) the qualities of women in the Bible will provide possibility for further assessment.

Further application of this resource

- Read about Mary, the mother of Jesus, and other women in the Christian New Testament. Pupils could explore what qualities these women portray and how they might influence believers today. Are there some new things that could be learnt about the portrayal of women in the Bible from these stories?