



### *Women less than 15% of Bible characters*

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As Vacation Bible School starts up this summer, our children will be learning many of the key stories of our faith. Will they learn about the women in Scripture? Maybe not.

Women of importance in the Bible were mostly sex workers, queens, and barren women in need of children. These aren't exactly kid-friendly stories, and they are not very diverse stories, either. It is difficult to tell stories when the characters are unnamed, as so many Scriptural women are. Including the Apocrypha, there are more than 600 unnamed women in the Bible. Many women are identified only in relation to men (wife of, daughter of, sister of, etc.). How can our children remember characters without names?

If the woman does have a name, she often shares it with another biblical woman; this is true on 27 occasions. Seven different women in the Old Testament are named Macaah, and six to seven women in the New Testament are called Mary. In the context of the times, these names were very popular, but unfortunately this also contributes greatly to the conflation of female characters.

Named or unnamed, great deals of these women were also conniving and deceitful in their stories, whether heroes or villains: Tamar, Judith, Jezebel, Rahab, Salome just to name a few. But only 188 to 205 of the women have names, depending on what Bible you're reading. Compare that to the 1,181 named men, and women are less than 15% of the named characters. (This is a conservative estimate as it includes women in the Apocrypha.) Ignoring women's stories (and names) has pervaded our religious and secular histories for centuries and continues today.

According to the Geena Davis Institute, in media geared toward children 11 and under, there are three male characters for every female character. In crowd scenes, females made up only 17%. With a scope so limited, it is no wonder that women in media are often portrayed in such limiting and stereotyped roles. In an age and place where women are educated and no longer considered property, it

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will still take another 42 years before women are staffed as television writers at the same rate as men.

Minimal representation and mass misrepresentation of women in media and of women's stories is harmful to us. It both reflects and influences society's attitudes and behaviors toward women. What are we telling women and girls about themselves if we can only imagine them and think of them in relation to men or as damsels in distress, or as not enough? Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie speaks to literary limitations such as these in a TED talk titled, "The Danger of a Single Story":

The Apocrypha are a set of books recognized in the Catholic and Orthodox canons but not in many Protestant or Jewish canons. The Apocrypha are sometimes categorized as a third set of books between the Old and New Testaments. Sixteen women are named in the Apocrypha.

"The consequence of the single story is this: it robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult, it emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar...Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people but stories can also repair that broken dignity...When we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise."

We can celebrate Scriptural women who defy the gender roles of their time (the Syrophenician woman in the New Testament, Deborah the judge in the Old Testament), named and unnamed (more examples below).

We can't change the Bible stories, but we can change the way women are represented in churches today and tomorrow. Let's be intentional about naming the women who have made a difference in our churches, conferences, and denominations.

### **For further thought:**

Who is your favorite Scriptural woman? Why?

How can your faith community be more intentional about naming and lifting up women?