

Women by the Numbers/June 2014

Women less than 15% of Bible characters

By Erin Kane, GCSRW Director of Research and Monitoring

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 Maccah, 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.

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.

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 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 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 reject these single stories by demanding, as 52% of movie-ticket purchasers, that we want to see [women protagonists in film](#) and by supporting media directed and produced by women. We can encourage our newspapers to list [more notable women in the obituaries and we can encourage our local leaders to remember notable women](#) when dedicating honorary streets and commissioning statues. We can celebrate Scriptural women who defy the gender roles of their time (the Syro-Phoenician 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.

Discussion:

Who is your favorite Scriptural woman? Why?

If someone were to write a record of important faithful figures today, which women should be included?

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

If you want to respond to these discussion questions, or if you have an idea for an article or research, email [Erin Kane](#), our director of research and monitoring.

To learn more about women in Scripture, take a look at our six-session Bible study “[Women Called to Ministry](#)” available for free download.

To see women in Methodist history that the GCSRW names and lifts up, click [here](#): (Keep an eye out for an upcoming curriculum from GCSRW that can help you to celebrate these notable women, too.)

For a list of historically significant events in June concerning women click [here](#).

Some examples of women from the Bible are on the following page.

One Named Woman from the Old Testament – Jezebel: *1 Kings 16: 31 through 2 Kings 9:37.* Jezebel was a ruthless pagan monarch who abused her power as queen. (But she is often misrepresented as a promiscuous temptress, one of history's favorite ways of discrediting a powerful woman. The same has happened to Cleopatra, Mary Magdalene, etc.) She falsely accused a man of treason and ordered that the Lord's prophets be killed. Jehu retaliated by killing her and left her body to be eaten by dogs.

One Unnamed Woman from the Old Testament – Jephtha's Daughter: *Judges 11: 34-35, 40.* This woman was killed by her father as a sacrificial act of gratitude for winning a battle against the Ammonites.

One Named Woman from the New Testament – Mary Magdalene: *Mark: 16.* Like Jezebel, Mary was a wealthy woman of influence, erroneously cast by Western history as a prostitute (She is sometimes cast as Jesus' wife, a repentant woman, or a woman cured of demons). Mary financed much of Jesus' mission and according to the Gospel of Mark was the first person he appeared to after the resurrection.

One Unnamed Woman from the New Testament – Pilate's wife: *Matthew 27: 19.* Before Pilate was persuaded by the crowds to crucify Jesus, his wife sent him a message asking him to leave Jesus ("that righteous man") alone.

One Named Woman from the Apocrypha – Judith: *The Book of Judith.* Judith was a widow of high status in Bethulia, a place suffering famine and attack from Assyria. Judith makes a plan to save the city by infiltrating the Assyrian camps dressed in her finest clothing with her slave, wining and dining with Holofernes, the enemy's general. When he passes out in a drunken stupor, Judith cuts off his head and brings it back to Bethulia, where it was hung on the walls of the city. The Bethulians were then able to fight off the Assyrians, who were left without leadership.

Unnamed Women from the Apocrypha – Menstruating Women of Babylon: *The Letter of Jeremiah 1: 29.* The Babylonian women were allowed to participate in worship while on their periods or after childbirth. This practice shocked Jeremiah, as Jewish women in these circumstances were forbidden from doing so.