



READER'S DISCUSSION GUIDE

GENERAL TOPICS

- Each of the women in these stories has a strong voice for her faith. Is it more difficult for some women than for others to speak out? Why?
- The stories come from the three monotheistic religions that descended from the patriarch Abraham. What do you learn about the relationships among the three religions, in their history, practices or beliefs? Do you see any connections that you have not seen before?
- Close friendships play an important role in the lives of most women, whether in ancient times or today. Of all the women in these stories, who do you think might become close friends if that were possible? Why?

JEWISH STORIES

A Thousand Wrinkles (Sarah)

- In this story, do you think Sarah acts from jealousy, as is often depicted? What other motivations does she have for asking Abraham to cast out Ishmael and Hagar?

- If Sarah is intended by God to play a certain role at this time, how hard is it for her to accept that role? What troubles her?
- How would you feel if you had to choose between two sons: one to receive great benefit and the other to confront unknown challenges? Are there instances in modern life where women have to make similar decisions about their children?

River Journey (Shiphrah)

- When this story begins, Shiphrah is an Egyptian who has little sympathy for the Hebrew slaves. How does she change over the course of the story? What inspires that change?
- What Pharaoh tells the midwives to do would be considered infanticide—murder—in our culture. How do the Egyptian women react to his order? How do you think you might react in the same circumstances?
- The chant of the Hebrew woman in labor seems to have special meaning both for her and for the midwife. Are there prayers, chants or songs that you have used to help you through difficult situations?

A Dance in the Desert (Miriam)

- Even though she is the sister of Moses, Miriam sometimes gets weary of her role as elder sister. Is Miriam becoming a bitter old woman? Why might that happen?

- Do you think that Miriam is justified in her anger at God? Are you ever angry at God? What do you do about it?
- What returns the joy to Miriam's life? What does she have to let go of before she can dance again?

The Pool of Siloam (Huldah)

- Would you consider Huldah to be the most important woman in the history of the Jewish religion? Why or why not?
- Huldah's visions are terrifying and might stop anyone else from continuing the task of validating the scroll. What gives her the courage to continue?
- Huldah takes comfort in knowing that the children of Israel will continue their Covenant with God no matter what happens to the Temple. How has this vision proved true?

O Come My Beloved (Shoshana)

- This story is more of a fable than most other stories in the book. What do you learn from the journey of each of the lovers searching for one another? What does their love symbolize?
- The evening ritual that Shoshana's grandmother taught her had been done since "the first days of Creation." Is it a ritual familiar to you? How are women today passing down their rituals to their daughters and sons?

- The ending of the story is not a happy one. Were you surprised? What hope and possibility does it offer?

Return to Hadassah (Esther)

- The young woman who changes her name to Esther relies on her beauty for success in life. How does Esther truly grow into her strength? How does she become more than a queen?
- When Esther is preparing herself to make her request to the king, she fasts and asks the Jewish people of the city to do so, too. Have you ever incorporated the ritual of fasting into your life? What was your experience?
- Esther knows that she could be killed for approaching the king without an invitation, yet she trusts in God's will for her and puts aside her fear. What are some other examples of women—in history or in modern life—who have placed their trust in God and been able to do courageous or remarkable things?

CHRISTIAN STORIES

Woman to Woman (Mary of Nazareth)

- In this story, Mary is ambivalent about the miraculous blessing God bestows upon her. Yet through her willingness to accept her role in God's plan, she proves her worthiness. Have you ever been in a situation in which you accepted a responsibility that you did not feel prepared to handle? What happened?

- Mary empathizes with Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, in the heartbreak of giving a son exclusively over to God's work. Mary and her cousin Elizabeth both experience this anguish firsthand. What spiritual gifts are required to be a mother who can sacrifice so much? Are mothers today still confronted with this challenge? How?
- Mary promises herself to look for joy in each new day, despite her uncertain future. Do you think she continued this practice through her life? How does the search for joy influence the spiritual lives of people?

Crumbs from the Table (Eleni)

- Eleni is single-minded in her determination to find Jesus the healer in order to ask him to restore her daughter to health, which he does because of Eleni's faith. In our daily lives, not everything we ask of God is granted, no matter how hard we pray. What is the meaning of faith for us in this context?
- In this story, Jesus is portrayed with human traits such as impatience, and he realizes a significant component of his spiritual mission through his encounter with the Gentile woman. Does it surprise you to see Jesus depicted with fallible characteristics, being liable to make a mistake or a hasty judgment? Why or why not? What did he learn from his encounter with the Gentile woman?

- Eleni's behavior might be seen as rude and overbearing, even manipulative. Does her desperation justify her behavior? Have you ever met someone who seemed to act rudely but actually helped you to learn an important life lesson?

Will I Drink of His Cup? (Salome)

- Salome is shocked by Jesus's teaching of forgiveness for one's enemies. What does she find so peculiar—the idea of forgiveness or the lack of retaliation and revenge? What consequences would forgiving one's enemies have?
- Like many mothers, Salome is proud of her sons and is fiercely protective at the same time. Why do you think her sons try to “manage” their mother when she approaches Jesus? Are they more concerned about what she will say to Jesus or about what Jesus might say to her? Have you ever been in a similar situation with your own child or parent?
- Salome's eyes are at last opened to see treasures beyond earthly riches. How do we prevent material concerns from interfering with our spiritual growth? What actions can we take to serve the poor, the hungry, the vulnerable?

Servant to Truth (Binah)

- The servants at the house of Caiaphas work long hours and are roughly treated. Binah feels that she and other poor people are not being protected by God as was

promised. What might be her response to Jesus's message to the poor and the powerless?

- Binah engages in a behavior that is common to many people who feel abused and victimized—she blames others for her own mistakes. Yet when the light of love and understanding is ignited in her heart, we know that she will change that behavior. How can we help ourselves and others to maintain this love and understanding?
- The servant girl whose question prompts Peter to deny knowing Jesus plays a role in bringing about the fulfillment of the prophecy. In this story, Binah receives a healing of her spirit through her brief contacts with Jesus. Is this healing a result of her growing compassion and empathy, or is it in return for her part in fulfilling the prophecy? Has a brief encounter with someone ever made a profound difference in your life?

Love Casts Out Fear (Mary Magdalene)

- What do you think is the significance of Mary Magdalene being the first person to see Jesus after he rose from the tomb? Does it have a broader meaning for the role of women in Christian churches?
- How does Mary Magdalene have the courage to leave the upstairs room where the disciples are in hiding? Why do you think she is willing to risk her life to complete the anointing of Jesus's body?

- Jesus tells Mary Magdalene that faith, not understanding, is required to accept his triumph over death. What are the key differences between faith and understanding? Which of the two is harder for you to practice?

Weaving a Church (Lydia)

- One of the clear messages of Lydia's story is about the work of the hands supporting the work of the spirit. If you do a craft such as knitting, crocheting or weaving, have you ever practiced it with spiritual intent? Have you ever created handmade articles to be sold or raffled to raise funds to help others? Do you feel differently about those articles as you create them? Through what other activities can the spirit be supported by the hands? How?
- As Paul points out in his letter, love is most important. Where there is love, there is no place for competition. Have you known people who compete over their level of religiousness? Have you known people whose generosity and openness are inspirational? What strengths does it take in you to bear with the former and learn from the latter?
- Does it seem easy for Lydia to transfer her skills as a dyer, weaver and merchant to help organize a growing church? Are there individuals in your community who serve their religious organizations by using their business or technical skills? Their artistic skills? Where and how could you be most valuable?

MUSLIM STORIES

The Night Wind (Eve)

- In this story both Eve and Adam eat from the forbidden fruit at the same time after they are deceived by the beautiful Iblis. In your opinion, how does this change the interpretation of the story?
- Eve's long walk of punishment and exile from Adam is made bearable by the sense that Allah's presence is still with her. Her repentance is sincere, so she is permitted to enter Mecca and reunite with her beloved. Why is exile and abandonment such a serious punishment for humans? How do we keep in touch with God as we work through our repentance?
- The sanctification and purification rituals prescribed for Adam and Eve are still practiced in the religion of Islam today. Do you participate in any similar rituals in your faith tradition? How meaningful are the rituals in your life?

The Waters of Zamzam (Hagar)

- In this version, the exile of Ishmael and Hagar occurs when Ishmael is a baby. Does that make the exile seem crueler? Does it give a greater role to Ishmael, whose baby feet opened the well at Zamzam, as the founder of the Arab people? How does it change the focus on Hagar, from a spiritual perspective?

- Hagar submits to the will of Abraham when he assures her that it is also the will of Allah. Her complete trust in God provides rescue for her and her son from certain death. How hard do you find it to step back and wait for God's will to become clear? Do you run from hill to hill like Hagar before calling out to God?
- Hagar creates a beautiful oasis of welcome around the holy spring at Zamzam. How can you create a sacred space where God is always present and where people can find spiritual nourishment? Can you embody that space yourself, becoming the welcomer? Can you join with others in meditation, prayer or music to create a sacred space for all present?

A Faith Blossoms (Khadija)

- Alone on Mount Hira, Khadija experiences a direct personal relationship with God. She stops her busy life long enough to listen. Do we need to make special efforts to find times of silence in which we can be more open to listening to God? Maybe we can't climb to a mountain-top, or spend days alone in a retreat, but what *can* we do?
- Khadija risks the ridicule of others and possible damage to her business by asking to pray as a follower of the Prophet Muhammad. What, if anything, do we risk today if we speak publicly about our spiritual lives?
- Khadija rejoices in her ability to financially support her husband, Muhammad, so that he can fulfill his role as

Prophet. It is said that she is the one who proposed to him and that she manipulated her father into agreeing to the marriage. Do you see many different ways in which God provides, as the Prophet says? Has someone ever smoothed the way for you to accomplish something you believed in? Have you had the opportunity to do that for others? How can we act as God's hands?

Prayers in the Darkness (Fatima)

- Fatima and her family live simple lives, perhaps even in poverty at times. This must have been different from her childhood as Khadija's youngest daughter. What do you think about her request for a servant to help her? How far should voluntary poverty or self-sacrifice extend?
- Fatima's children are well-schooled in their grandfather's religious faith and accept their special responsibilities as the family of the Prophet. Do you think that passing down religious faith and tradition is one of the more important roles of women? How have the challenges of doing so changed in modern times?
- Fatima finds peace in praising Allah as her father instructed. Have you ever used repetitive prayer or chant as a way of deepening spiritually or of finding comfort? What was the experience like?

The Merchant Boys' Prank (Zarah)

- Do you think that Zarah shows maturity and bravery in explaining to the two young men why she wears a veil?

Or is she naïve in thinking she will be heard by people who want to tease and humiliate her? Have you ever experienced a similar situation of being taunted or tricked? How did you handle it? What did you learn from it?

- Zarah makes a conscious decision to control her feelings and to keep her dignity, rather than cry out in protest at her treatment. She follows the Prophet's injunction to forgive and to remain patient. It is a struggle for her. Do you struggle with suppressing justified anger? Are there times when forgiveness and patience are the better responses? Are there times when protest is the better response?
- Women have worn veils and head coverings throughout history, sometimes by choice, sometimes not. If you wear or have worn a veil or headscarf in a religious context, did it make you feel different about yourself? Did it set you apart in some way other than merely by outward appearance? How did others react?

The Dogs of al-Haw'ab (Aisha)

- This first battle between Muslim factions foretold a division in Islam that continues to this day, between the Shi'a and Sunni sects. What do you think the Prophet Muhammad meant by saying that justice was second only to prayer? In your opinion, what options does the world have in achieving justice?

- Aisha is not able to avert the battle, although she has the warning of disaster, because she is a woman without military experience and does not trust her own judgment. Could she have done anything differently? What might you have done in her place?

- Her courage and faith made Aisha a role model for Muslim women through the centuries. Who have been your role models, whether in your own faith tradition or in another? How did their spiritual strengths influence their actions—and yours?