

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Recognizing women in our faith traditions



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We often read about the men in our faith traditions. In the Bible, we have no fewer than 30 references to the God of "Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." But, how often do we read of Sarah, Rebecca and Rachael, wives of these patriarchs? They do appear in the Bible, but in a secondary role. There are nearly 140 women mentioned by name, but most of the stories are told with a definite male bias.

Adam appears in a better light than Eve. Moses' heroic story is told with minimal reference to his mother, Jochebed, who saved his life, or his wife, Zipporah, who again saved his life. King David is known as the son of Jesse, but the mother who bore him is not named in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Talmud, however, identifies Nitzevet as David's mother.

A few do take center stage, such as Deborah, the female judge who led Israel through 40 years of peace during the lawless times before Israel began its series of kings. The story of Ruth and her faithfulness occupies an entire book in the Bible, and she is identified as an ancestor of King David as well as Jesus. Esther's story tells of her becoming the queen to the Persian King Xerxes and using her position to save the Hebrew people from destruction. It also occupies a whole book in the Hebrew Scripture.

Three women appear in prominent roles at the beginning of the three Abrahamic faiths. Sarah is the mother of Isaac and

the beginning of the Hebrew/Jewish faith. Hagar (Hajar in the Qur'an) is the mother of Ishmael and from whom God promises to make a great nation. Islamic tradition tells of Ishmael and his father, Abraham, traveling to Mecca. In Christian Scriptures, Mary plays a very significant role as the mother of Jesus. We read of her dialogue with the angel known as the Annunciation, and her encounter with her cousin Elizabeth leading to her Magnificat or the Song of Mary.

Mary is also greatly honored in the Quran, where she is called Maryam, as the mother of Isa (Jesus). She is the only woman mentioned by name in the Quran, which also records her being addressed by an angel announcing the birth of Jesus. In fact, she is mentioned more times there than in the Christian New Testament. She is recognized as a virgin and considered especially virtuous, and enjoyed a standing with the other revered prophets.

Two other women named Mary play important roles in the Christian Gospels: Mary, sister of Lazarus along with Martha, and Mary Magdalene, who is the first to see the risen Christ.

KEY FIGURES IN ISLAM

Throughout history women have played significant roles in our faith traditions. The Prophet Mohammed's first wife, Khadija, was a wealthy businesswoman who was extremely influential in supporting him by recognizing that the visions he was receiving from the angel Gabriel were revelations from God. She was the first to become a believer

and is considered the Mother of Islam.

Women have held major roles as political leaders, from significant queens in Europe to prime ministers and political leaders in predominantly Muslim countries in the past 30 years. In fact, the three most populous Muslim countries, Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh, have had women heads of state. Golda Meir was the first and only woman to be elected prime minister in modern Israel.

Other prominent Jewish figures in history include Anne Frank, whose diary records her two years of hiding from the Nazis before her capture and death in Bergen-Belsen just weeks before the liberation. Currently we note Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Elena Kagan, Jewish women serving on the Supreme Court, and Janet Yellen, past chair of the Federal Reserve.

In recent Christian history we recognize Dorothy Day, the social activist and key figure in the Catholic Worker Movement. Mother Teresa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work among the poor in India and was declared a saint just six years after her death.

There have been three Muslim women who have received the Nobel Peace Prize, including Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani activist for female education and youngest ever to receive that recognition, at 17.

We need more awareness of the important roles that women have played in our religious traditions as well as in our contemporary world. Next week we will listen to new female voices as we come together in our annual Abrahamic Dinner. We are honored

to have representatives from the three Abrahamic faith traditions in our community who will share their insights.

THREE TRADITIONS, THREE PERSPECTIVES

Sharing a Jewish perspective will be Shelby Brusselof, recent graduate of Grand Valley State University, former president of the campus Hillel and now a staff member for Hillel Alliance of Michigan.

Margarita Solis-Deal, the director of the Dominican Center in Grand Rapids, will share her Christian commitment. She previously served in refugee resettlement and Latino outreach ministries.

Zahabia Ahmed-Usmani will bring us a Muslim perspective. She is the chair of the Lakeshore Ethnic Diversity Council and is currently a program coordinator with the Kaufman Interfaith Institute.

We are pleased to hear these new voices at next week's Abrahamic Dinner and, together with the Niagara Foundation, invite you to join us.

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Abrahamic Dinner: "Listening to New Voices"

Tuesday, April 17 at 6 p.m.

Temple Emanuel, Grand Rapids

\$10 registration required at InterfaithUnderstanding.org