



**A
FRIENDLY
GUIDE TO**

WOMEN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

**JANINA
HIEBEL**

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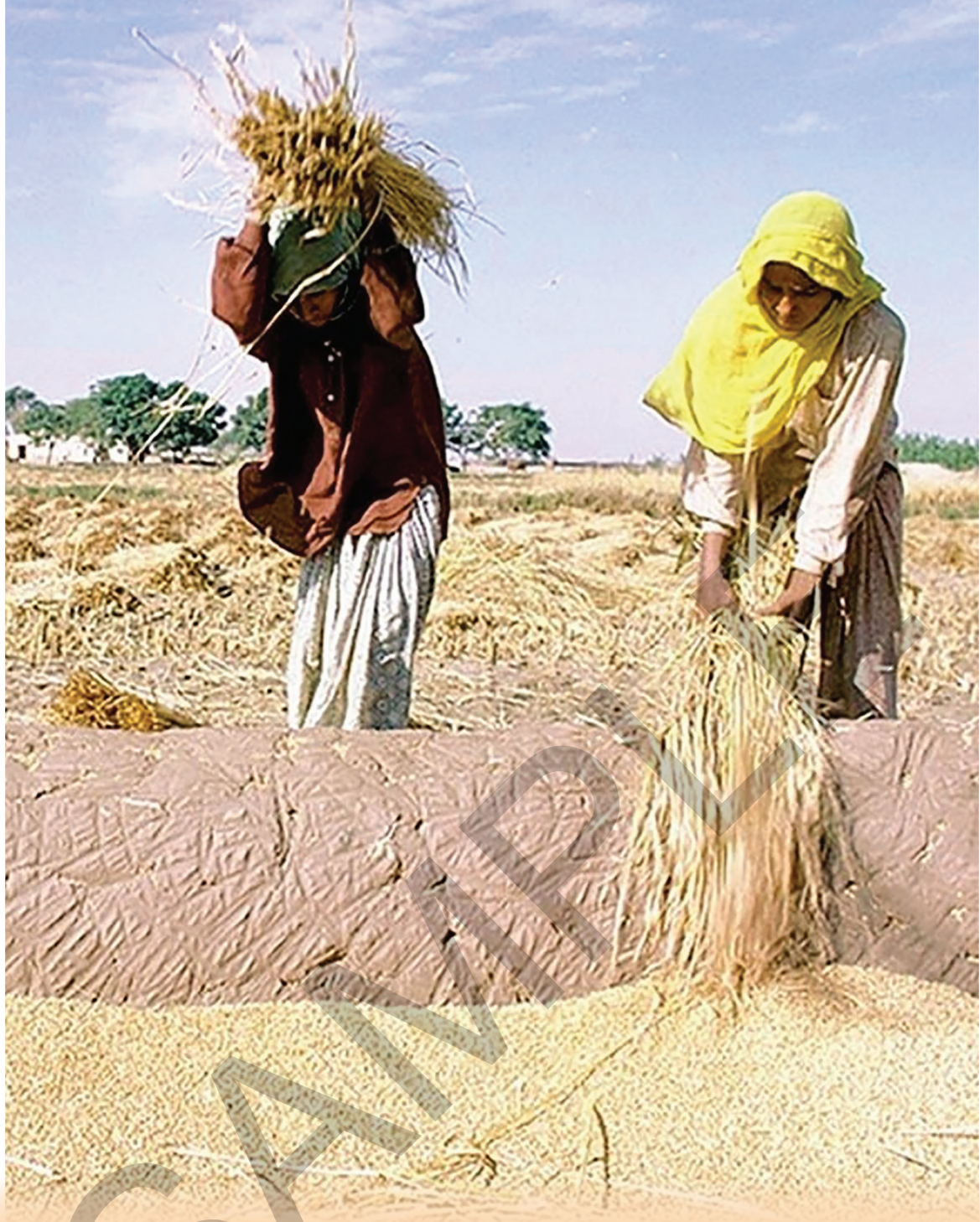


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Cover image: Queen Esther by Andrea del Castagno c 1450 in Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

Opposite page: threshing wheat in the traditional style



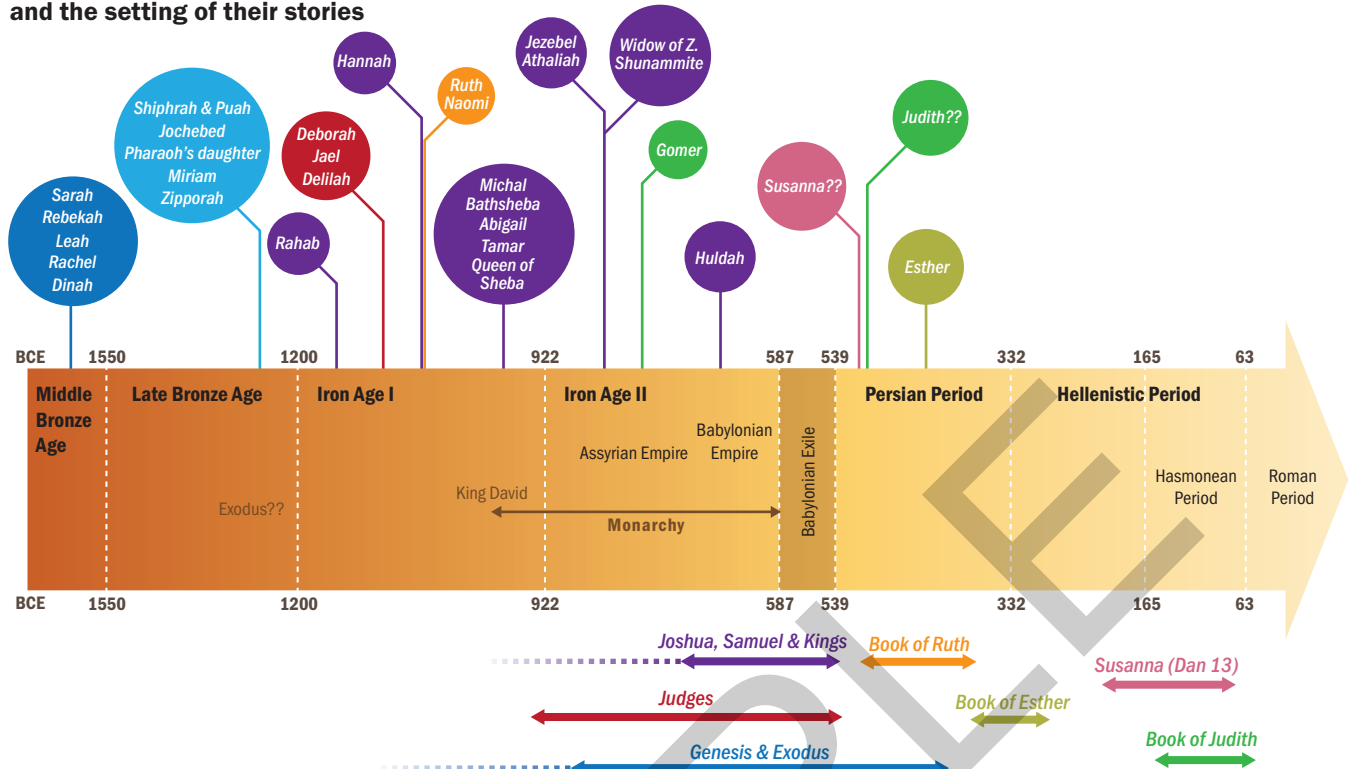
INTRODUCTION

Much of the Old Testament is written from a male perspective. This does not mean, however, that women characters are non-existent or irrelevant: women are as significant as men in bringing about God's plans – or in hindering them. Highlighting the female protagonists of Old Testament stories clarifies that the Bible is not just about men. We would seriously diminish salvation history if we reduced it to an affair between God and a handful of men. God's

involvement with humanity concerns women and men together.

The Old Testament uses rich imagery when speaking of God, and includes female aspects that we can only understand if we notice biblical women and their social and religious roles. Some poetic texts portray God as a mother bird protecting her young (Deut 32:10–12; Ps 36:7, 61:4) or as a human mother consoling, teaching and feeding her children (Isa 66:13; Hos 11:3–4). God even makes clothes, a woman's job (Gen 3:21).

Timeline of women in the Old Testament and the setting of their stories



Timeline of Old Testament books and the writing of their stories

Women's tasks typically included seasonal harvesting, health care and household management, fetching water, the production of food, textiles and various utensils, as well as the bearing and raising of children.

Despite the male bias of the scribes, in the Hebrew Bible, 'women are nowhere portrayed as less intelligent or capable than men; rather, they often appear as clever, competent, and sometimes heroic figures.'^a In this book, we will encounter some of the women in the Old Testament. However we rarely

meet ordinary women; everyday people, especially everyday women, rarely have their stories preserved. Their stories are told because they are the wife or the mother of someone famous, because they are queens, heroes, or because they are the victims of some heinous crime. In short, they are exceptional women.





Everyday life

Life in ancient Israel was very different from the individualistic, high-tech societies of today's developed world. To help us reflect on texts about women in the Old Testament, the following shows what life for ordinary women was like.

Most Israelites lived in an agrarian setting, in small hamlets, villages or fortified but very small towns. Cities contained a very small portion of the population, and only from about the eighth century onwards. City dwellers still worked in agriculture but some also did paid work. City life offered a market economy, including international trade.

Household, house and land

A typical household in rural Iron Age Israel included a complex family group: a senior couple, their unmarried children, and their married sons, and their wives and children.

Wealthy households also had servants. Households were patrilocal: married sons generally stayed with their parents while daughters moved out to live with their husbands' families.

The most important asset of a household was its land. Their entire livelihood depended on the small terraced fields in a hilly, dry landscape. Land was passed down from father to son (patrilineal inheritance), making it vital to have at least one son. Having children was essential to meet the high labour demand of daily life. Married sons' wives ensured aged care for elderly parents.

Survival required hard work from every family member. Food shortages and malnutrition were common, as were infectious diseases. Men tended the fields, growing a variety of crops (mainly wheat, barley, legumes, vines, and olives), which depended heavily on seasonal rainfall. At harvest time everyone helped in the fields. Small flocks of sheep and goats were kept on the steeper

Opposite: remains of house at Horvat Haluquim

Above: textile production

hillsides, providing wool, and milk that was made into cheese. Meat was a rare treat reserved for festivals and special occasions. Vegetable gardens supplemented the diet with onions, cucumbers and herbs.

The so-called 'four-room house' was typical during the Iron Age. The ground level was built of stone. Stone pillars divided the front part of the house lengthwise into three rooms, with a fourth room across at the rear, where storage vessels were kept. The central front room was where the household mainly lived and worked. Most houses had a partial second story, and the flat roof (accessed by ladder) was also used for working and sleeping during the summer months. The paved side rooms could be used as stables during winter. People slept on mats that were stored away during the day. Some households lived in one house, others had a compound of several houses with a shared courtyard.

A woman's work

Women's tasks typically included seasonal harvesting, health care and household management, fetching water, the production of food, textiles and various utensils, as well as the bearing and raising of children. All of these responsibilities were crucial to the household's survival – no less important than the men's tasks.

The main staple food was bread. Women spent several hours each day grinding, kneading and baking to transform raw wheat or barley into flour and then bread. Food preparation also involved cooking lentils and vegetables, drying fruit

such as grapes and figs, processing milk into cheese, and brewing beer.

Similarly, making a piece of clothing out of a heap of wool would take many hours of spinning and weaving. Standard clothing for both men and women included a long woollen tunic, held together at the waist by a belt or sash. Men wore a kind of mantle on top; women wore a large piece of fabric covering the back of their head and reaching down to the hem of the tunic. Clothing reflected one's marital and social status: linen was used mainly by the upper classes, whose clothing was more elaborate.

Women often shared time-consuming chores requiring more than one pair of hands, and some equipment (such as ovens) was communal. This collaboration was an opportunity for communication and created a network of solidarity and mutual assistance.

Women are mentioned in the Old Testament in professional roles – cooks and bakers at court, specialist textile producers and traders, businesswomen, prostitutes, midwives, professional mourners and prophets. But formal leadership positions outside the household were normally reserved for men.

Marriage

Contrary to our contemporary idea of marriage as the choice of two individuals, ancient Israelites understood marriage as the union of two families. In general, they saw themselves primarily as members of a group and only secondarily as individuals. Their personal wellbeing was inseparable from that of their group. The way we think about life choices of career, partner or housing would never have occurred to any ancient Near Eastern person. Most men and women had no choice in any of these matters.

Girls probably married in their mid-teens. Marriage was arranged by

the fathers or senior male relatives of the bride and groom. Especially with wealthier families, a marriage contract detailed property arrangements. The groom's family acquired the right to marry her by paying a bride price in money, kind or labour to the bride's family.

The marriage became effective when the bride went to live with the groom in his father's house. Depending on the families' means, wedding celebration could extend over a week. The bride brought her dowry with her, including gifts from her family, her wedding outfit, and jewellery, all of which remained her property.

While men could marry more than one wife, most marriages were monogamous. Having many wives, and therefore many children, was a status symbol of kings in particular. Because children, especially sons, were so important, marrying a second wife became an attractive offer when a first marriage failed to produce offspring. In this case, the husband was not allowed to 'diminish the food, clothing, or marital rights of the first wife' (Exod 21:10).

However, according to Deut 24:1, a man could simply divorce his wife if he found 'something objectionable about her'. But a wife could not divorce her husband. Children remained with the family of their father.

Mothers and Children

Apart from their daily work, a major part of a woman's life included pregnancies, childbirth and child-rearing. Infertility posed an existential threat to a family, especially to a woman: childless women faced public shame and marginalisation, and risked divorce and destitution. Childlessness jeopardised the continuity of the family lineage and the couple's own aged care.

It was not uncommon for women to die in childbirth from complications, haemorrhage or

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infections and the death rate of newborns was high. Some estimate an infant mortality rate of around 50%. Many more children died of disease before the age of five. This meant that women had to undergo many pregnancies to have any children survive into adulthood.

In the Hebrew Bible, women more often than men gave a name to their newborn. Women were the primary caregivers and educators for young children. Education essentially meant learning on the job, the transmission of knowledge and skills from one generation to the next. Children started helping with chores when they were very young.

From the age of about six, girls helped their mothers with spinning, kneading, fetching water, looking after younger siblings, and tending to the vegetable garden; later on they learnt grinding, weaving, making pottery and more complex skills. Similarly, fathers taught their sons agricultural work, animal husbandry and other specialised skills. Flocks were tended by both boys and girls.

Mothers continued to be figures of authority for daughters and sons throughout their lives. Older women, respected for their wisdom and experience, would pass on traditions, cultural values and folktales to the young generation.

Below: A Judean family being deported during the Assyrian invasion in 701 BCE

Next page: spindle whorls from Jordan Museum and grinding stones

WOMEN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The following chapters show a selection of Old Testament women – mothers, sisters, wives, heroes, victims, and villains. We encounter them as literary characters in various stories and poems. Some of these women are more or less based on a historical person; there are some who are

openly fictional or symbolic. Each of these women can be a mirror, a model, a warning, an inspiration, a teacher, an enemy, a friend, or all of the above.

This book does not discuss all the women in the Old Testament, but offers a first introduction, hoping to leave you wanting more.





This *Friendly Guide to Women in the Old Testament* provides an easy-to-follow introduction to the stories of women in a range of Old Testament writings for readers of the twenty-first century. It presents an opportunity to explore biblical texts and characters that can be challenging to modern readers, and to discover their relevance and meaning today.

In all their diversity, the women in this book play a vital part in the history of salvation, the great story of God's involvement with humankind. The stories featuring these women have been considered as so important that they were told and re-told, written down, preserved over many centuries, and finally handed down to us as 'Word of God'.

This *Friendly Guide* demonstrates that, even though there are more male than female characters in the Old Testament, women are as significant in bringing about God's plans – or in hindering them – as are men, and sometimes even more.

Dr Janina Hiebel offers a clear and engaging portrayal of a wide range of women in the Old Testament, from the 'first woman' (Eve) in the garden of Eden story to such late legendary figures as Esther and Judith. As one might expect, the Bible devotes considerable attention to mothers: the joys and sorrows, the supports and threats they experienced in bearing children. Among and alongside these were women who acted as leaders of their society – prophets, judges, rulers, and teachers, as well as those

who were victims of their society – suffering violence and even death. But the Bible story is not only about Israelite women. Hiebel identifies a number of foreigners who contributed to the advance of Israel's cause or attempted to subvert it, at times violently. Overall, she provides a gripping read about women in the Old Testament that will challenge and transform a reader's understanding of them.

Assoc. Professor Mark A O'Brien op

The *Friendly Guides* series by Garratt Publishing is designed to provide easily accessible information on themes fundamental to understanding the Catholic faith.

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accepted the invitation to write at an introductory level in their fields of expertise and have produced texts which are clear, concise and readable.

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boxes and original artwork. The format is attractive and engaging and will provide an invaluable resource for teachers, students, parish groups, RCIA teams and candidates, and anyone searching for a clear explanation of Catholic tradition.



Dr Janina Hiebel teaches Old Testament at Yarra Theological Union and Catholic Theological College, two colleges of the University of Divinity, Melbourne. Originally from Germany, Janina has been living, studying and teaching in Australia for the past twelve years, and has completed her PhD at Murdoch University (WA). Janina's special field of interest is the period of the Babylonian Exile, in particular the book of the prophet Ezekiel. She has published a book and several journal articles on Ezekiel. Janina has a passion for making biblical texts accessible to 'everyday people' and for exploring the ongoing relevance of Old Testament writings and traditions. She lives in a Focolare community in Melbourne.