

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark top and a light-colored patterned scarf, stands in a field with her arms crossed. The background is a bright, sunny outdoor setting with tall grass and a fence. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter.

# EACH FOR EQUAL

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ILLUMINATING WOMEN  
AND THEIR PLACE IN SCRIPTURE

*By Karen Gonzalez*

world relief 

*Each for Equal: Illuminating Women and Their Place in Scripture* is written by Karen Gonzalez. Karen serves as the Director of Human Services at World Relief and is the author of the new book *The God Who Sees: Immigrants, the Bible and the Journey to Belong.*

In my late twenties, I spent several years in Christian service throughout Russia and Central Asia. When I returned home from overseas, one of the first things I did was retrieve the boxes of books I had placed in storage while I'd been gone. I was afraid the Florida humidity might have molded and distorted their pages over the years I'd been away but was relieved to discover that was not the case.

As I unpacked the books and placed them in their new home, I noticed something I'd never noticed before: most of the books that had shaped my faith and formed me spiritually were written by men: John Piper, Jerry Bridges, Richard Foster, Eugene Peterson, Bill Hybels and many others. I paused, sitting with the books splayed on the floor and reflected on all the Bible teachers, mentors and pastors I'd had over the years. **Even though I am a woman, an immigrant and a Latina, my faith had been informed mostly by white men.**

This wasn't all bad, of course. These men had many good things to say, and God had spoken to me through them. **But the problem was that this perspective was incomplete because it left out women who make up more than half the church.**

Normally, this situation might not have troubled me. I had always reasoned that the only identity that mattered was that I was a Christian. But I'd just spent years living outside the U.S. and reading the Bible with people from another country and culture, an experience that made me keenly aware that we all come to the Bible with our varied backgrounds, diverse perspectives, and distinct experiences.

I'd been discussing Jesus' encounters and parables with Russian and Kazakh college students — people whose points of view hadn't been shaped by the Enlightenment and the West. **Reading the Bible with my friends who weren't white Americans created a tension within me, and ultimately, it changed me.**

I felt troubled and confused and experienced a spiritual crisis of sorts. Beyond books about Proverbs 31 womanhood, not a single woman had spoken significantly into my life of faith.

How could this be?

How was it that I'd never noticed my faith had been informed by a single, male point of view?

What could I be missing?

And how could I remedy this situation?

**As I sat with my questions, unsure of the answers I might find, God met me.** The following week, a friend gave me a book written by a woman. Though I began reading with skepticism, that book changed the trajectory of my life.

The author called herself a theologian. Up until that point, I'd been taught that women could not be theologians. **But with this woman's perspective in mind, I began to see the Bible in a whole new way.** I began to know God more fully and it transformed me.

**I learned that Hagar** was not just a side character in the story of Abraham and Sarah, but a woman whose story had much to teach me. Hagar — a woman, a slave, a foreigner, an outcast — is the only person in the Bible to give God a name. She calls him El roi, the God who sees me.

***"She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: 'You are the God who sees me, for she said, 'I have now seen the One who sees me.' — Genesis 16:13***

**I learned that the Syrophenician woman in Mark's Gospel** talked back to Jesus with sass. She approached Jesus to ask a favor, an action considered socially inappropriate in her day. But perhaps the real scandal of the encounter was that a woman stood up to a man, pleading for wholeness and inclusion, and instead of shaming her, Jesus blessed her; he granted her request and affirmed her words.

***"Good answer!" he said. 'Go on home. The demon has already left your daughter.' — Mark 7:29***

**I learned that Ruth and Naomi** were the female equivalents of Job — women who had lost everything — and that their story of redemption is a lesson in God's faithfulness in remembering vulnerable immigrants. Theirs is a story of forced migration, and Ruth the Moabite's famous words of love and loyalty aren't about romantic love but about her commitment to migrate to her mother-in-law's homeland and integrate into the community of Bethlehem.

***"Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God." — Ruth 1:16***

**I learned that humble Mary**, the mother of Jesus, called herself blessed not because her life was easy and problem-free, but because she got to play a role in God's plan of redemption for the entire world. The child she and Joseph raised in material poverty became the savior of the world! Mary saw God in the world and trusted He was at work even in things she could not see or understand.

***"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me." — Luke 2:46-49***

These are just four of the countless examples in Scripture where women's stories have something valuable to teach us about God. **Women, I now understand, have a unique lense through which we view the Scriptures, and this perspective matters.** Much of the Bible was written by and given to a community in the margins of society, and women have been in the margins of the church for most of its history. A woman's perspective enriches biblical study and blesses the church. Women not only read the Bible differently, but we illuminate the stories of women in the Bible with clarity and intentionality, helping other women see themselves in the Scriptures.

It was a woman who taught me to see the qualities of God that reflect a mother's heart and the Scriptures this language to describe God. The Bible sometimes gives God the qualities of a human mother.

***As a mother comforts her child, so will I [God] comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem.” — Isaiah 66:13***

Jesus himself embraced this maternal language when he lamented over Jerusalem in the gospels:

***“...how often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings...” — Matthew 23:37, Luke 13:34***

As I look over my bookshelves these days, I see a pretty even number of male and female authors that inform my understanding of God, and my faith is stronger for it. **Embracing women's voices and valuing their insight has given me a greater understanding of who God is and what he's about because women, just like men, embody the Imago Dei — the image of God.**

Value for women as God's image-bearers is the central point of International Women's Day and one of the many reasons it's observed each year on March 8th. It seeks to highlight the accomplishments of women and their history, to emphasize the vulnerabilities of women across the globe and to commit to doing the work needed to achieve gender equality everywhere. God gives women strength and resilience in their homes and communities to affect everlasting change.

Jesus says in John 10:10, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” **But in many places around the world, women are prevented from living the abundant life Jesus came to give us.** We are often excluded from contributing to the work of biblical study and theology for the edification of Christ's body.

And yet I have learned so much and owe a debt of gratitude to the women that have devoted their lives to study and biblical scholarship.

What about you? Who are the women leaders that are shaping your faith?

If you're looking for a place to start, here is a list of female leaders from whom we love to learn as well as some helpful resources to jumpstart your journey.

**Hermanas:**

**Deepening Our Identity & Growing our Influence**

by Natalia Kohn Rivera, Noemi Vega Quiñones, Kristy Garza Robinson

**Fat & Faithful:**

**Learning to Love Our Bodies, Our Neighbors, Ourselves**

by J. Nicole Morgan

**Parable of the Brown Girl:**

**The Sacred Lives of Girls of Color**

by Khristi Lauren Adams

**Disunity in Christ:**

**Uncovering the Hidden Forces that Keep Us Apart**

by Christena Cleveland

**Defiant:**

**What the Women of Exodus Teach Us About Freedom**

by Kelley Nikondeha

**Miracles and Other Reasonable Things:**

**A Story of Unlearning & Relearning God**

by Sarah Bessey

**Raise Your Voice:**

**Why We Stay Silent and How to Speak Up**

by Kathy Khang

**Lost Women of the Bible:**

**The Women We Thought We Knew**

by Carolyn Custis James

**Assimilate or Go Home:**

**Notes from a Failed Missionary on Rediscovering Faith**

by D.L. Mayfield

**We Will Feast:**

**Rethinking Dinner, Worship and the Community of God**

by Kendall Vanderslice