

# Leaders

*lessons from women of vision and courage*

HER NAME IS WOMAN BIBLE STUDY

Gien Karssen



Gien Karssen is a storyteller. Although there are many studies about the women in the Bible, I have never read one more practical than *Her Name Is Woman*. Gien makes these biblical women really come alive as you observe their actions and the effects of their lives. She helps you draw out applications which are relevant today. Gien is one of the best trainers I know for young Bible study leaders. She brings the Word of God to bear upon situations in day-to-day living. My prayer is that this book will work as a seed that brings forth much fruit.

**CORRIE TEN BOOM**

*Author of *The Hiding Place**

All my life I have read about the women of the Bible, learning much from them even though they were somewhat vague, historic characters. In this book, these same characters have suddenly come alive. Because of Gien's careful research, sanctified imagination, and skill as a writer, I found myself understanding these women and their situations in a new way. Knowing more about the customs of their day helps us understand better why they acted as they did. It is interesting to note that God's women, down through the centuries, have enjoyed a freedom the world will find difficult to understand—the freedom to be and to do that which God intended. You will find this book both interesting and enlightening.

**RUTH BELL GRAHAM**

*Author of *Footprints of a Pilgrim**

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*Leaders: Lessons from Women of Vision and Courage*

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The Team:

Don Pape, Publisher

Caitlyn Carlson, Acquisitions Editor

Cover design by Jacqueline L. Nuñez

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# Foreword

As a little girl, I dreamed grand dreams. Whether it was to be a princess in a castle, president of the United States, a famous actress, or a corporate CEO, I wanted to believe I could do something great.

We all long for a life of significance. We want to matter. We hope we can make a difference. For those of us with leadership gifts, the desire for influence can be consuming.

We quickly identify heroes and role models. We look for others to guide the way—to help us make sense of our gifts and longings. We're eager to learn and grow.

Every aspiring leader needs an example to follow, and Gien Karssen has given us the examples we crave. In this book, Gien brings to life the stories of amazing women leaders from Scripture. Providing historical and cultural background, she sets the stage for us to understand the particulars of their stories. She helps us find parts of ourselves in their strengths and weaknesses. She provides portraits of strength and humility to which we can aspire.

I encourage you to read this book slowly and contemplatively. Imagine yourself in each woman's context. Consider how you may have reacted in her circumstances. See where her strengths and her sin collided, and ask God to give you wisdom for how her leadership story applies to yours. Ponder the questions carefully. What might God be saying to you?

There is no greater place for us to seek leadership wisdom than the pages of Scripture. Gien's work reminds us that God didn't neglect to leave us examples of great women who have gone before us.

May their stories inspire you and draw out your greatest leadership!

*Jenni Catron, church leader and author of Clout*

# How to Use This Study

Do you long for a meaningful life? Do you want to become whole and fulfilled? These inborn, inner urges originate from the commission God gave woman at her creation. He expects woman, an equal partner with man, to be willing to step into her calling. The spiritual side of a woman is extremely important.

The women in this book are not fictional. They are real. They lived in history and, in their desires and problems, in their hopes and ambitions, are living among us today. Though the Bible doesn't share the full extent of their stories, I imaginatively explore what these women may have been doing and feeling in the time and place in which God placed them, in hopes that you will connect with their journeys even further.

As you learn about each of the women throughout the *Her Name Is Woman* series, the central question you must ask is, What place does God have in her life? The answer to this question decides the extent of every woman's happiness, usefulness, and motivation to keep moving forward. If God

is absent, or if He is not given His rightful place, then life is without true purpose—without perspective.

As you read this book, join with these women of the Bible to consider your attitude toward God. And I hope that as you get acquainted with these women, you will make a fresh or renewed start in getting to know the Word of God.

I trust that meeting these women will turn out to be an unexpected gift for you and that you will resonate deeply with their experiences—and I pray that they will show you the way to a richer and happier life with God and other people.

## **AS YOU BEGIN**

You may approach this book in one of two ways. First, just read it. The stories are intended to draw you deeply into the life of each woman in these pages. But be sure to include the Bible passages referenced at the beginning of each chapter in your reading. They are an important part of the book and are necessary for understanding the chapter. Second, you may wish to discuss the book in a small group. Considering the subjects and questions with some other people will add depth and greater insight to your study of these women.

Scripture references at the bottom of many pages will help you dig deeper into the Bible's wealth of truth and wisdom. You may answer the questions throughout each chapter personally or discuss them with your group. You may also conduct topical studies of these women or research accompanying themes. Whatever your direction might be, this study

will become richer as you discuss these women with others, especially after your own individual preparation. Whether you do this study on your own or with others, be sure to use a journal so you may record your thoughts on the questions and any other things God impresses on your heart through the course of this study.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR BIBLE STUDY GROUPS**

1. Start with a small group—usually with a minimum of six and a maximum of ten people. This way your group will be large enough for an interesting discussion, but small enough for each member to participate. As your number increases, start a second group.
2. Before you start the group, decide how often you want to meet. Many people may hesitate to give themselves to something new for an indefinite period of time. There are twelve chapters in each book of the *Her Name Is Woman* series, so they may easily be used as twelve-week studies. However, these books can just as easily work as six-week studies (two chapters per week). Some chapters are longer and will take more time to work through, while others are short enough to be combined into a two-part lesson. Please note that the number of questions varies depending on the length of the lesson. Discuss what process will work best for your group.
3. Remember that a Bible study group should discuss the Bible. While many of the questions within this book

are designed to help women examine their individual faith journeys, Scripture informs every piece of the study and should be referenced as an integral part of the discussion. Each participant should prepare her study at home beforehand so each member may share her personal findings.

4. Stress the necessity of applying the lessons learned, and help one another in doing this. There is a far greater need for spiritual growth than for an increase of knowledge. “How can what I learned influence my life?” is a question each participant should ask herself.
5. Determine, before you start, to attend every meeting. Miss only when you absolutely cannot attend. If you can’t attend, do the study anyway and make up for it at the next meeting.
6. Consider yourself a member of the group. Feel free to make a contribution. Lack of experience should not keep you from taking part in the discussion. On the other hand, resist the temptation to dominate the group.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR LEADERS OF BIBLE STUDY GROUPS**

- Be sure that you have given sufficient time to your own Bible study and that you have completed it.
- Come prepared. Make notes of the points you want to stress.

- Begin and end on time. Set the tone by starting promptly at the first meeting.
- Few mountain climbers enjoy being carried to the top. Leave the joy of climbing to the group members. Don't do all the talking. Guide the discussion in such a way that each member of the group can participate.
- Don't allow any one person to dominate the conversation. Gently guide women so each person may have an opportunity to speak. Sometimes it is necessary to talk privately with the overtalkative person, explaining the necessity of group participation. While some women may prefer to remain quiet, give them the opportunity to participate by asking them specific questions.
- Use the questions throughout each chapter as a jumping-off point, but feel the freedom to focus on issues that seem to particularly resonate with your group. However, don't allow the group to get too off topic. If a particular question becomes too time consuming or detracts from the overall study, redirect the conversation back to the main study. Getting back on track when the subject begins to wander can be done by saying, "Perhaps we could discuss this further after the study," or "Let's return to the main focus of the study."
- At the beginning of each session, open with prayer. Pray that Christ will speak to each person present by His Word. At the end of each session, pray for yourself and for each member of the group. Pray that the Holy Spirit will make you sensitive to the needs of others.

## A NOTE BEFORE

You may be tempted to think that many of the women in this study have nothing to teach you. *I am not a leader*, you may say. You may think you are too quiet, or too shy, or not influential. But as you look at the lives of each of these women, be encouraged. Leadership is not always a role that is bestowed. God-centered leadership is first and foremost a heart attitude. You may lead through your attitude in your home, or through your advice in your friendships, or through your service in your church. You are a leader if through your submission to God you offer guidance and perspective to those around you. As you step into the lives of these women—who range from outspoken prophetesses to servant-hearted stay-at-home mothers—be encouraged that God has equipped you to lead exactly where you are.

# 1

## MIRIAM

*A Leader Who Overestimated Herself*

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test my thoughts.  
Point out anything you find in me that makes you sad, and  
lead me along the path of everlasting life.

PSALM 139:23-24, TLB

### READ

Exodus 15:19-21; Numbers 12:1-15; Numbers 20:1



MIRIAM HAD BEEN AN INTELLIGENT CHILD. Her mother had readily entrusted her with an assignment of such importance that the life of her youngest brother was dependent upon her success. She completed her task with courage and tact, bringing her mother, a Hebrew woman, and an Egyptian princess in contact with one another. Thus her brother was rescued, benefiting both their family and God's people.<sup>1</sup> The child was Moses, mediator of the old covenant, the prophet who spoke face-to-face with God.

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 2:1-10

As an adult, Miriam was a woman of stature. Her character had been formed in a family where faith was a daily reality. Her parents had the courage, the love, and the ingenuity to defy the commands of a tyrannical king in order to save the life of their youngest son. The family of Amram and Jochebed was unique in Israel's existence, for it brought forth three great leaders—Moses, Aaron, and Miriam—who all served the nation at the same time.

“I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam,” God later declared through the prophet Micah.<sup>2</sup> When Moses led his troublesome people out of Egypt to Canaan, he was assisted by his brother Aaron, the high priest, and his sister Miriam, the prophetess.

She was not just a tagalong sister. She was his colaborer, with leadership responsibilities. God called Miriam, an unmarried woman, to an exceptional task. She had the privilege of being the first female prophet—a spokeswoman for God.

In deeds and words she proclaimed the greatness of God. Her life was totally centered on loving God and His people. Her gifts and interests were too great to be used exclusively for the small family circle. Israel had many wives and mothers, but only one Miriam. God entrusted her with a high position. An entire nation was dependent upon her. She received supreme satisfaction in life, as she dedicated herself wholly to the task.

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<sup>2</sup> Micah 6:4

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*What gifts has God entrusted you with? How are you using those gifts? Are there any other ways in which God is prompting you to use your gifts?*

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She was nearing the age of one hundred when the miracle of the Red Sea astounded the masses. The water that brought salvation to God's people confirmed the fall of His enemies. "I will sing to the LORD, for He has triumphed gloriously," cried Moses afterward. "He has hurled both horse and rider into the sea."<sup>3</sup> After the men had started the joyous singing, the women continued it. From that day forth, Israel would always sing about exceptional victories because of Miriam. She was first in line—energetic and youthful in spirit despite her age. With a timbrel in her hand, she took over the song from Moses. She encouraged the women to dance to the honor of God while shouting for joy: "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously."<sup>4</sup>

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*How do you praise God when He does great things? Do you inspire others to praise as well?*

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Miriam was a born leader. The women readily followed her. And although they could not foresee the future, singing

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 15:1, NLT

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 15:20, NLT

would become an endless source of support to the women during their long wilderness wanderings. The journey was long because of the disobedience of the people, and it was going to be necessary to encourage one another with the faithfulness of God. They gained new courage when singing, “He has hurled both horse and rider into the sea.”

But self-conceit was becoming fatal to Miriam.

She was a strong woman. Leadership came easily to her. And, as is often the case, this very strength became a weakness. It has been said that circumstances reveal the inner person. The circumstance that revealed Miriam’s inner character was Moses’ second marriage, this time to an Ethiopian.

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*In what ways do your strengths also act as weaknesses? How has God led you to combat those weaknesses?*

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It is understandable that Miriam found this difficult. It was strange that Moses, a man of God, would again marry a woman from another nation. Or was Miriam simply reacting to the presence of another woman in the life of Moses, especially since she was unmarried herself? Was she indignant because he was satisfied with a foreign woman, while countless Israelite women would have been more suitable? These questions are not answered in the Scriptures.

Moses, the great leader of the Israelites, was Miriam’s youngest brother, and she was worried about him. She was

concerned about how the results of this marriage might affect the people. The marriage took place in a period of history when relatives usually decided upon matters of marriage. Looking at her concern from this standpoint, it would seem to be a proper spiritual reaction from a mature woman. But it was far from that.

Miriam, who had ascended to the highest post ever held by a woman, and who was named by God in the same breath as the two great male leaders, had simply surpassed her boundaries. She overestimated herself. She considered herself to be on the same level as Moses. And in her pride she undermined his authority. “Is he, indeed, the leader of the three of us?” she asked. “Are not Aaron and I his equals?”<sup>5</sup>

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*How do you react when an authority figure makes a decision you disagree with? When God does or allows something you disagree with, in what ways, if any, does your response differ?*

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Miriam was not motivated by concern for the well-being of the people or for Moses, but by jealousy. Aaron, the most pliable of the three, could not resist his domineering sister, so he went along with her. Together Miriam and Aaron tried to usurp Moses’ authority. In doing this, they endangered the unity and future of the entire nation. Moreover, they attempted to thwart the direct revelation of God. Instead of

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 12:12, author’s paraphrase

thinking about the well-being of everyone concerned, they thought only selfishly.<sup>6</sup>

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*Have you ever used your influence out of poor motives? How did God correct you in that time?*

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God created humans to give themselves to others. When we do this, we experience the greatest happiness. It enriches and widens our horizons. But our lives become poor and limited when we selfishly desire only to receive—when our self is in the center of our thinking.

Moses remained calm. He showed no desire to defend himself. There was, however, another who defended Moses' rights, and this became a frightful experience for Miriam and Aaron. For God in heaven heard, knew, and saw what was happening on earth. He took immediate steps to stop the rebellion against Moses' leadership and to punish the guilty ones.

Shattered and with shaky knees, Aaron and Miriam appeared before God. They heard how He judged the situation. Moses, they heard, was not only the undisputed leader; he was also given a position higher than all the prophets.

It was clear that God had chosen Moses to be the mediator between Himself and His people. He respected Moses so highly that He didn't speak to him through vague riddles and obscure dreams. Instead, He spoke to Moses as a man speaks to his friends<sup>7</sup>—openly, plainly.

<sup>6</sup> Philippians 2:3-4

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 33:11

Miriam and Aaron had attacked a man highly respected by God. When He in His godly justice and authority called them to account, they had no excuse. Ultimately they had not harmed Moses, but themselves. Moses, the God-appointed mediator, was a foreshadowing of the Savior to come. To reject Moses was, in fact, to reject the Messiah. This was what made the situation so serious.

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*Do you respect the leaders God has appointed in your church? If so, how do you communicate that respect? If not, are your reasons biblically based, or are they subjective?*

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When God left them in His anger, Miriam became a leper. Leprosy was the most dreaded of diseases, for it sapped the strength of the person who had it, degrading her with a walking death. And God had stained Miriam with the curse of leprosy.

The woman who for years had gone ahead of the crowd singing, who had challenged the other women to sing praises to God, had been expelled from the ranks of leadership. Her voice, which had once so melodiously praised God, now shouted a hoarse “unclean, unclean,” when anyone came within her reach. The members of her body would gradually become more and more hideous, until they finally dropped off. She would go through life crippled and lonely until her death.

Miriam had to experience very painfully how great her sin was in the eyes of God. The shame of her deed could be compared to a father spitting in the face of his child publicly. Therefore, she had to undergo her punishment publicly, so that everyone could see how God punished people who thought too highly of themselves.<sup>8</sup> Miriam, the brave, active woman, found no words to answer His curse.

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*Do you view disrespect of leadership as sin?  
If so, how does this inform your response  
when leaders make decisions you don't like?*

---

Aaron regained his composure first and indicated that he had accepted the correction. He said to Moses, “Oh, my lord”—he did not call him “brother,” but “lord,” thus recognizing Moses’ leadership. “Don’t punish us for being foolish and sinning.”<sup>9</sup> Aaron identified himself completely with Miriam’s sin. Then it was not he, the high priest, but Moses who entreated God for her healing. Moses didn’t indicate that he approved of God’s judgment, nor did he rebuke Miriam and Aaron. He simply prayed to God, and his prayer reduced Miriam’s sentence from one of lifelong suffering to only seven days.

Miriam’s attitude had brought harm not only to herself but also to her people. Their journey had been delayed because

<sup>8</sup> Romans 12:3

<sup>9</sup> Numbers 12:11, author’s paraphrase

of her sin. The entire nation was kept from moving forward until Miriam was among them again. The seven days she spent as an outcast must have given Miriam much food for thought. Did she then understand that God Himself appoints His leaders? That in His godly order He entrusts leadership to those who are humble enough to be willing to serve?<sup>10</sup> Had she come out a better person? Had she been purified?

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*Have you ever observed someone create discord within your church body due to lack of respect for leadership? How was the issue resolved? Were there any long-term effects of the discord?*

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The Bible doesn't record any further rebellion. Had the experience destroyed Miriam's strength and usefulness? Did she lose her gift of prophecy? The Bible doesn't say, but it does state that she died before her people entered the Promised Land.

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*What do Philippians 2:3-4 and Romans 12:3 teach about criticism and overestimating oneself?*

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Miriam was a woman at the top. It was an exceptional position, a commission that had been entrusted to her by

<sup>10</sup> Luke 22:24-27; 1 Peter 5:5-6

God. Miriam's story offered a wonderful example as long as she used her position to honor God. A person who does this can hardly go wrong. However, Miriam gradually shifted away from accepting God's control in her life to trying to control things herself. This no doubt occurred so subtly that she didn't realize the change was taking place. Perhaps if she had searched her heart honestly in time, she could have prevented God's judgment.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps then she would not have overstepped her boundaries by overestimating herself.

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*Take an honest assessment of your life. Do your actions show a reliance on God's control, or your own? How might you model your life off of the positive example Miriam set in her early leadership and avoid the negative example of her later years?*

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<sup>11</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:31