

**Daughters of the Desert:
Stories of Remarkable Women
from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Traditions**

Study Guide for Book Groups

1. The three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all descended from Abraham and his wives Sarah and Hagar. Reflect on your understanding of this. In your experience, do people of these religions focus on their common roots? On their differences? Discuss advantages and disadvantages of this.

2. Throughout the story collection, all five authors explore the same question: What if women had been the scribes? How might the scriptures have been different if women had been involved in the writing of the Biblical narrative?

3. The stories of Sarah and Hagar are told twice in this collection: *A Thousand Wrinkles* (page 3) is based on the Genesis story and the *Waters at Zamzam* (page 126) is based on the Muslim telling of similar events. Compare and contrast the details of the two stories. What impact might these stories, and the differences between them, have on our world today?

4. Sarah is often credited, and blamed, for the casting out of Hagar and Ishmael, that she had them removed to protect her and Isaac's interests. *A Thousand Wrinkles* (page 3) suggests an alternate view, that perhaps she separated her two sons in an attempt to make peace between them. What do you think?

5. It is easy to look at a historical event such as Pharaoh ordering midwives to kill male infants (page 12) in order to appease an angry god and to see the horrific and illogical nature of this policy. Without the historical distance, however, it can be harder to see the sometimes erroneous or cruel nature of our own ideas and political policies. Imagine yourself in the future looking back on our culture and discuss the ways in which our descendants might see our behavior.

6. *A Dance in the Desert* (page 21) presents a brief glimpse of how life might have been for the band of Israelites wandering in the desert after their escape from slavery in Egypt. The book of Exodus tells us that both Miriam and Moses died before their people reached the land God promised them. Have you ever come to realize that a dream you have worked for and believed in will not come true in your lifetime? How did you react?

7. The Book of Deuteronomy is sometimes viewed as the most complete of any of the books of Jewish scripture. Scan it for its major codes and laws. Do you agree with the theory that its verification by huldah allowed Judaism to become cohesive and the Jewish people to become a "people of the book?" What are the secular and sacred ingredients that make a religion powerfully compelling?

8. Rabbi Akiba, in the first century CE, is associated with advocating that the Song of Songs be included into the Bible, describing the ancient poetry as the 'holiest of holies.' However, in the Song of Songs, God is not specifically mentioned. There are many metaphorical interpretations suggesting that the two human lovers represent God and the People, the male and female aspects of God and for Christians, the two lovers represent Christ and the Church (page 42). Talk about this book's place in the sacred canon and your own interpretation of its meaning.

9. Do you believe that Esther (page 51) was flattered at first to be chosen by King Ahasuerus and then grew bitter? If so, how could her faith change enough to give her the power to face even death for her people and her God?

10. Mary turned to Elizabeth for solace and support in the early days of her pregnancy (page 67). What is the essence and knowledge that older women can share with their younger comrades? What can we do in modern life to return to this intergenerational support?

11. Eleni, (page 77) or the "Canaanite women" in the Gospel of Matthew in the Christian Bible, is believed by some scholars as a turning point in Jesus' mission, when he turned his gaze upon the needs of the Gentiles. What other women are you aware of throughout history who have inspired great men to do great things? Also, in this story Jesus is portrayed as having gone to rest. What event with John the Baptist had taken place at this time in Judea that may have prompted the Galilean to be "inaccessible" to the public?

12. Have you like Salome (page 84) ever felt protective toward your children or someone close to you? Why can it be so difficult to detach one's own life from our loved ones? Do you agree with Jesus that it is one's own cup one must drink? That it is crucial to learn to trust other's decisions and work instead on one's own?

13. Is truth valued in our culture? Was Binah (page 92) a *servant to truth*? Are you?

14. In *Love Casts Out Fear* (page 101) Mary Magdalene chooses to go and anoint the body of her beloved friend even at the risk of her own safety. Have you ever loved another person so much you would risk your life for them? How has that changed you as a person?

15. Lydia of Philippi (page 108) is known in the Christian Bible as a dyer of purple cloth. Khadija, the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, was a caravan trader. Both were the first people on their respective continents - Europe and Asia - to convert to Christianity and Islam. What similarities do these women share that may have led each to take these leaps of faith? How would their work be instrumental in helping them build new religions in their lands? Have you read about other women in Biblical and Koranic times who were businesswomen? Was this the norm of those times?

16. *The Night Wind* (page 119) portrays the first woman, a creation myth (human tears which allow life to flourish in their wake), and a love story, all in one. Had this Eve been the archetype through which the Abrahamic religions viewed women, what are the potential differences we might have seen in monotheistic societies and culture from early times onward?

17. As Hagar (page 126) realizes she is to be left alone with her child in the desert, she undergoes a transformation from anger and fear to one of acceptance. "If this is because of your other wife, then I am angry. If this is the will of Allah, then I will

submit." When Abraham replied that it is God's will that she be left there, she accepts her fate. Discuss circumstances in your own experience where you had to decide whether to fight for change or to work towards acceptance.

18. Read *Prayers in the Darkness* (page 143) and consider why renunciation seems to be a central value in all-major religions. What is it we lose? What is gained?

19. In *The Merchant Boy's Prank* a young woman, Zarah, is victimized and chooses forgiveness in response. Given the age-old desert tradition of avenging one's family members for grievances, this woman showed enormous courage. She also showed courage in wearing her veil, identifying herself as a follower of the Prophet Muhammad, in a city where many non-Muslims lived. Today, the media often portrays veiled women as "the oppressed." Does this story suggest this notion? What inferences can you draw about the status of Muslim women in those days based on the stories in this book? Can you find passages in the Qur'an which might support your ideas? Did any of your discoveries surprise you?

20. *The Dogs of Al-Haw'ab* (page 159) describes the conflict which split Islam into two major branches: Sunni and Shiite. Do some research so that you can articulate some of the philosophical and practical differences. The vast majority of the world's Muslims are which branch? Which branch of Islam stems from Ali's lineage? Which branch stems from Aisha's?