

“We have been lost to each other for so long.

My name means nothing to you. My memory is dust. This is not your fault, or mine. The chain connecting mother to daughter was broken and the word passed to the keeping of men, who had no way of knowing. That is why I became a footnote, my story a brief detour between the well-known history of my father, Jacob, and the celebrated chronicle of Joseph, my brother. On those rare occasions when I was remembered, it was as a victim. Near the beginning of your Holy Book, there is a passage that seems to say I was raped and continued with the bloody tale of how my honor was avenged. It’s a wonder that any mother ever called a daughter Dinah again.”

This is the beginning of Anita Diamant’s novel, *The Red Tent*. In it she envisions a female culture within the nomadic herding society of the earliest Hebrew patriarchs. By its nature, nomadic society leaves little for historians or archeologists to study so there is no way to know if anything like the Red Tent actually existed, but from what we know of similar cultures, the idea is plausible and likely. The tent was exclusive to women and infants. Girls were admitted, with great ceremony, at puberty. It was a place where women stayed during their monthly periods and where they supported each other in giving birth. The story assumes what any woman who has lived in a dormitory knows: women’s cycles synchronize when they live together, so there was a time in each lunar cycle when all the women of the tribe gathered, separate from the men. In our modern urban world, we regard the idea of segregating menstruating women as misogynistic or degrading, but in cultures where the practice is followed women use the opportunity to bond, share knowledge, educate girls and simply take a break. The Red Tent in the story was not a place of exile, but of refuge. This exclusive gathering was a source of female power. Even in cultures we see as oppressive to women, women *always* have their own means and sources of power, because female power is ancient, reaching back to the dawn of humanity or even earlier. In many primate species, females are the continuity of the troop; they are the core, with complex relationships among mothers, daughters, sisters and aunts. They instruct the young and pass on knowledge about sources of food and special skills. There is a good argument that the beginning of language came from mothers; perhaps the first song was a lullaby. The fruit that Eve tasted was the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge; it was the woman who first sought wisdom, to become more like God even though she was warned of the danger. This Knowledge represents the loss of animal innocence; knowledge of Good and Evil is sentience, and the root of judgment, morality and free will. Good and Evil cannot be separated; with the understanding of the Good, comes the burden of Evil. Now you have to believe God knew this was coming. God knew that knowledge of Good and Evil was the end of the childhood of our species; when God warned humanity that eating the fruit of that tree was Death, the real nature of the danger was the foreknowledge of death, that is the certainty of mortality. Clearly God didn’t think Man could work all this out on his own; he needed a Woman to understand what had to be done to get human history in motion.

Diamant received a lot of criticism for postulating that the matriarchs practiced paganism, co-existing with the religion of the God of Abraham. Paganism is a name applied to a wide variety of beliefs and practices. It is used to describe simple folklore and highly organized ancient religions, such as Hinduism; Wiccans apply the term very specifically to themselves. The word derives from a Latin term meaning 'country,' or 'rustic' and supposed to imply old fashioned or 'hick'. In the context of the book, we refer to stories, rituals, and practices based on the earth and seasons, and handed down by generations of women. I would maintain that a practice based on reverence for creation cannot be contradictory to worship of the Creator. The author portrays Jacob's wives and his daughter as attuned to the rhythms and mysteries of God's world. They know the female face of God.

The bible is a mystic book, actually a collection of books, and we all know that parts of it have been used, even perverted, to support any number of contradictory, and sometimes oppressive beliefs. There is a common supposition that both the Old and New Testaments are patriarchal and repressive of women. In fact the bible contains many examples of powerful, wise and heroic women. Sarah, Leah and Rachel, who appear as characters in *The Red Tent*, are revered as mothers of their people, and portrayed with character and intelligence. Miriam, sister of Moses and Aaron, is honored as a prophet, and she saves Moses' life by putting him in a basket in the bulrushes for Pharaoh's daughter to find. The bible shows her as the poet in the Song of Miriam and Moses. Another beautiful poem attributed to a woman is the Song of Hannah in First Samuel.

6 *"The LORD brings death and makes alive;
God brings down to the grave ^[c] and raises up.*

7 *The LORD sends poverty and wealth;
God humbles and God exalts.*

8 *God raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
God seats them with princes
and has them inherit a throne of honor.
"For the foundations of the earth are the LORD's;
upon them God has set the world.*

9 *God will guard the feet of the saints,
but the wicked will be silenced in darkness.
"It is not by strength that one prevails;*

The bible shows women of great courage, as in the example of Esther, queen of Persia, wife of Xerxes. The king's advisor Haman has an ancient grudge against the Jews, and has convinced the king that they should all be slaughtered. Esther goes to the King to reveal her heritage and plead for her people, even though to enter the king's presence uninvited can mean death. She is remembered in the Jewish Spring festival of Purim. Another example is the story of Judith, which appears in the Greek and Roman bibles.

She was a Jewish widow who saved her city by beheading the Assyrian general Holofernes while he was passed out drunk in his tent.

One of the most beautiful stories of feminine solidarity is that of Naomi and Ruth, ancestors of the House of David. Naomi was a woman from Bethlehem who left with her family because of famine. In the country of Moab, her 2 sons married local women, Orpah and Ruth. We can suppose that all these women lived and worked and spent much of their time together. Eventually her husband died, then her sons. She heard that conditions had improved in Judah, so she decides it will be better if she returns home, where at least she knows people. The women are sorry to be parted after going through so much together, but Naomi tells the younger women to return to their mothers, and hope to marry again. Orpah, cries and goes, but Ruth won't leave Naomi, and promises to follow her anywhere. Because they stick together, they ultimately are saved by a kind kinsman who redeems the family homestead. Ruth's son was Obed, the grandfather of David.

The New Testament also tells of important women. Mary, mother of Jesus, and her cousin Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, are praised for their understanding of and obedience to God's will for them. The prophet Anna was among the first to recognize Jesus as the Christ when His parents brought him to the temple. Mary of Magdala was one of Jesus' most important disciples. Though in later centuries her reputation was challenged, and she was incorrectly identified as a reformed prostitute, first century Christians knew her as a Gospel writer and a pillar of the early church as a teacher and financial supporter. The story of Mary and Martha illustrates Jesus' attitude toward women. These were the sisters of Lazarus, and Luke tells us that the "...woman named Martha opened her home to him." Note that it is described as Martha's home. So here's Martha fussing and being efficiently domestic, and her sister is just sitting, listening to Jesus. Martha asks Jesus, "Why don't you tell her to help me?" Jesus tells her to give it a rest; learning is more important than housework. He doesn't expect the women to stay ignorant and in the background, His message is for them as well as anyone else.

Worship has a female and male face, as does God. We are made in God's image and I believe we each have a dual nature, and that we are most fully realized when we find the harmony in our being and in our worship. If the male face is structure, the female is mystery. The structure is empty without the female power of mystery. Not the power of religion, but the power of faith. The female power is not in the temple, but in the sacredness of place and connection to God's earth. The female power is not in the liturgy, but in the spiritual surrender of an act of reverence. The female power is not in the Law, but in love that engenders kindness and compassion to others. The female power is not in the Word but in the story and the wisdom at the heart of the story. Like the stories of wise and powerful women in the bible, or the story of our mothers in the Red Tent.