

**WUNRN Lesson Plan:**  
Religion and Women's Economic, Social and  
Cultural Rights among  
The Monotheistic Religions:  
From Exclusion to Inclusion

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(<http://www.wunrn.com> )

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

To the User

Global Statement of Purpose

Course Structure: Guide for Leaders

Session One: What is Religion?

Session Two: Human Rights Basic Documents

Session Three: Are Women and Girls A Special Case?

Session Four: Biblical Legal Rulings Versus a Human Rights Perspective  
A Word About Biblical Texts  
The Sotah ('The Falling'): Numbers 5

Session Five: On Sexuality, Virginity, Motherhood and Woman's Role in Sin

Session Six: Prohibition From Functions: What's Blood Got To Do With It?

Session Seven: Inadequacy of Instruments: Women in Biblical Laws

Session Eight: Recovering Our Legacies

Session Nine: Where Do We Go From Here?

Appendix One: Group Readings Listed by Section

[\\*Appendix Two: Student Paper "Honor Killings in Turkey"\\*](#)

[\\*Appendix Three: Student Paper "The Rape of Dinah: An Historical and Cultural Critique of Virginity in the Ancient Near East"\\*](#)

[\\*Appendix Four: Student Paper "Women's Voices, Prophetic Voices: Women as Prophets, Women as Other"\\*](#)

[\\*Appendix Five: Student Paper "Talaq-Talaq-Talaq: Women Suffering in India Because of Misuse of Triple Talaq"\\*](#)

[\\*Appendix Six: Order of Worship for an International Women's Day Celebration\\*](#)  
*\*These Appendices are listed as separate documents on the website!*

Appendix Seven: Resources for Electronic Study of Quran and Hadith

## **To the User:**

This lesson plan is designed to provide a leader with a group of materials, questions, readings and resources to study the place of ‘woman’—her being, her rights, her future—within the context of the classical monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, although we will focus most closely on the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible as a model. This course was originally given in 2005-06 at Andover Newton Theological School, in conjunction with an international conference sponsored by WUNRN on the topic listed. (DVDs of presentations at the conference are available upon request for a modest fee). Although it originally appeared as a seminary level class, we have tried to lay it out in such a way that it will be useful to persons of all levels of education and religious commitment. We encourage all users to tell us about their experiences with the materials, and let us know any improvements or suggestions that may have to make this resource a useful one for those looking at the rights of women and girls from the perspective of religion and traditions.

It is expected that, depending on the group using the materials, only the leader will probably have access or the time to deal with fundamental readings on the questions raised in the course. This is to be expected, and is not a worry! As women study together, we are certain they will find ways to share resources, encourage each other, and hold up the special gifts for teaching, research and leadership that they may discover in themselves. If the Boston WUNRN Workshop model is to be a useful one, then we fully expect it to be flexible and responsive to the settings for study in which women around the world find themselves. The research papers provided here were all prepared by seminary students, many of them with no special background in gender studies, historical research, or the social sciences—yet much may be accomplished in such circumstances, as you will see when reading what the students have presented.

### **Global Statement of Purpose:**

For too long, feminists in religion have confined their vision to the worthy goals of professional advancement of women as leaders and full participants within religious bodies, analyses of violence against women, ‘women’s ministries’ and the legally protected access to reproductive ‘rights’ or constitutional guarantees of right to privacy. However, such ‘equality’ movements and attempts to change the lot of women in a patriarchal world, however desirable, present a truncated view of the powerful nexus of gender asymmetry in economic, social and cultural rights, and fail to address the religious dimensions of the problems (for example, women and poverty under the economic system of patriarchy, or the role of race and class in normalizing violence in the home).

By incorporating general Human Rights principles and strategies into local and global ministries and/or studies of religion, religion can become a force for good in advancing the equality of all peoples. Theory is not a negligible concern for either Christian Church or social activists, if we seek genuine cross-disciplinary work to address the ills of societies. However, just as ‘faith without works is dead’, so theory divorced from

practice in living communities is barren. For Christians, Jews and Muslims, at least some attention must be given to theories of reading texts held as sacred by their communities. Proactive educational activities must be undertaken to empower women of faith AND activists in knowing their rights in teachings of their traditions, even as those traditions transcend or fail to redress Human Rights abuses against women and girls. To this end, we will be using the Internet and the WUNRN website as a tool for social change.

To quote from The Women's Rights Division of *Human Rights Watch* (<http://www.hrw.org/women/index.php>):

“Our duty as activists is to expose and denounce as human rights violations those practices and policies that silence and subordinate women. We reject any law, culture, or religion in which women are systematically discriminated against, excluded from political participation and public life, segregated in their daily lives, raped in armed conflict, beaten in their homes, denied equal divorce or inheritance rights, killed for having sex, forced to marry, assaulted for not conforming to gender norms, and sold into forced labor. Arguments that sustain and excuse these human rights abuses - those of cultural norms, "appropriate" rights for women, or western imperialism - barely disguise their true meaning: that women's lives matter less than men's. Cultural relativism, which argues that there are no universal human rights and that rights are culture-specific and culturally determined, is still a formidable and corrosive challenge to women's rights to equality and dignity in all facets of their lives.”

Our course is designed to foster dialogue about the nature of ‘Human Rights’, their foundation or exclusion from theological origins or purposes, and an assessment of the Bible as a document which may be confidently used to advance the concepts of human dignity and global interdependence.

## Course Structure: Guide for Leaders

### COURSE GOALS

- help students construct a framework for human rights analysis by focusing on economic, social and cultural rights of women and girls in the communities of religious formation, then and now
- help students identify the gender ideologies inscribed within biblical texts
- provide a forum for the discussion of alternative readings
- create empowered readers who can lead the Church in the assessment of the Bible's role in the continued oppression of women, children, foreigners, homosexuals, and "the Other"
- give students the opportunity to incorporate Human Rights principles into their various public and private ministries
- Teach students to use the WUNRN website as a resource for their own continuing work in Human Rights

**REMEMBER:** these books and suggested readings below are NOT required to use this WUNRN lesson plan, but they do present a lot of useful background information for those unfamiliar with biblical interpretation. You may be able to find them in a local college or university library, and if not, your local public library should be able to obtain them through InterLibrary Loan. Those without library resources should surf the web and see what might be available on line by these authors.

### Selected Bibliography for Leaders

#### **Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Religious Origins of Violence***

Avalos is a Hispanic Humanist scholar of the Hebrew Bible, with special interests in the role of health care in the ancient world, and the origins of violence. His book starts from the propositions that a) religion is primarily the belief in otherworldly beings; b) it seeks to create and control the 'scarce resource' of sacredness/blessing/meaning, and c) for those reasons, the violence caused by religious teachings and practices cannot be philosophically or socially sustained as a simply a 'bad' product from a 'good' source. Although many would not agree with these starting points, Avalos' recognition and willingness to confront religious violence and its sources make this an important and provoking resource.

#### **Kristen de Troyer, ed. et al., *Wholly Woman, Holy Blood***

This book gathers a collection of essays all on the notion that it is women's 'impurity' (reproductive blood) which stands as a primary reason for patriarchal exclusion of women from the boundaries of the Sacred. Studies on the treatment and view of women

in the biblical text and the history of the Church range from very detailed and particular to expansive consideration of religion as a sort of cult of male privilege.

**Elizabeth Schussler-Fioreza, ed., *Searching the Scriptures, vol. 1 Searching the Scriptures, vol. 1*** covers method in New Testament studies and theology; *vol. 2* treats the individual books of the New Testament and Intertestamental Writings. Edited and inspired by the premier Harvard University Professor of New Testament, Elizabeth Schussler-Fioreza, a German Roman Catholic scholar, this work stands as a clear reference for those who would seek to formulate a liberating Christian theology.

**Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine, eds., *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods, Strategies***

This book is one of the three ‘feminist classics’ in the study of the Bible (the others are Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe, eds., *Womens Bible Commentary*, and Elizabeth Schussler-Fioreza, *Searching the Scriptures, 2 vol., see above*). It provides a general introduction to study of the Bible from a feminist perspective, and includes all kinds of methodologies and scholars from a variety of faith communities. The *WBC* is a great reference on individual books of the Bible from the perspective of their teachings on women, and covers both the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and the New Testament.

**Carol Meyers, et al., *Women in Scripture***

Investigate the cultural and literary context of female characters in both testaments. Excellent for the preparation of bible studies and talks on individual women of the Bible.

**Claudia Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy: The Strange Woman and the Making of the Hebrew Bible***

Worried about ‘why?’: this analyzes the impact of postexilic questions on communal survival---purity and genealogy issues--- n the portrait of woman as the Other.

**Carole Fontaine, *Smooth Words: Women, Proverbs and Performance in Biblical Wisdom*** Your source for Queens of Sheba, then and now; now in paperback from T and T Clark This book is way too expensive for any normal woman, so please contact Boston WUNRN Workshop for useful, free and web-friendly resources. As it happens, the same material by this author is featured in the BBC Documentary, *Queen of Sheba: Behind the Myth*. Sheba is a notable role model because she is an independent woman ruling alone, and appears favorably in all three Scriptures (Hebrew Bible, New Testament, Quran).

### **Readings for Leaders**

ESF: Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Searching the Scriptures*

FCRB: *Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible*, ed. A. Brenner and C. Fontaine

H. Avalos, *Fighting Words*

K. de Troyer, ed., *Wholly Woman, Holy Blood*

<b>Before the first session</b>	<i>Methodological Buffet: approaches and focus of research/Human Rights</i> <a href="http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/edumat/hreduseries/TB5/lifting.html">http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/edumat/hreduseries/TB5/lifting.html</a> )	ESF: ix-26 <i>FCRB, 11-14, 17-29</i>
<b>Before Session Four</b>	<i>Some Problems with Genderization: The Sotah: Numbers 5, compared to Honor Killings</i>	Fontaine, <i>The Abusive Bible in FCRB</i> , pp. 84-113; Pilch, <i>FCRB</i> , pp. 306-325
<b>Before Session Six</b>	<b>The Other: What's Blood Got to Do With It?</b> Sacrifice and purity, personal and social violence; international norms	Discussion of <i>Wholly Woman, Holy Blood</i> von Kellenbach, <i>FCRB</i> , pp. 190-202; ESF: 154-71
<b>Before Session Seven</b>	<b>Legacies of Our Mothers: Where do we go from here?</b> <b>The Queen of Sheba in Three Faiths</b>	Discussion of Avalos, <i>Fighting Words</i> ; ESF: 64-116; Sheba in HB, NT, and Quran
<b>Follow-up</b>	<i>Jewish Questions</i> <b>On Rabbis, Romans and Readings; Jesus and Feminist Questions</b>	Hauptmann, Peskowitz, Boyarin, <i>FCRB</i> , pp. 472-547, ESF: 272-89

*Directions for Leader for Session One:*

Leader: background on human rights and religion, freedom of religion and human rights, etc. can be found at The Tandem Project:  
<http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/edumat/hreduseries/TB5/lifting.html> )

Go over starting positions outlined in WUNRN Lesson Plan above. Assign group readings for next session. (found at the beginning of each session). Then open the conversation for general discussion, encouraging group members to raise issues from their own experience in relationship to the readings provided.

## Session One: What is Religion?

**Groups Readings for Session One: None, but surf the WUNRN website ([www.wunrn.com](http://www.wunrn.com)); please also visit the Tandem Project website, for more definitions of religion used in Human Rights paradigms, and core common values in world religions; [http://www.tandemproject.com/part1/concepts\\_methods/concepts\\_methods.htm](http://www.tandemproject.com/part1/concepts_methods/concepts_methods.htm) )**

### **A Note about Terms Used:**

There are, of course, as many ways to define what is meant by ‘religion’ as there are humans practicing a particular ‘faith’. We start at the outset of this course of study with a deep respect for religious traditions, an interfaith perspective that no one religion may press its views upon another, and that all persons have the right to worship as they wish. These insights, we feel, can be drawn from a deep understanding of the common themes that underlie all religions, as well as from the United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights. Mystics of all faiths have tended to find that there are some ‘universals’ at the heart of their traditions---the call to universal compassion, the search for meaning, the questions of how one lives a life of harmony and peace.

So, at one basic point, we must separate the altruistic and noble aspirations of *religion* or *faith*, understood as the search for meaning and justice, from the particular manifestations of *a* religion in a patriarchal context. We believe that women have a right to choose their faith and level of observance, a right to ask questions of a patriarchal tradition, and a right to enjoyment of all human rights regularly ascribed to men. As the WUNRN study intimates, it is often the case that religion forms a ‘hallowed ground’ for the discrimination against women as a form of cultural practice which the religion not only sanctions but requires. Any form of advancement for women in the economic, social or cultural realm is challenged as an assault to group religious identity—which often turns out to mean only the protection of men’s privileged status!

We ask, then, as the WUNRN study compels us to, ‘What does this or that religion *actually* say about women’s rights?’ Are the worldwide asymmetries that we see based on gender truly an essential part of the religion under consideration, or has the religion’s message been warped by patriarchal interpretation and ideology? What do we find in religion that is good and useful and universal? Are there things that we feel must be discarded as inauthentic, partial, or just plain wrong?

### **Session One Group Discussion Questions:**

1. What does the word ‘religion’ mean to you?
2. How do you think about religions whose beliefs differ from those of your own? Are there resources within your own tradition for respect and peaceful coexistence between religions with competing claims?



3. How do you feel religion has helped or hindered women in their quest for a fuller, safer, more peaceful life?

4. What are your views *right now* on the rights, purpose, and dignity of women in *your* religion or tradition?

## Session Two: Human Rights Basic Documents

### *Session Two Readings:*

European Women's Lobby position paper on Religion and Women's Rights  
([http://ewl.horus.be/SiteResources/data/MediaArchive/policies/Women\\_%20Diversity/rwh\\_06\\_en.pdf](http://ewl.horus.be/SiteResources/data/MediaArchive/policies/Women_%20Diversity/rwh_06_en.pdf))

United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights: Go to the WUNRN website, choose Reference Documents, and read the base document:

[http://www.wunrn.com/reference/pdf/univ\\_dec\\_hum\\_right.pdf](http://www.wunrn.com/reference/pdf/univ_dec_hum_right.pdf)

### Session Two Discussion Questions

1. Are you surprised by all the rights accorded to every human by the United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights? Do you see those rights being honored in your own social setting or location?
2. What points of contact do you see between your own religion/faith/tradition and the United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights? What rights does the United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights's have that your religion doesn't mention? What rights does your religion mention that are NOT in the United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights?
4. Do you think that the United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights's focus on 'individual rights' is fair to *group* concerns about rights, cultural traditions, and national religious traditions?
5. What was your response to the European Women's Lobby statement in your reading?:

#### **Religion – used as justification for infringements of women's human rights**

The argument is frequently made by religious authorities and by adherents that discriminatory actions are not to be found within the faith – that is, in the revered books, such as the Bible or the Koran. None the less religion is used to justify commandments directed only at women such as dress codes that render them invisible, that require the shaving of the head, that restrict the movement of women outside and inside the home, the holding of positions of authority within the churches as ministers or priests and outside in places of work and organizations and to deny them access to education or to work outside the home and to fulfill their potential in all walks of life.

The most painful violations occur often in relation to marriage and the family – especially a woman's rights to choose her own partner or not to choose at all, to bear or not bear children and to choose the number and spacing of them, to divorce or not, and on divorce, to enjoy the same rights and privileges as her husband. One example of the latter is the withholding of the certificate of religious divorce for

women in orthodox Judaism. The divorcing husband is free to live his life while his wife remains tied to him and he may bargain for payments to be made to him before he will release her under Jewish law.

Indeed religions worldwide seek to control female sexuality and condemn women's expression and enjoyment of their sexuality routinely with much greater harshness than that of men. Most religions also condemn all sexual relationships except those between a woman and her husband – women in some societies may still be stoned for adultery and/or killed for so-called “honour crimes”. And only heterosexuality is condoned. (Excerpts from the European Women's Lobby Position paper on Religion and Women's Human Rights situate our questions nicely:

[http://ewl.horus.be/SiteResources/data/MediaArchive/policies/Women\\_%20Diversity/rwh\\_06\\_en.pdf](http://ewl.horus.be/SiteResources/data/MediaArchive/policies/Women_%20Diversity/rwh_06_en.pdf) ; adopted May 27, 2006).

***Did you know...***

That a woman played a key role in bringing the United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights to life? Read more about First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt's struggle to chair the UN Committee drafting the Declaration in the context of a worsening 'Cold War'!

'The Struggle for Human Rights', <http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/documents/speeches/doc026617.html>

Learn more about the impact of this great woman on Human Rights world wide at the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project at <http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/abouterp/>

## Session Three: Are Women and Girls a Special Case?

### *Group Readings for Session Three:*

Navigate to the WUNRN website, and choose:  
REFERENCE DOCUMENTS/

[Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief](#)

[Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women \(CEDAW\)](#)

[CEDAW Optional Protocol](#)

Leader: Our topic in this session is **why**, having a ‘universal’ United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights, international bodies found a need to address the conditions of women and girls, and their understanding of how ‘universal’ (= male) rights apply to females.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What do you think of CEDAW’s basic statement:

“...the term ‘discrimination against women’ shall mean any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field. (Article One, CEDAW,

[http://www.wunrn.com/reference/pdf/Convention\\_elimination\\_Discrimination\\_women.PDF](http://www.wunrn.com/reference/pdf/Convention_elimination_Discrimination_women.PDF) )

2. Should the rights and needs of ‘groups’ outweigh those of individuals? What if the individuals (like ‘women’ or ‘children’) whose rights are abridged belong to groups whose rights are ALWAYS considered less important than those of the (alleged) male majority?

3. Should the desires of a married man outweigh those of his wife and children? Does his role as ‘head of the household’ make him the ‘king of the castle’ in all cases?

4. How does your religion speak about conflicting rights within the family? How does it work in *your* family?

5. Has your nation/state/community/religion ratified CEDAW?

## Session Four: Biblical Legal Rulings Versus a Human Rights Perspective (Numbers 5 vrs 'Honor Killing' Traditions and modern responses)

### *Group Readings for Session Four*

Navigate to the WUNRN website, choose Reference Documents and read

- [Crimes of Honor- UN Resolution 2004-19 languages:](#)
- [Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women](#)
- [Glossary Of Violence Against Women](#)
- Navigate to the Appendix and read Student Research "Honor Killings in Turkey"

In the Bible, read the Book of Numbers, Chapter 5, about the ritual referred to as 'The Sotah' (the falling, as of a baby falling out of a cursed uterus). Navigate to The Bible and Quran website (<http://www.anova.org/sev/>) to find complete scholarly and standard translations of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Quran.

### **A Word about Biblical Texts**

Many groups hold that the works of the Hebrew Bible (Torah for the Jews, and 'Old Testament' for Christians) and New Testament are *Scripture*. What does this mean? Theologians and scholars give many answers. You will find many discussions concerning terms like 'inspiration' (it comes directly from the Divine Source), 'infallibility' (it contains no errors of any kind), and 'authority' (the teachings in Scripture outrank other sources of authority, like governments and international law). Different groups even *within* a tradition will differ greatly on how they view the nature of Scripture, and this will affect their ethical and moral values and practices. Most primarily, though, Scripture can be said to be ***a text (or set of texts) believed by a group to be of sacred/special origin, containing important information about the nature of life which engages the believing community through time and place.***

Because the books of the Bible have been shown to have been written over time by many hands (which certainly does NOT rule out concepts of inspiration), and many voices speak in it, it is not possible for any text to have only *one* meaning, according to certain lines of thinking. This is because what a text meant to an original community hearing it (monotheistic scriptures did not begin as written texts) may not be at all like what a medieval community hears in it, nor would that necessarily be like what modern communities, western and eastern, might hear as the meaning for today. For example, Jesus speaks in Matthew 5: 43-48:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the

**unrighteous.** For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. “

For an ancient person, the idea that God gives rain to the wicked is a wonderful sign of God’s incredible bounty, blessing and forbearance. For a modern industrialized community with weather reports and not much connection to the cycles of nature through farming, the ‘rain’ on the righteous is more likely to be viewed as a punishment (‘don’t rain on my parade’, says the proverb from a Broadway song) than a blessing—and if the unjust are having their picnics rained on, they are getting their ‘just desserts’!

So, there is often NOT a simple answer to questions of interpretation of Scriptures, whether that is the Torah, NT, or Quran. Official interpreters—scholars, holy men, scribes—have always existed to assist with application of the text to one’s life in the here and now. Each community reads with its own expert interpreters: Jews turn to the Talmud written by the rabbinic communities of Babylon and Judea; Christians read with the Church Fathers, church theologians and reformers, and Muslims read the works of their great philosophers, mystics and legal authorities who interpret the Quran for their communities. Women have traditionally been excluded from the specialized education needed to become a certified interpreter with authority, and so *their* questions and concerns have not been dealt with by the religious community. Part of what we are doing in this course is allowing the space for women in the various traditions to engage in interpretation of their own sacred texts, using the lens of Human Rights to focus on issues of rights and status.

### **Numbers 5: The Sotah (‘the falling’)**

Christian women seminarians often have serious problems with studying this text—not just because it describes a terrible ordeal for a potentially innocent woman, but because so many scholars and traditional interpreters never raise simple questions about justice and fair treatment in this passage. Most research prior to feminist interpretation focused on the unique status of this text: it is the only full description of a religious ritual found in the Hebrew Bible. How wretched that *this* is the text we all study as the model, suggesting that subtle violence against women is not out of place in moments of worship!

Here are some things to watch for as you read the Sotah:

The role of the husband’s fear—is it justified? The role of the priest—how do you think the woman responded to his arrangement of her body? Where is God, and whose side is God on in this ritual?

#### ***Discussion Questions for Session Four:***

1. Did you know this kind of legal procedure (‘trial by ordeal’) was in the Bible? What do you think of it?

2. How would you evaluate the ritual with respect to the 'rights' of the married woman and her family of origin?
3. Have you ever heard of honor killings? What do you think of that as a cultural practice which, like the Sotah, tries to guarantee male honor?
4. Do you think a married woman (and her children, actual or potential) should be considered the 'property' of the husband, as both the Sotah and the honor killing paradigm imagine?
5. Do you think the religious tradition of the Sotah adequately protects the woman from domestic violence?

*Did you know....*

That there is NO top level ENTRY on 'violence against women' on the World Council of Churches website?

Should you ask them about that? Read the WCCs Women's Challenges: Into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, from the 1998 8<sup>th</sup> World Council Assembly (<http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/assembly/chall.html>); you can also find it off the WUNRN website under Organizations, Religious )



## Session Five: On Sexuality, Virginity, Motherhood and Woman's Role in Sin

### *Readings for Session Five:*

Navigate to the Appendix and read Student Research, "Virginity in the Bible"

Read Genesis 1-4 (<http://www.anova.org/sev/>), with special attention to the creation of woman in Gen 1:27 and Gen 3.

Navigate to the WUNRN website, choose Reference Documents and select "Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa".

Read Articles 5-7, 14, and 20-24

([http://www.wunrn.com/reference/pdf/African\\_Charter\\_Human\\_Rights.pdf](http://www.wunrn.com/reference/pdf/African_Charter_Human_Rights.pdf))

Read the discussion of gendered language issues in the New Revised Standard Version and the Revised English Bible, "The NRSV and the REB: A Feminist Critique"

(<http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/oct1990/v47-3-article4.htm>)

### **All About Eve**

Starting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, archaeologists digging in Mesopotamia (Iraq, Kurdistan, eastern Syria, Jordan) and Egypt found 'parallel texts'—stories and laws that were clearly earlier than those found in the Bible, but which also showed many similarities, some far too close to be coincidental. Noah's ark, the creation of the world from 'deeps', the wicked snake who wrecks humanity's chances for a kind of immortality—all these parallels and more have enriched our understanding of the Bible immeasurably.

I. The story of the creation of humanity occurs in Gen 1-4, and comes from two distinct 'sources': the Priests of the postexilic period (6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> C BCE) wrote Gen 1-2:4a; the so-called Yahwist, a person writing during the Iron Age, possibly in a royal court in Judah, is responsible for the story of Eve and the Snake, and this is actually the earlier story. Both sources incorporate elements from other nations' goddess mythology and apply them to Eve, accounting for her incredible power and their negative view of it (ancient Israel and Judah often competed for resources against goddess worshipping communities in the rich valley areas).

#### *II. The Priestly Account (Gen 1:-2:4a)*

- Parallels the Babylonian Creation Epic "Enuma Elish"

- Tiamat, mother-goddess of salt water, becomes Tehom, the "Deeps" in Gen 1:2

- "Spirit of the Lord" = mighty ("god-awful") wind, grammatically feminine in gender; swoops and hovers over water like a mother bird over nest

- In Babylonian epic,

-humanity is created as slaves for the gods

-humanity made from blood of a slain traitor god mixed with dust from the steppe, mixed together by a mother goddess

- In Genesis version, both male and female are listed as equivalent versions of the divine image (1:27)

- Paradise = entirely peaceful and vegetarian (vv. 29-30)

### III. *The Yahwist's Account – An Explanation (aetiology) of Human Condition*

- God viewed anthropomorphically

- Paradise envisioned in Mesopotamia (4 rivers)

- Parallels to creation via pottery found in Mesopotamia and Egypt (2:7): this kind of creation is usually performed by a male god (goddesses usually just give birth)

- "rib" of Gen 2:22 = "side", on Babylonian parallel

- Snakes important in ANE goddess and fertility cults; symbols of wisdom and sexuality

- Snake parallel in Gilgamesh Epic from Mesopotamia (snake steals plant of eternal youth)

- Gen 3:16 : To the woman he said, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."

Archaeologist Carol M. Meyers claims that the 'curse' in Genesis 3 is a reference only to the difficulties of giving birth in antiquity, especially in a community of subsistence farming where many children are needed in order to survive. She believes we should read "I will greatly increase your pregnancies" instead of "I will greatly multiply your pain".

Other scholars have shown that 'your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you' could just as easily be translated as "your desire shall be for your man, and he shall be similar to you". The same word in ancient Hebrew for 'man' also means 'husband'; similarly, the word for 'woman' also means 'wife' in appropriate contexts. The same word that means 'rule over' *also* means 'to be like, or similar' (they are 'sound-alikes', like *their* and *there*).

- 3:20 : "Mother of all Living" = wordplay on Sumerian creation story about "Lady of the Rib": Is this the *real* message of this text, that the one who is our Big Mama (mother of

all living) is *also* the Bringer of Death (just like creating-destroying gods and goddesses of other traditions)? Makes sense—Cosmic Mother is in charge of it all.

IV. *Suggestions for Further Reading ( I know you are excited to learn more!)*

- James Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the OT*
- A. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*
- \_\_\_\_\_, *The Gilgamesh Epic and OT Parallels*
- John Phillips, *Eve: The History of an Idea*
- Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve*
- Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*
- Samuel Terrien, *Til' the Heart Sings*
- Diane Wolkstein & S.N. Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*
- Peggy Day, ed. *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*
- Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*
- Gary A. Anderson, *The Genesis of Perfection: Adam and Eve in Jewish and Christian Imagination*

***Discussion Questions for Session Five:***

1. What do you think of the problems involved in translating the Bible or any other holy book in an unfamiliar language? Are you more suspicious of texts used to degrade women than you were before today's readings?
2. Is woman's main role in creation to be a bearer of children? Reread Genesis 2 and 3 carefully!
3. Should virginity be the major criterion for a woman's worth? What about *male* virginity? How do you react to the St. Paul's view in the New Testament in 1 Timothy 2:12-15?:

I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

4. How has Woman (Eve) been blamed for the entrance of Sin into the world? Does this view still hold in your religion? Can you think of ways to respond to those assertions based on your readings?

5. Do you find any attributes in Mother Eve which are worthy of emulation?

6. Might male circumcision, as practiced among Christians and Jews, be considered a male counterpart to religiously inspired female genital mutilation? If FGM is forbidden based on Human Rights considerations of over all integrity of the body, does that mean circumcision should also be forbidden? Should individuals be allowed to choose for themselves? For their children?

## Session 6: Prohibition from Functions: What's Blood Got to Do with it?

### *Readings for Session 6*

Navigate to the WUNRN website and choose 'Factual Aspects', F2, "prohibition from functions"/ 'Social Disqualification' (<http://www.wunrn.com/factual/aspects/ff2.htm>) and read the preliminary statement. Then, under Women's NGO's, choose "Women's Learning Partnership", and choose "Resources/Leadership Facts and Figures" (<http://www.learningpartnership.org/resources/facts/leadership>).

Navigate to the article by Carole R. Fontaine, "A Heifer from Thy Stable': On Goddesses and the Status of Women in the Ancient Near East" (<http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=1945&C=1782>)

Read the following passages in the Bible: Leviticus 12:1-7, Leviticus 15, Leviticus 17:10-14; Leviticus 20:18, and in the New Testament, read Luke 8:43-48 (<http://www.anova.org/sev/>)

### **Blood is Life**

*For the life of the flesh is in the blood...* Leviticus 17:11

Consider this passage from the Book of Genesis, where God speaks to Noah after the flood:

Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life. Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind. NRSV Gen 9:3-6

The ancient Hebrew word for 'life', 'life-force', sometimes less accurately translated as 'soul' (really a NT concept, as the term is used in most Christian communities), is *nephesh*. Originally it referred to the feeding, breathing throat of a being, that body part most intimately connected to the experience of breathing. When a throat is slit, animal or human, blood gushes out and death follows. So, for ancient Hebrews thinking about life and death, health and safety, blood becomes a powerful symbol because it contains the life force or *nephesh*. This view is reflected in the passage from Genesis where humans are now allowed to eat animals, but *not* the animal's blood, or an animal whose blood was not shed properly (as in kosher butchering). This focus on the 'life-in-the-blood' also accounts for the role blood plays in rituals of sacrifice: it was thought to be THE most powerful thing one could offer, and a sort of transmitter of prayers into the sacred realm of the gods.

Now, consider the problems that this view of blood = life = power must have caused when thinking about the normal biological processes of the female body, most especially in the realm of fertility! Normally, someone who bled in the ancient world was at risk for infection or death. Anyone ill with something suspected of being contagious was excluded from normal daily activities and isolated to contain infection. Without an understanding of how disease is transmitted, ancient people drew what conclusions they could: stay away from the sick, and keep blood (and other bodily fluids) inside its proper boundaries. Sadly, since no one really knew where illness came from, it was usually thought of as the punishment for sin, or a demonic attack (the ancient world's 'code' for diseases modern people term 'mental illness').

Women's functional reproductive blood, then, posed a problem for the purity system developed by the ancient Hebrews from ideas that they shared with many cultures. Women regularly bled—but did *NOT* die of it (usually). Are women, then, made unclean from their menses and birth-blood, or are they especially powerful and connected at the most deep level to the life-force, the *nephesh*? By the time of the rabbinic writings (4-7<sup>th</sup> centuries, CE), some thinkers had suggested that menstrual blood was in fact the corpse (also defiling in their purity system) of an unborn child, so that a menstruating woman was doubly unclean: first, she had a flow of blood, and secondly, that blood contained a dead human.

The ancient world was one in which the cycle of child-bearing placed great demands on the female body, and many women died giving birth. Naturally, this was always accompanied by significant blood loss. For ancient men considering the mysteries of female procreation, these aspects of female biology certainly looked like a 'curse' and were explained as a result of sin committed by Mother Eve. She could be saved of this sin of being born woman only through risking her life to give birth. Tomb evidence from the Bronze and Iron Ages in the Middle East shows that men routinely outlived women, giving them a chance to acquire greater knowledge and power.

The New Testament uses the purity system to show how uniquely free Jesus of Nazareth felt in his mission of healing and preaching. He did not discriminate against those with infectious diseases, congenital defects (even Jesus' disciples ask of the man born blind, 'Who sinned, this man or his parents?'), or any other kind of malaise, nor did he endorse the 'illness = punishment for sin' paradigm. His response to a woman who was labeled perpetually unclean by her society is stunning, given the social world from which he came. Faith, of course, is the real message of Luke 8:43-48, and it emphasizes the *active* role the woman took to overcome her illness by seeking a healer. First, she believes she can be helped; next, she does an uncommon thing in her society, by reaching out to touch a male. Finally, she speaks up for herself when questioned, although she is afraid. Jesus the Healer has the right of it when he says to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."

### ***Discussion Questions for Session Six***

1. How does your culture feel about the sight of blood? What does 'bloodshed' mean in your religion?
2. Do you feel cursed? Do you agree with feminist thinker Simone de Beauvoir's view that Woman's biology has been understood as something that exists to serve the species (a woman can be infertile, or have reproductive organs removed and live a perfectly normal life), whereas men exist for themselves? Do men make history because women are making and tending babies?
3. Is biology destiny? Have you been taught to resent your biology as a woman?
4. What do you think would happen in the modern workplace if all menstruating women were considered unclean? What would happen in the average home? Do you think ancient village life would have had the same problems created by the purity code?
5. When you look at the WUNRN materials concerning 'social disqualification', how many do you think come from a lingering sense of 'woman as impure'?
6. Are you surprised by the accomplishments around the world of women in leadership positions? Do you think some of them might have been menstrual during their times of leadership? Did this seem to affect the overall outcome of their work? Do you think they should have been prohibited from fulfilling their functions by the simple fact of them being women?
7. Were you surprised to read about women priestesses and wise women in the ancient world? Do you think their power was something that biblical authors tried to limit because it was not authorized by the Hebrew God? Can you think of other reasons why the writers of the Bible might have been hostile to women's leadership (see Judges 4-5 for a textual example of women's power, leadership, and the disorientation it causes for the males around them!).

**Homework:**

Navigate to the WUNRN website and choose 'Archives'. Select a month at random, and browse the article headings to see if you can find any entries where a religion speaks up on behalf of women in a situation that is NOT about their role as mothers. Navigate to the Appendix, and select Research Paper, "Women' Voices/Prophetic Voices: Women as Prophets/Women as Other in the Hebrew Bible." Is the situation about the prohibition of women from religious functions better or worse than you thought?

## Session Seven: Inadequacy of Instruments: Women in the Biblical Laws

### *Readings for Session Seven:*

Navigate to the WUNRN site and choose Reference Documents; in Reference Documents choose [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#)

Navigate to the Scripture Website (<http://www.anova.org/sev/>) and read the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, and Deuteronomy 5. In the New Testament, read the Sermon on the Mount and following discussion of the biblical laws, Matthew 5-6

Navigate to the Appendix and choose Research Papers, 'Triple Talaq in India' for an overview on Muslim divorces in some parts of the modern world.

### **Women in the Biblical Laws**

In the ancient world, it is the 'winners' and the elites (= males) who write the laws, even when some of those laws originated orally in village life (sometimes as proverbs, like 'Finders, keepers; losers, weepers' on found property, or 'A man's home is his castle' on privacy, from Anglo Saxon legal proverbs). When a law is made, it is a sign that either the activity being forbidden or limited is *actually* going on and must be dealt with, or an indication that law-makers were concerned about a particular set of activities, whether they were actually happening or not (like 'flag-burning' in the United States). So, it is NOT in fact possible to tell whether laws in the Bible were actually enforced, and often we see laws from much earlier or later times set into narratives that originally did not include them. Hence, it is best to think of biblical law as reflecting an 'ideal state', according to the mind of its makers, whether in existence at the time of the writing, or added in later from another text. This explains why there are two different sets of the Ten Commandments, one in Exodus placed in the narrative of exit from Egypt, and one in Deuteronomy, which envisions Moses addressing the Israelites as they cross into the land of Canaan. In fact, analysis of the Hebrew shows that it is much later than that of Moses' time, and most researchers place the composition of Deuteronomy in Judah of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, BCE.

Many other countries surrounding biblical Israel had law codes of their own which pre-dated biblical laws by many centuries. The treatment of women in these codes is most instructive for helping us understand the Bible's treatment of women's legal issues. Very often the legal concerns are the same, because women, as persons who produce children but usually do not inherit themselves, fall between 'family law' (inheritance and prerogatives) and 'property law' (dispositions of slaves and other assets). The Bible's laws are no worse than those of other ancient Near Eastern countries, and sometimes are much better in their treatment of those with less power or rights. We find some special attention given to the plight of slaves and female war captives in the Hebrew Bible, places where the Israelite view of 'ethics' was much more universal than that of other cultures. For example, in Mesopotamia, a person who does *NOT* turn in a runaway slave is punished; in ancient Israel, a person who *DOES* turn in the runaway



(Israelite) slave is punished. Women taken as slaves in wartime cannot simply be sexually exploited by their masters; such relationships are sternly regulated for the woman's protection.

Laws in the Bible come in two types: 'Thou shalt not...' (apodictic law, which is valid at all times and places) and 'If X happens....., then you shall make Y judgment' (casuistic or 'case law', which only applies in a particular situation). The Ten Commandments are clearly apodictic laws thought of as binding in all situations; laws from the 'Covenant Code' which follows Exodus 20 are case laws for an agricultural society. Consider the following casuistic laws from this passage in Exodus 21

When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman's husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine. If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

When a slaveowner strikes the eye of a male or female slave, destroying it, the owner shall let the slave go, a free person, to compensate for the eye. If the owner knocks out a tooth of a male or female slave, the slave shall be let go, a free person, to compensate for the tooth. (NRSV, vv. 22-27)

Clearly, these laws are linked by the emphasis on 'tooth' (a *catchword*, a literary convention that helped ancient writers organize their work into topics), and the are casuistic in that they deal with specific situations, a pregnant woman who miscarries because of an injury done her during a fight, and a slave who has been permanently wounded. Note well: this law imagines that a miscarriage can happen but 'no further harm follows', and the husband of the woman is compensated as though the miscarried child was merely property. The woman's feelings we do not know. But, should there be an injury to the woman beyond her miscarriage (especially if the injury might limit her future fertility or attractiveness to her husband), then the culprit is injured in just the same way as he injured the pregnant woman. This 'law of revenge', then, was NEVER imagined to be the common form of justice, and applies in the special case of the pregnant woman—who would rather have kept her baby that been compensated with an eye, no doubt. Slaves who are permanently disfigured by a violent master are to be set free; in Mesopotamia, whoever harms a slave in such a way must pay the slave's master. No compensation is given to the slave who remains in the same status.

Even with apodictic laws, it is necessary to engage in study and interpretation to understand them properly. It is important here to note that many scholars think that Exodus 20:15, "Thou shalt not steal" originally read "Thou shalt not steal *a person*" and was directed against the slave trade in the ancient world. Another key point about the Ten Commandments is that Exodus 20:13, "Thou shalt not *murder*" is the proper translation of the Hebrew word, NOT "Thou shalt not kill". Ancient biblical writers made a distinction between killing (a separate word from that in 20:13) which is

legitimate and socially sanctioned (like capital punishment) and ‘murder’ which is personal, and marked by planning and malicious intent.

### *Discussion Questions for Session 7*

1. What response did you have the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)? Did you feel that women’s issues and rights were given enough specific attention in this document?
2. What differences did you see in the Ten Commandments between Exodus and Deuteronomy? What might have accounted for those variations?
3. What do you think about finding women *included* in the list of a man’s ‘chattels’ that should never be coveted, and *excluded* from the list of those who get to rest on the Sabbath? Are you pleased to discover mothers get less religious time off than donkeys or slaves?
4. Do you think the Ten Commandments provide sufficient protection to women and girls from the many forms of violence facing them? Do the Ten Commandments provide sufficient protection for other groups in distress, like war captives, foreign immigrants, slaves, persons of different religion or sexuality? What about the social, economic and cultural rights of women and girls?
5. Do you think that the guidelines given in the Sermon on the Mount are an improvement on the Ten Commandments? (How are they an improvement?) What is still missing in Jesus’ sermon? Does the Sermon on the Mount address more of the social, economic and cultural rights of women and others?
6. Is it possible to understand Jesus’ view of divorce without also understanding the Jewish divorce customs of the time? Would this be an example of apodictic or casuistic law?
7. In the case of the pregnant woman whose miscarriage was caused by an injury, what do YOU think would be an appropriate ‘universal law’ about pregnancy?
8. Are you surprised to learn that the Hebrew has a word for ‘killing’ (h-r-g) *and* a word for ‘murder’ (r-ts-ch)? Does this change your understanding of the command concerning the taking of life?

## Session Eight: Recovering Our Legacies

### *Readings for Session Eight*

Navigate to the Scripture website (<http://www.anova.org/sev/>) and read the Stories of the Queen of Sheba:

1 Kings 10:1-10, 13

Matthew 12:42, Luke 11.31; Acts 8.27

Quran: Sura XXVII (27): 'The Ant'

### **Rediscovering the Queen of Sheba**

The Queen of Sheba (from somewhere in Arabia or the Horn of Africa) is one of the few women to appear in all three monotheistic Scriptures, so she is a shared asset for women from Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths. Yet, beyond her sexualized treatment in the media—whether in a Circus, a Fair, or Hollywood epics—we seldom hear of her from male religious leaders. Could it be Sheba has a powerful gift for us, one that might make male elites uncomfortable?

It is important to note some basic features of the Sheba story: she is a woman ruling alone; she has males who serve her politically; she makes a harsh and dangerous journey; she asks tough questions; she leads her people by avoiding wars through treaties and trade negotiations; and she returns, unmarried, to continue her rule after visiting Solomon. Nowhere do we find bedroom scenes, opulent female immodesty, or demonic seductions, though all of these would be added to the Sheba legend as her story continued in folklore in later centuries. We might ask WHY the later storytellers were so keen to introduce a sexual aspect into Sheba's visit with Solomon—was it impossible for them to see a woman leader without also thinking her power must come from her sexuality (rather than her fabulous wealth, which is the story all the Scriptures tell)?

Sheba presents a dangerous variation to patriarchy: the clear evidence of a woman ruling without male oversight! For this reason, women of the monotheistic faiths need to take her seriously as a biblical role model. A woman sure of herself, comfortable with her power, and acting as mother of her people may expect to earn a proverb: 'Who does she think she is, the Queen of Sheba?!'

### **Discussion Questions for Session Eight**

1. Which Sheba story did you like the best? Why?
2. Which Sheba story did you like the least? Why?

3. Were you surprised to see Sheba's treatment in the NT as the 'Queen of the South' who is smarter (in recognizing Jesus as 'something greater than Solomon') than all the religious males of Jesus' culture? Why do you think she is connected to the 'sign of Jonah'?
4. What do you think about the role of the Jinn in The Ant Sura? Are you shocked to find them in a monotheistic iconoclastic text? (In later folklore, Sheba's mother was a full Jinn, but Sheba decides to rule in the human world instead of among her mother's people.)
5. Look at The Ant passage carefully: do you notice that Sheba sits on a 'glorious throne' that is the same as the throne of 'Allah, mentioned earlier in the Sura? What conclusions might you draw from that?
6. Sheba is noted for her wise speech, smart questions, and quick wit. Can you think of other women in Scriptures who exemplify the same traits? How about women leaders in the modern world?
7. What do you think of Sheba's views of diplomacy and war as strategies for rulership? Do you think it was her consultative management style convinced her male followers?

## Session Nine: Where Do We Go From Here?

### WUNRN Student: “Do Human Rights *need* God?”

Hopefully, by the completion of the Eight Sessions above, you now have a sense both of how concepts of Human Rights applies to women and girls, and an enlarged view of the activity of interpretation of sacred texts. You have seen that often the rights and needs of women and girls are not explicitly stated in ancient texts, and that when women *do* show up in these texts, they are fully subjected to patriarchal stereotypes: the only good woman is a mother, and yet even that leads her to a certain degree of ‘uncleanness’ which disqualifies her from other social and cultural activities. It is impossible to believe that a compassionate deity authorized such unjust legal formulations, or that a sacred text like Genesis 1, which sees men and women as equally created in the Divine Image, intended the outcome of the oppression and dehumanization of women.

Part of the problem, of course, is that the concept of ‘the individual’ who has certain rights by nature (of being human and alive) is very foreign to the ancient world, where community consciousness was usually the deciding factor in ethical formulations. Individuals, men or women, were *all* supposed to sacrifice any individual yearnings to their approved social, economic roles. Socialization operated to secure the safe transfer of knowledge, property and power to the next generation; in such circumstances, no one had any basis for questioning the view of female biology as destiny, and this certainly shows in what we can say about the actual consciousness of ancient women. As one student put it, women only step out of line in the Bible when something has happened to take their place in the line away. They did not seem to be at all ‘feminist’ in any of the ways modern persons might describe that term, and we should beware of trying to import modern concepts into ancient texts.

However, our sensitivity to the differences between *then* and *now* does NOT mean that we are not allowed to critique and question sacred texts, and there are several ways to do this faithfully and respectfully. If we believe in a compassionate Source who undergirds all meaning, then we might answer our WUNRN student above: **Human Rights may not *need* God, but God certainly *needs* Human Rights!** Using a Human Rights paradigm to study the Bible and other sacred texts allows the Compassionate One to intervene to right the wrongs of patriarchy which have become part of the text because they were part of the culture out of which the text emerges.

One should always be open to the paradox of a compassionate ethic attempting to break open the patriarchal formulations of scripture. While it may seem like The Sotah is a perfectly miserable way of handling domestic violence, a close reading shows that *in fact* violence (by an outraged community or a crazy-jealous husband) is prevented because only God can execute the curse placed upon the woman. If she is fine after the ritual, then she has been proved innocent and God is her defender. We may find the Sotah deeply repugnant, but compared to stoning for adultery only suspected and never proved, it is the better strategy for safe-guarding the woman and her potential children.

We might make similar positive observations about situations of engagement, pregnancy, marriage and women's inheritance. The Rabbis who wrote the Commentary on the Law—the Mishnah, and the Talmuds—did not rest with simply enforcing age-old laws, some now outdated by new cultural circumstances. Instead, they interpreted freely in a community that did not silence its dissenting voices, so a fuller, more precise meaning was given to the legal practices. Pregnancy becomes a protected status; the counsel of a midwife on whether a baby was strong enough to be circumcised routinely over ruled what any male rabbi might say. A pregnant woman with a craving for pork (!), even on the great fast Day of Atonement, was to be given what she craved. Women were eventually able to inherit, and dispose of some of their property. Forced marriage in circumstances of rape was replaced by a crippling monetary fine paid to the girl's family: this way, no unscrupulous man could kidnap a rich man's daughter, rape her and then force her to marry him so he could get her fortune. Instead, the monetary fine assured that the rapist would NEVER have sufficient funds to contract a real marriage—his violent greed robbed him of the chance of ever having a legitimate sexual partner. In fact, the rabbinic writings go even further than many modern law codes: they were the first legal corpus in recorded history to recognize the fact of 'marital rape' and forbid it. (Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*). A woman has the 'right' to say NO, no matter who she is, even if the one she rejecting, is her husband. This is a 'human rights' legacy for women which comes to us through the vehicle of the Hebrew Bible.

Christianity has often demonized Jewish traditions in order to promote its own views and sell 'liberation' from the Law by means of the Gospel. As we have seen, this is not always fair to the earlier Hebrew formulations. In fact, Jesus has a lot more in common with his Jewish ancestors than he does with the Church 'Fathers' who replace them as the authorities after his death. Christianity which was looking for a Second Coming shortly after the death of Jesus and the destruction of the Second Jewish Temple by the Romans took a different view of sexuality from the Hebrew Bible's. For Christians living in the End Times, the activities of sexual gratification and reproduction were simply irrelevant to the world they thought they would be leaving soon. So, motherhood becomes the only possibility for salvation for a sexually active woman, and men are only to marry if they cannot contain their sexual desires any other way. Both sexes are exhorted to maintain their virgin status, and Mary, Mother of Jesus, eventually becomes the paradox that no woman can ever hope to emulate: a virgin AND a mother! While religious virginity had a real benefit for women who did not want to be mothers by providing them with a formal role as nuns, for average believers, real life kept interrupting the concept of purity that the New Testament espoused.

As a religion suffering early persecution of its members, places where the NT had been truly egalitarian were modified to appeal to pagan patriarchal audiences and powers in an attempt to show that Christians could be good and normal citizens who would not upset the status quo. Teachings about justice and equality became 'spiritualized' and the staggering openness of the Gospels to change and growth was gradually diminished. Ultimately, as Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire, negative views of women which had found their way into the sacred text were inscribed now as

the law and official point of view of the Empire. The effects of this formalization of misogynist attitudes are felt in our world even today.

***So, what is to be done?***

Sacred texts will always be part of our discourse about ethics and meaning, because they are foundational documents for Western culture, whether we believe in them or not. We must learn to know what is actually *in* Scripture so we can protest against its misuse. We need to ‘write ourselves in’ where we find we are not addressed or have been reduced to our old status of chattel. One way to do this has been explored by feminist biblical scholars, based on the rabbinic tradition of filling in the gaps via *midrash*. *Midrash* means a profound search of and interaction with a particular text or tradition: it can be legal, fanciful, narrative, poetic, or heavy-handed. It seeks to add in what was *not* said, to clarify what *was* said, and to suggest ways we might interpret further, while staying in harmony of the text. *Women’s Midrash*, which does not claim to be ‘scholarship’ or exact translation, follows the rabbinic passion for making the text relevant to the communities of the present. Practiced by Jewish and Christian feminists (and those who are neither), it is a burgeoning category of textual reflection, and it is highly recommended (take a look at Ellen Frankel’s *The Five Books of Miriam*, for a woman’s retelling of the Genesis-Deuteronomy).

In the spirit of a Woman’s Human Rights Midrash, I offer the following text based on the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy:

**If Women Had Written the Ten Commandments...**

**WUNRN Chapel for International Women’s Day, 2006  
Andover Newton Theological School**

**Note:** *Some feminist commentators note that women are not directly addressed in the Ten Commandments, nor are their particular concerns dealt with—so we take the opportunity of International Women’s Day to advance this hallowed text into partnership with women...*

**Divrey-HaNashim: The (10) Words of the Women**

1. Thou shalt have as many metaphors of the Divine as it takes.
2. Thou shalt create joyously whatever thou wilt, if it harms none.
3. Honor thy care givers, and forgive them when they repent (for you too will make mistakes while giving care).
4. Remember the time of meditation, to keep it holy, that your days may be long in your land.

5. Thou shalt not sleep around, nor have unprotected sex nor procreate carelessly.
6. Thou shalt not engage in hateful speech or acts, even in God=s name.
7. Thou shalt not be envious, nor be rich when others are starving.
8. Thou shalt not make thy living as a thief (investment banker, trafficker, politician, etc....)
9. Thou shalt not commit murder, nor shalt thou hit, nor commit any acts of violence except in self-defense.
10. Thou shalt not destroy the ecosystem, nor stand idly by in the presence of suffering.

**Of course, women would never stop there, so....**

P.S.: #11. Thou shalt take off thy shoes after we have just mopped up!

\* \* \* \* \*

*Discussion Questions for Session Nine*

1. Have you ever heard of Midrash before?
2. Are there texts that you think deserve a midrash written by women (or human rights activists)?
3. Why don't you and your group write one? (Don't forget to send it to us!)
4. What do you want to study or do next, based on what you have learned in this course?



## Appendix One: Group Readings by Session

### ***Session One: What is Religion?***

None; surf the WUNRN website

### ***Session Two: Human Rights Basic Documents***

EWL position paper on Religion and Women's Rights

(([http://ewl.horus.be/SiteResources/data/MediaArchive/policies/Women %20Diversity/rwh\\_06\\_en.pdf](http://ewl.horus.be/SiteResources/data/MediaArchive/policies/Women_%20Diversity/rwh_06_en.pdf))

United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights: Go to the WUNRN website, and read the base document: [http://www.wunrn.com/reference/pdf/univ\\_dec\\_hum\\_right.pdf](http://www.wunrn.com/reference/pdf/univ_dec_hum_right.pdf)

### ***Group Readings for Session Three: Are Women and Girls a Special Case?***

Navigate to the WUNRN website, and choose: REFERENCE DOCUMENTS/

[Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief](#)

[Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women \(CEDAW\)](#)

[CEDAW Optional Protocol](#)

### ***Group Readings for Session Four: Biblical Legal Rulings Versus a Human Rights Perspective***

Navigate to the WUNRN website, choose Reference Documents and read

- [Crimes of Honor- UN Resolution 2004-19 languages:](#)
- [Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women](#)
- [Glossary Of Violence Against Women](#)
- Navigate to the Appendix and read Student Research “Honor Killings in Turkey”

In the Bible, read the Book of Numbers, Chapter 5, about the ritual referred to as ‘The Sotah’ (the falling, as of a baby falling out of a cursed uterus). Navigate to The Bible and Quran website (<http://www.anova.org/sev/>) to find complete scholarly and standard translations of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Quran.

### ***Readings for Session Five: On Sexuality, Virginity, Motherhood and Woman's Role in Sin***

Navigate to the Appendix and read Student Research, “Virginity in the Bible”

Read Genesis 1-4 (<http://www.anova.org/sev/>), with special attention to the creation of woman in Gen 1:27 and Gen 3.

Navigate to the WUNRN website, choose Reference Documents and select “Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa”. Read Articles 5-7, 14, and 20-24 ([http://www.wunrn.com/reference/pdf/African\\_Charter\\_Human\\_Rights.pdf](http://www.wunrn.com/reference/pdf/African_Charter_Human_Rights.pdf) )

Read the discussion of gendered language issues in the New Revised Standard Version and the Revised English Bible, “The NRSV and the REB: A Feminist Critique” (<http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/oct1990/v47-3-article4.htm>)

### ***Readings for Session 6: Social Disqualification: What’s Blood Got to Do With It?***

Navigate to the WUNRN website and choose ‘Factual Aspects’, F2, “prohibition from functions”/ ‘Social Disqualification’ (<http://www.wunrn.com/factual/aspects/ff2.htm> ) and read the preliminary statement. Then, under Women’s NGO’s, choose “Women’s Learning Partnership”, and choose “Resources/Leadership Facts and Figures (<http://www.learningpartnership.org/resources/facts/leadership> )

Navigate to the article by Carole R. Fontaine, “ ‘A Heifer from Thy Stable’: On Goddesses and the Status of Women in the Ancient Near East” (<http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=1945&C=1782> )

Read the following passages in the Bible: Leviticus 12:1-7, Leviticus 15, Leviticus 17:10-14; Leviticus 20:18, and in the New Testament, read Luke 8:43-48 (<http://www.anova.org/sev/>)

### ***Readings for Session Seven: Inadequacy of Instruments***

Navigate to the WUNRN site and choose Reference Documents; in Reference Documents choose [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#)

Navigate to the Scripture Website (<http://www.anova.org/sev/>) and read the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, and Deuteronomy 5. In the New Testament, read the Sermon on the Mount and following discussion of the biblical laws, Matthew 5-6

Navigate to the Appendix and choose Research Papers, ‘Triple Talaq in India’ for an overview on Muslim divorces in some parts of the modern world.

### ***Readings for Session Eight: Recovering Our Legacies***

Navigate to the Scripture website (<http://www.anova.org/sev/>) and read the Stories of the Queen of Sheba:

1 Kings 10:1-10, 13

Matthew 12:42, Luke 11.31; Acts 8.27

Quran: Sura XXVII (27): 'The Ant'

***The Following Appendices are listed as separate documents on the website!***

**Appendix Two: Student Paper “Honor Killings in Turkey”**

**Appendix Three: Student Paper “The Rape of Dinah: An Historical and Cultural Critique of Virginity in the Ancient Near East”**

**Appendix Four: Student Paper “Women’s Voices, Prophetic Voices: Women as Prophets, Women as Other”**

**Appendix Five: Student Paper “Talaq-Talaq-Talaq: Women Suffering in India Because of Misuse of Triple Talaq”**

**Appendix Six: Order of Worship for an International Women’s Day Celebration**

**Appendix Seven: Electronic Resources for the Study of Quran and Hadith**

### **Appendix Seven: Links for Quranic Research on the Internet**

<http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/quran/>

This site by the Muslim Students Association at the University of Southern California is one of the best, in my opinion: it has fully searchable database and gives 3 different translations of the Quran (in English), laid out together so you can compare the translators' assumptions.

<http://web.umar.edu/~msaumr/topics/>

A Topical index of the Quran in English from the Muslim Students Association of the University of Missouri-Rolla

<http://www.equran.org/mp3main.html>

Listen to and memorize Quran on-line in Arabic; also includes translations

<http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/reference/searchhadith.html>[http://www.answering-christianity.com/hadith\\_search.htm](http://www.answering-christianity.com/hadith_search.htm)

Ah, at last: a scholarly ahadith search engine. (Western folk: Hadith, or a story of the Prophet, used to guide ethical and daily decision-making process).

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/HolKora.html>

Basic e-text.

[http://www.islamonline.net/English/In\\_Depth/Doha\\_Conference/views/05.shtml](http://www.islamonline.net/English/In_Depth/Doha_Conference/views/05.shtml)

Islam On Line (sponsored by al Jazeera) has wonderful archives; this is the link to Prof. Farooq Hassan's paper from the Doha Conference on the Family.