

Roles of Women in the Old Testament

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The final poem in the Book of Proverbs begins: "Who shall find a valiant woman?" The answer? Anyone who opens the Old Testament! What's more, the reader will discover this valiant woman in all kinds of occupations, functioning in a variety of roles—some expected, some surprising. Several things should be noted. First of all, women appear in at least as many different kinds of roles as do men, even though they may not all be the same roles. Secondly, women often appear together. There is a bond between women; their lives are woven together. Thirdly, women play a significant part in the story in all periods, from the primeval stories of creation through the "patriarchal" stories, into and out of the land, into and out of exile. Finally, women function as an image of God.

Religious and Political Leaders

Women appear as religious leaders in the Old Testament. At the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, the central event of Israel's history, the prophet Miriam leads the song of praise: "Sing to the Lord who is gloriously triumphant; horse and chariot God has cast into the sea" (Exod 15:21). The preceding song, which has the same refrain, is sung by Moses and the Israelites (Exod 15:1). It is Miriam, however, who is identified as the leader of song.

Miriam continues in a leadership role in the wilderness community. The relationship among leaders eventually becomes a problem. Miriam and Aaron challenge Moses' leadership. The ostensible cause for the challenge is Moses' choice of a wife. The content of the complaint, however, has to do with prophecy. "Is it through Moses alone that the Lord speaks? Does God not speak through us also?" (Num 12:2). God's answer to the challenge establishes Moses as the chief leader of God's people.

Miriam's leadership, however, is genuine. Her challenge to Moses' leadership is punished, as is every other challenge to Moses' leadership. Her challenge is not turned back because Miriam is a woman; Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and their followers are punished much more severely for speaking against Moses (Num 16). God's statement in response to Miriam's challenge does not deny the presence of other prophets—"should there be a prophet among you"—but only asserts the pre-eminence of Moses—"face to face I speak to him" (Num 12:6-8). In the wilderness Moses is *the* leader; all other leaders are second to him.

A few centuries later, during the period of the judges, Deborah appears as prophet and judge (Judg 4:4). The judges of that period functioned both as religious and political leaders. Their primary task was often to free the people from enemies by military means. At the time of Deborah, the people were being oppressed by Jabin, king of Hazor. Deborah called Barak and appointed him army general to attack Sisera, Jabin's

general. Barak, however, refused to go without Deborah. Deborah not only went along; she decided the time and place of attack. Barak was indeed successful, but it fell to a woman, Jael, wife of Heber, to kill the general Sisera.

Deborah thus fills the role of judge in much the same way that Jephthah and Gideon do. Even though she does not actually lead the army in battle, she appoints the general and makes the military decisions. In addition, she seems to have another function, which no other major judge except Samuel has: she functions as a prophet and arbiter of disputes. "The Israelites came to her for judgment" (Judg 4:5).

Both Miriam and Deborah function in positions of religious leadership. Miriam is a secondary leader, responsible to a man in the top position; Deborah is the primary leader, with a man responsible to her. There is no predisposition to prefer one arrangement over the other. The situation determines the arrangement.

Vulnerable Heroes

Another role in which we find women of the Old Testament is the role of the hero-savior. Two such women appear in the Book of Judges; two appear in post-exilic books.

In the Book of Judges, two women save their people by killing the oppressor. In the story of Deborah (Judg 4-5) that we considered earlier, the hero is Jael, wife of Heber. Sisera, the enemy general, flees after his defeat to the tent of Jael. She invites him to come in, and she soothes him with extravagant hospitality. "He asked for water, she gave milk" (Judg 5:25). But when Sisera goes to sleep, Jael takes a tent-peg and hammers it through his head. Thus the enemy was slain; thus the land was at rest for forty years.

A nameless woman in the same book also kills the enemy leader. When Abimelech, illegitimate son of Gideon, takes the kingship at Shechem and begins to oppress the people, all the people of the city of Thebez flee into a tower in the middle of the city. "But a certain woman cast the upper part of a millstone down on Abimelech's head, and it fractured his skull. He immediately called his armor-bearer and said to him, 'Draw your sword and dispatch me, lest they say of me that a woman killed me.' So his attendant ran him through and he died" (Judg 9:53-54)-Abimelech's attempt to save his name is unsuccessful, however. Centuries later, after David has arranged the death of Bathsheba's husband, David's army general Joab comments in his report of Uriah's death: "Who killed Abimelech, son of Jerubbaal? Was it not a woman who threw a millstone down on him from the wall above?" (2 Sam 11:21).

In a story written after the Babylonian Exile, the widow Judith also saves her people by killing the enemy general. The Jewish leaders have given up hope because of the enemy siege. They have given God a time limit in which to send rain, otherwise they plan to surrender. Judith, after scolding them for their faint-heartedness, announces that

she has a plan. She entrusts herself to God in prayer and goes to the enemy camp. There, using her beauty and wit as primary weapons, she seduces Holofernes, and when he is dead drunk, beheads him. Thus a woman saves Israel by her trust in God and her courage.

Finally, Esther, another queen, also saves her people from genocide. She risks her life in approaching the king without being summoned. Then she invites both the king and the archenemy to two banquets. At the second, she reveals the enemy plot to the king. The tables are turned, and the enemies suffer what they had planned to inflict on the Jews. As Esther's uncle Mordecai told her, "Perhaps it was for this very reason that you were made queen—to save your people" (Esth).

Here we have four women who deliver the people through courage and wit. Four women who are redeemers.

Heroic Maids

One group of women seems to be utterly without influence: maids. This group, however, also affects the story significantly.

Three maids function as mothers of patriarchal children. Hagar, maid of Sarah, is the mother of Abraham's first son, Ishmael (Gen 16). Bilhah and Zilpah, maids of Rachel and Leah, also bear sons to a patriarch. Like Hagar, they too are pawns in the struggle of a barren wife. Each of them is mother to two of Israel's tribes. Dan and Naphtali are Bilhah's sons; Gad and Asher are Zilpah's sons. When Jacob fears Esau's violence against him and his family, the maids are set up as buffers. "Jacob saw Esau coming with four hundred men, so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two maidservants, putting the maids and their children first..." (Gen 33:1-2). Invisible, expendable, yet they mother one-third of Israel's tribes.

Three other maids play significant parts in the ongoing story of God's people. At the time of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, the Arameans capture a little girl who becomes the maid of the wife of Naaman, the army commander. Naaman is struck with leprosy. His illness seems incurable. But the maid initiates the miracle. She says to Naaman's wife: "If only my master would present himself to the prophet in Samaria, he would cure him of his leprosy" (2 Kgs 5:3). Naaman goes to Israel, contacts Elisha, and is cured. The prophet wins the glory; the story depends on the word of a maid.

In the story of Tobit, Raguel's daughter Sarah is afflicted by a demon who kills her husbands on the wedding night. She has lost seven husbands to this demon. Tobit's son Tobiah, in obedience to his father and the angel Raphael, becomes Sarah's eighth husband. Tobiah exorcises the demon and he and his bride pray for deliverance, according to Raphael's instructions. Raguel, however, does not know this. Fearing he has lost his eighth son-in-law, he digs a grave and then, unable to

face the possible tragedy, asks his wife to send a maid to see whether Tobiah is alive or dead. "She sent the maid who lit a lamp, opened the door, went in, and found [Tobiah and Sarah] sound asleep together. The maid went out and told the girl's parents that Tobiah was alive and that there was nothing wrong" (Tob 8:12-14). The first healing of a story that centers on healing is discovered and reported by a maid.

Another maid, almost invisible in the story, plays a significant part in the deliverance of God's people. When the widow Judith goes to the enemy camp, "the maid who was in charge of all her things" (Jdt 8:9) went with her. The two women left the city, walked across the valley, and encountered the Assyrian outpost. They were taken into custody and eventually established in the Assyrian camp. Judith and the maid go out early every morning for prayer. When the crucial night arrives, the maid goes ahead of Judith to Holofernes' tent and spreads out fleece on which Judith may recline. The maid waits outside the bedroom door as Judith decapitates the helpless Holofernes. Then Judith "came out and handed over the head of Holofernes to her maid, who put it into her food pouch; and the two went off together as they were accustomed to do for prayer" (Jdt 13:9-10). Then the two women return to the city and announce their victory. The story of Judith is a story of two women who are heroes. Neither could have accomplished the feat without the other.

Wisdom Woman

In the Wisdom literature another woman appears, Wisdom Woman. In Proverbs she invites the simple to her banquet. She sings that she was begotten and given birth by God, that she was not only present at creation but was creation's architect. She is the delight of God; she delights in human beings. All who find her find life (cf. Prov 8). According to Ben Sira (Sirach 24) she came forth from the mouth of God, and after roaming the earth, pitched her tent in Jerusalem. She is the word of God and the law of God. In the Book of Wisdom (Wis 7-8) we see her even more clearly. She is the reflection of God's goodness, the mirror of God's power, the aura of God's might. She can do all things; she renews all things. It is she who sanctifies people and makes them friends of God. It is she who gives people immortality. She is the image of God.

Conclusion

There are many other women in many other roles who deserve attention: wives and mothers like Eve, Hannah, Moses' mother; house managers like Sarah and Edna (Tobit); political leaders like Bathsheba, Jezebel, Athaliah; hosts like Rahab; teachers like Tobit's grandmother and the mother of the Maccabees; victims like Jephthah's daughter and David's daughter Tamar; competent women like Naomi and Tobit's wife Anna.

Who shall find a valiant woman? It is impossible to narrow the vision of women in the Old Testament to a few images, a few roles. A few constants should, however, be

noted. Women appear together, for good or ill: Deborah and Jael, Sarah and Hagar, the mothers of Jacob's children, Judith and her maid. Women have a dramatic effect on the story: Naaman's wife's maid and the woman who killed Abimelech. Women function in primary roles like Deborah and secondary roles like Miriam. Women as well as men are an image of God.

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