

Women in Ancient Israel— From the Conquest to the Exile

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Preface by Joseph Tkach

In the previous article, we noted that the laws of Moses must be evaluated by New Testament values, because many of those laws were designed for a patriarchal culture. We cannot take the inequities of the laws of Moses as models for male-female relationships today—and certainly not as rules about the role of women in the church.

In this paper, the doctrinal team surveys additional Old Testament material about the role of women in ancient Israel. Although this survey does not directly address our question about the New Testament church, it does provide background and provide examples that may help us better understand what the New Testament says.

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The book of Joshua

After Moses died, Joshua led the Israelites into the land of Canaan, where God gave them military victories. A woman plays a prominent role in the beginning of the story. Joshua sent two men into Jericho to spy out the city, and they stayed at “the house of a prostitute named Rahab” (Josh. 2:1).¹ When the king wanted to arrest the spies, Rahab hid them and lied to the king’s agents.

Rahab then told the spies of her faith in the God of Israel: “I know that the LORD has given this land to you.... The LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below” (vv. 9, 11). She asked the Israelites to spare her, her parents, her siblings, and their families, and the spies agreed. She helped them escape the city and suggested a strategy for them to avoid the Canaanite soldiers.

¹ Some people wonder if Rahab was really a prostitute, or merely an innkeeper. But the law of Moses permitted prostitution, and there is no reason to think that this Canaanite woman had a higher standard of morality. The New Testament remembers her as “Rahab the prostitute,” and praises her faith but not her occupation. A person that is exemplary in one area is not necessarily a good model in others.

Joshua told his soldiers to spare Rahab and her family when the city was destroyed (6:17, 25).

Whatever Rahab's faults might have been, she was a positive role model because she acknowledged the power of God. The New Testament praises her faith (Heb. 11:31) and her willingness to act on that faith (Jas. 2:25). She married Salmon and became an ancestor of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:5).²

Judges

After Joshua died, Israel was ruled by various judges. One judge was a woman. "Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading [KJV: judged] Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel...and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided" (Judg. 4:4-5). As prophetess, she had a religious role, and as judge, she had a civil role in a public place.³

Even in this patriarchal society, the people looked to her for leadership and wisdom, and the text does not imply any dishonor for Israel in being led by a female. She apparently became a judge because of her role as prophetess (most other judges rose to prominence through military victories).

As a prophetess, she gave orders from God: "She sent for Barak...and said to him, 'The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: "Go, take with you ten thousand men..."'" Barak refused to go unless Deborah went with him, and she agreed, but noted that the honor of victory would then go to a woman (v. 9).

Sisera, the Canaanite general, gathered his army to attack. Deborah ordered Barak, "Go! This is the day the LORD has given Sisera into your hands" (v. 14). So Barak attacked and killed the Canaanites. Sisera escaped to the tent of Jael, Heber's wife, who gave him a false sense of safety, then killed him while he slept (v. 21). Deborah and Barak then sang praises to God—a song that at least in parts was composed by Deborah (see 5:7). This is another religious role for her: public worship.

When God gave Deborah his words, she spoke with the highest possible

² Although it is possible that Matthew's Rahab is a different woman, it is not likely. Only one Rahab would be known to Matthew's readers, the one mentioned in Joshua.

³ Since various people came to the Palm of Deborah, it was a public place. Israel did not yet have any official government buildings.

authority. Although God could have led Israel through a man (as he usually did), in this case he chose to give authority to a woman, even though Barak was enough of a leader that he could raise an army of 10,000 men.⁴

Nevertheless, Deborah set a precedent for women to be able to sing praises in public, for women to tell men what God has commanded (cf. Matt. 28:10), and to have certain kinds of authority, even spiritual authority in some situations. But none of those roles necessitates ordination in the role of elder or pastor.

Another notable woman in Judges is the daughter of Jephthah, a man who made a vow to offer “whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites” (11:31). The exact nature of this offering is debated, but the daughter’s willingness to cooperate is not: “My father...you have given your word to the LORD. Do to me just as you promised, now that the LORD has avenged you of your enemies.”

Delilah, another famous woman from the book of Judges, set an example of deceit and betrayal. However, her example was no worse than what Samson did.

Judges 19 tells us about a man and his concubine who spent the night in Gibeah. In a story reminiscent of Sodom, the men of Gibeah wanted to have sexual relations with the man, but he gave them the concubine instead (vv. 22-25). They raped and abused her, and she died. The man cut her body into 12 pieces and sent them throughout Israel. The Israelites were outraged at what the people of Gibeah had done and they went to war, nearly exterminating the tribe of Benjamin (20:46-48). Then, to give wives to the surviving Benjamites, they killed everyone in Jabesh Gilead except for the virgin women; then they arranged for other Benjamites to seize women at a festival (21:10-22).”

The book ends with this sad commentary: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit” (v. 25). In other words, they lacked a king to maintain civil order and promote righteousness. They knew that this behavior, including the mistreatment of women, was scandalous. The text does not tell us which aspects of

⁴ Deborah was not working in the tabernacle—she was primarily a civil leader. We should also acknowledge that some of the prophets and judges would *not* be qualified to be church pastors. God can choose to speak through a young boy, but that does not mean that we should consider boys as likely candidates for ordination (a point made by Bruce McNair in his untitled paper posted at <http://churchwomen.tripod.com/a/bmcnair.htm>). We must look to the New Testament for the qualifications of a New Testament office.

the sordid story they wanted to correct—but later books show that a king was not the answer to the problem.

Ruth

The book of Ruth provides a positive example from the same time period. Ironically, the example of faith and loyalty was set by a woman from Moab, even though the Torah said that Moabites could not yet become part of the people of Israel (Deut. 23:3). Nevertheless, three generations later, a descendant of that Moabite woman became king of Judah and Israel.

Elimelech and Naomi moved to Moab, and their sons married Moabite women. After Elimelech and his sons died, Naomi and Ruth moved back to Bethlehem, where the nearest male relative was asked to serve as a “kinsman-redeemer.” As a widow without a male heir, Naomi owned rights to the field of Elimelech, and she could transfer it to the nearest male relative. However, he would also have the obligation to marry Ruth⁵ in order to create a son for the family of Elimelech, and the field would eventually be given to that son (4:5).

The nearest kinsman did not want that part of the duty, so Boaz (son of Rahab and descendant of Tamar) not only bought the field, he also “acquired Ruth...as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property” (v. 10). So his child, Obed, became the legal inheritor of Elimelech’s land.

Everyone in this story behaves honorably. Naomi is faithful to the family she married into; Ruth has the frequently quoted statement of loyalty to Naomi and her God (1:16-17). Boaz is a model of charity, good manners, and proper conduct. Even though everyone did what was right in their own eyes, some people did what was right—and it was from that family that the king eventually came.

Samuel & Kings

The next book explains how Israel received its first king. The story begins with a woman—Hannah. She desperately wanted a son, and “in bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the LORD. And she made a vow” to give her son to God (1:10-11). Eli, the high priest, accused her of being drunk, but she explained what she wanted, and he blessed her. God caused her to have a son, whom she named Samuel (v. 20).

⁵ Naomi was apparently past the age of child-bearing, so Ruth was the only appropriate widow.

Hannah is an example of a woman of faith, of prayer, of sincerity. She made a vow and kept it—and that became a pivotal moment in Israel’s history. After Samuel was weaned, she took him to the tabernacle, gave him to Eli, and brought sacrifices and offerings. She prayed again, praising God with a psalm that became part of the Bible and therefore part of Israel’s public worship (2:1-10). Hannah had an exemplary relationship with God that did not depend on men, but she did not have a leadership role.

1 Sam. 2:22 mentions women who served at the entrance to the tabernacle, but we do not know what role they had.

Women played a prominent role in the story of David. Like men, they were sometimes good, sometimes bad, and sometimes victims of injustice. Interesting character vignettes can be written for Michal, Abigail, Rizpah, Tamar, and Bathsheba, but they are not relevant to our study about women in leadership.⁶

The Queen of Sheba was a female leader in her own nation,⁷ and there is no hint in the Bible that her leadership was in any way inappropriate (1 Kings 10).

The widow of Zarephath was an exemplary woman from the region of Sidon. She fed the prophet Elijah, swore by the name of God, and received her son back from the dead (1 Kings 17). Similarly, the wealthy woman of Shunem gave Elisha room and board, and also received her son back from the dead (2 Kings 4).

Jezebel, also from Sidon, set an opposite example – of Baal worship, theft and murder. As queen of Israel, she was an influential civil and religious leader for evil. In the same way, Athaliah (although originally from Israel) usurped the throne in Judah and ruled for six years (2 Kings 11).

An example of good religious influence was given by Huldah, a prophetess. When Josiah’s workers found the book of the law and saw that they had violated the covenant with God, they asked Huldah about what they had found in the book, and she prophesied, giving authoritative words to the high priest and several men (2 Kings 22:14-20). There was nothing inappropriate about asking a woman about the Bible. Even though Jeremiah was then alive, he lived further away than Huldah did. The word of God delivered through a respected older woman, a prophetess,

⁶ Bathsheba played a key role in ensuring that Solomon would inherit the throne, but the story does not portray public leadership.

⁷ If the king was alive, then the queen was serving as an important emissary to the most powerful nation in the area.

was authoritative.

Later, a woman named Noadiah was hired to prophesy against Nehemiah (Neh. 6:14). Although she was a false prophetess, the fact that she was hired – and her name is mentioned – shows that the people respected the word of a prophetess just as much as the word of a prophet. Women in ancient Israel had less authority when it came to laws, customs, and Levitical worship, but they had equal authority when it came to prophecy.⁸

Other books

The book of Psalms is almost entirely written from a male (often a warrior's) perspective. When women are portrayed, they are usually mothers, and rarely in the role of worship. Psalm 68:11 is an exception: "The Lord gives a command; the women who bring the news [of military victory] are a great host" (v. 11).⁹ Women played tambourines in the worship processions (v. 24-25; cf. 148:12-13).¹⁰

In Proverbs, women are used to symbolize wisdom (the Hebrew word for "wisdom" is feminine¹¹), and are also used to symbolize folly and sin. The Proverbs 31 woman shows that Hebrew society praised highly competent women who were able to teach — but the context is in the family, not the religious assembly.

Near the end of the biblical period, approximately 478 B.C., a Jewish woman became queen in Persia. Although Esther hid her ethnic identity for a while, she eventually revealed it and thereby saved her people from genocide. However, she had limited formal authority. She was given access to the king only as a special favor, and the official decrees were his. However, she and Mordecai wrote an authoritative letter requiring Jews in the Persian Empire to celebrate a festival (Esther 9:29). "Esther's decree confirmed these regulations about Purim" (v. 32). She had authority over the Jewish people to institute a new religious festival.

⁸ False prophetesses are also mentioned in Ezek. 13:17-24; Isa. 8:3 mentions a true prophetess.

⁹ Jewish Publication Society translation; some modern translations obscure the fact that the Hebrew word for "host" is in a feminine form.

¹⁰ The female singers mentioned in Ezra 2:65 were probably part of the temple choir.

¹¹ This in itself suggests that the Israelites did not view women as inherently gullible. Wise women are mentioned in 2 Sam. 14:2-20 and 20:16-22.

Conclusion

The Bible provides some excellent models for women of faith, as well as some examples to avoid. Some of these involve a woman's personal relationship with God, and others involve a more public role, including leadership. For our study, the following are notable:

- As prophetess, Deborah spoke the word of God, giving an authoritative message to Barak. Huldah the prophetess gave the king an authoritative message based on Scripture. These women had spiritual authority.
- Deborah wrote a worship song and sang it in public; women were later involved in music at the temple.
- As judge, Deborah had civil authority; Esther also had authority over the Jews.
- These women were given authority by God, and the Bible does not imply that there was anything inappropriate about a female having these roles, even though it was not common for women to have these roles.

However, the New Testament church is a different social and spiritual reality, and it may have different rules about roles. Our next paper will examine the ministry of Jesus and the early church.