

A few examples of Women in the Old Testament

Genesis 7 v 7 **Noah's wife** Why isn't she named?

Exodus 1:8-22 **Shiphrah and Puah** They put their lives at risk to uphold God's law. They stand up to Pharaoh. They defend the vulnerable. They are wily and answer Pharaoh in a way that he cannot contradict their actions...

Exodus 2: 1-10 **Moses' sister** is unnamed. Exodus 15: 20-21 Moses' sister is now named as **Miriam**. Miriam is named as a prophet - the first woman to be named as a prophet. Numbers 12: 1-6 Deuteronomy 24: 8-9. Numbers 12: 15 Micah 6. Miriam questions authority - has God only spoken through Moses? We know that Aaron also questions Moses' authority but only Miriam is punished. Why? The people refuse to continue to march until Miriam has recovered from her illness. In later prophets she is remembered. Is Miriam an example of challenge to the establishment?

1 Samuel 25: **Abigail** an example of good mediation and intelligence?

2 Samuel 3: 7 and 21: 8-14 **Rizpah** an example of honouring her children and persevering for their rightful dignity, requiring respect from those in authority to acknowledge her own suffering. A reminder for us of those mothers who stand up for justice such as Steven Lawrence's mother Doreen Lawrence who fought for truth after his death or the mothers at the Hillsborough enquiry.

2 Samuel 13 **Tamar** is raped by her brother. A reminder of the experiences of sexual violence known by many women.

Judges 4 and 5 **Deborah** judge, poet, warrior, prophet. In Hebrew judge also means political and military leader. The only other person to be called judge and prophet was Samuel.

Judges 11 **The daughter of Jephthah** is unnamed and killed by her father. She wants two months to wander the hills before she dies as she will not marry... Why? This is confusing to me!

Judith – a whole book in the apocrypha about a woman!!! Could she be an example for the Me Too movement!

Women in the Old Testament. An overview.

Revd Becky June 2021.

Why is it important to focus on women in the Old Testament as a separate 'topic' when we consider the story of the Old Testament as a whole? The Old Testament is a compilation of oral tradition and old texts. Men are at the forefront of tribal and political life, legal treaties and documents. Scribes, who turned oral traditions into writing, were a literate minority of mainly men - although there is some evidence in texts from Mesopotamia and Egypt that daughters of scribes and the royal entourage could write and occasionally functioned as scribes. The focus of written tradition is based mainly on men's experience. The Old Testament scriptures reflect the powerful male figures of that time and those who were perceived to be important in building an identity for a tribe or nation. Editors of the texts were also men. These facts are not often acknowledged.

A recent analogy I have used to describe the Bible is as a family photo album. The main pictures are the main characters who can reveal not only themselves but also God. However, in our album the main pictures are men and the photographers are also male. If we take this analogy further, some of the pictures have the arms or feet of the women at the edge of the photograph - but no faces! There are some women in the foreground, (but these are often omitted from the Bible Readings allocated in the Church lectionary.) Women tend to be in the background, their names are often omitted. When their pictures are included they are often the ones that are the 'black sheep' of the family whom people shouldn't be like... or they have been ripped out of the album because we shouldn't talk about the terror that happened to 'her.'

Why, you may ask, does this matter? I would respond that it raises the following questions: 'Whose experience is reflected in the Bible?' and therefore 'Whose experiences of life and God are held as valid and having authority?' and therefore 'If God is described as male is this because God actually has the characteristics of maleness or is it because the male is presented as God?' and so 'Can male experience ever really be universal?'

As a woman I have wrestled with the Bible, in anger, lament, delight and passion.

Why is Eve seen as the sexual temptress and baddie instead of someone who used her initiative? Why are Sarah and Hagar set up as women opposed to each other and Abraham's part in it not questioned? Why didn't he want to take any responsibility? How wonderful that Hagar is the first woman to name God! Why are the women who saved Moses hardly ever celebrated and yet their names are recorded? Why are rape and violence against women hardly mentioned in church but are evident in the Old Testament as a way of saving the honour of a tribe? Why is the leadership of women questioned and male authority assumed? Isn't it wonderful that Ruth is celebrated as an example of the Covenant promise that God is always with us!

This is not just a personal wrestling. Bias still has effects on women in the church, in law, in society and internationally. One small example - In the most recent Church of England School's Paper 'Understanding Christianity' and its accompanying educational lesson plans, the bias is still evident. The documents attempt to enable children to see the bigger picture of the Bible, the story of salvation from Genesis to Revelation. This story is seen through male characters such as Abraham and Moses and larger events such as the Tower of Babel and the Flood with the only women cited directly as Eve and Mary. Why are we still presenting the story of God in such a biased way to children today so that they only remember male leaders? Another more extreme example - In some churches there are still rules about women not entering the sanctuary during their monthly periods and about being cleansed before re-entering church after childbirth, but men are not asked if they have ejaculated. All are examples of uncleanness which are based on the same texts in Leviticus but have been interpreted differently for men and women.

I question how the stories of faith that are told affect the messages girls and women receive about their bodies, their ability to reason, their ability to choose to be a mother or not, their ability to lead in the workplace and church, their history, their faith, their God and their own agency.

If I am called to 'abundant life' as a Christian, then using my experience, my voice, my faith to name the things that stop that abundant life happening is important.

Speaking about women in the Bible is important *and* valuing my own experience in life as a woman to critique the Bible is important. The examples of the women in the Bible are important but also how we interpret them....

How can we interpret the lives of the women in the Bible well? A few of the approaches...

- a. The Bible is an important source for understanding the causation of the contemporary situation of women and so it is important to examine it well. We can use a feminist approach, knowing that it is a prophetic movement, to examine the status quo presented in the Bible, to make a judgement, and call for repentance and change. The feminist theologian Phyllis Trible takes this stance.
- b. We can use a method that focuses on God's purpose of liberation (like my argument for abundant life above). If we believe God wants all people to be free then we can use this framework (or paradigm) to show how women are not free when we read the Bible. As exemplified in the writings of Rosemary Radford Reuther.
- c. We can 'redeem' some of the women's experiences recorded in the Bible, and by noticing them move women from the margins to the centre. For example we can notice *'the texts or terror, how the history, the cry of the victim, is the same character who has dignity and worth and then see how the text speaks.'* Walter Brueggemann.
- d. We can use the tradition of the Midrash, the textual interpretation of Jewish Rabbis, that craft new meanings, alongside the original texts.
- e. Or we can say that the Bible cannot reflect women's experience as it is so male dominated, therefore we can access God only through our own experiences today. The Bible has no relevance but women's experience does. Mary Daly takes this stance.