

Women of the Bible The Old Testament

There are 317 women mentioned in the Bible. The problem is not that women are not in the Bible, but that they are often listed as wives or daughters of males, not by their own names. If it had not been for the males who are listed by name most of the women would not even appear in the Bible. However, there are some whose names we know and their importance in biblical history and theology cannot be denied.

Women have not been treated with equality by the original writers of the Bible whether they are Jewish or Christian. Women in Christianity during the 1st and 2nd centuries of the Common Era (C.E.) and until today in some denominations or sects of religion do not have equality with men. There are several reasons for this lack of equality of women in the Bible and in churches today. The first reason is found in Genesis with the "Fall of Man" reported as being due to the first woman – Eve.

Before turning to Eve, it seems appropriate to examine the historical views of women in relationship to biblical religious views. Women in Israel from creation to the three exiles of Israel into Babylon (587-586 B.C.E.) are important. Generally, during the time before the Babylonian exile, Hebrew or Jewish women had status nearly equal with men. While it was nearly equal it was not the same. Cultural views in Israel established women's roles in the Jewish society that gave them power and freedom in the same way that the male cultural roles gave them power and freedom that for the most part balanced well fulfilling the Jewish concept of being helpers. Males and females were helpmates who also provided progeny for the continued expansion of humanity.

Women lived in a patriarchal world that was informed by religion more than culture or government. In the Old Testament it becomes clear that while the women of Israel had a sense of equality based upon the opportunities and freedom within their roles that dominated society for the Israelites, this was not true in other ways and especially in religion. Religion is a notable example! Judaism was dominated by the men who separated the women from equality due to the status of womanhood in their menstrual cycle and the issues of blood rendering them unclean. Men were not bound by such restriction obviously.

The result of this single issue meant that women could not be leaders and partakers of all the religious rites that the men could, including worship, study, and making sacrifices to God. Thus, Judaism was a patriarchal religion that did not

give equal rights to women. Women were not allowed to be leaders of a synagogue or to be priest. They were allowed to act as servants to the prophets. See: Exodus 15:20, II Kings 22:14-20.

Women were never excluded from the worship of God except during the menstrual cycle. At the Temple in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus, women could participate in worship, but they did so from the women's section or the women's court outside the Temple.

Generally, single women lived under the authority of their father, but when it came to marriage a woman was free to love and select her own mate. In this, women were never considered to be the property of a male to be bartered. In fact, in Judaism marriage is celebrated as a metaphor "of the love between God and his covenant people. This is also why the Catholic Church made marriage a sacrament in the 5th century C.E. Sexual love was celebrated as a gift from God (see: Genesis 2:23-24). In the pre-exilic times there are stories in the Bible that exhibit cruelty toward women and treatment that demonstrated women as objects of degradation (See: Genesis 19:8, Judges 19:22-30).

While in the Babylonian Exile the priest of Israel wanted to ensure that Israel would never again be judged by God. The priest's intention was to create a priestly legislative plan that would purify (make kosher) their faith before God. Much of this legislative plan became what is known today as the Talmud. This is still today a powerful cult force in setting the social and cultural boundaries for the Israelites within a religious context. Sexuality became for the women, the means for the covenant community to place them under the males (father or husband) domination rather than allowing a women's rights based upon their own birthright.

During the 2nd Temple period (516 BCE-70CE) after the Exile to Babylon women's cultic rights were restricted. Women were literally exiled from the cult of Judaism during the time of their menstrual cycle that made them impure by blood contamination. During this time, which included during the time of Jesus, women were only allowed in the "women's court" of the Temple. They could not enter the Temple. Women were not allowed to testify in court. They were denied the right to be taught to read or write and they were not to be taught the Torah in their homes. They were not to speak to strangers outside the home and they were required to wear a double veil when outside of the home, much like Islamic women do today in Islamic countries. In short during the 2nd Temple period women were made second class citizens of Israel.

The actions and teaching of Jesus toward women was revolutionary. Jesus, even in public, was seen not only with Jewish women, but even foreign women. Remember the Samaritan woman at the well. He broke three of the 2nd Temple rules of the Talmud. First, he spoke to a woman, not his wife or daughter, in public. Second, he spoke to a Samaritan or foreign woman, and third, he asked the Samaritan woman to give him a drink of water.

Consider this reality People have a tendency to judge others from the view of stereotypes, cultural customs or human prejudice. However, **Jesus sees people as individuals - children of God.** He accepts others with love and compassion that many people ignore or reject. For Jesus to speak as he did to this woman, who was as we learn, far from perfect, was and is remarkable. Jesus' social interchange is a call to understanding that goes beyond gender or nationality. Women in the Bible are to be seen and often to be the door that opens to new understandings of others in spite of male dominance.

Eve, the First Woman

The story of Eve begins in Genesis 2:18. The purpose of the creation of the first woman is made clear in this verse. *"Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.'"*¹ There are two points in this verse that are important. God understood that it was not good for man to be alone. Secondly God establishes that his companion is to be a "helper suitable" for him.

The Hebrew text of Genesis 2:18 literally says word for word: *"And the LORD God said: 'It is not good the man be alone. I will make for him a help as his counterpart.'"* This is the concept of woman as being created by God. God then creates all the creatures of the earth and none was found to be suitable for the man.

The woman, unlike the man who was created from the dust of the earth and the breath of God, is created from a portion of the man. Verses 21 and 22 in the Hebrew read literally: *"And the LORD God caused to fall a deep sleep upon the man, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed the flesh of it. And the LORD God built the rib which he had taken from the man into a woman, and he brought her unto the man.* The word translated most often as rib in Hebrew is *tsela*. This word actually is translated in biblical Hebrew as "rib or side." Tradition

¹ The Englishman's Hebrew and English Old Testament, Genesis to 2nd Samuel by Joseph Magil, (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI) p.5-6.

translates it as rib, but there is good reason to translate it as side due to the form of the word which is *metsale'ki* that amplifies the idea of the rib as being of the side without changing it.

And the man said: this time bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh: to this shall be called WOMAN because out of man was this taken." The Hebrew word for man is 'ish and the word for woman is 'ishah. When the word for man is constructed with a feminine ending of "ah" the word becomes woman. The word Adam is not a name but a collective noun meaning man in the collective form; such as mankind; or humanity or humankind in Hebrew. Man and woman are the same while being distinctively different just as God is in being. Therefore, Eve is not just a woman, she is the first or original woman who comes from Adam. Adam and Eve are proto-beings. From Eve as the "bringer of life" comes humanity as she gives birth to two sons, Cain and Able. Eve is a part of how human beings come to be able to experience God because they are made in the image of God and have been given the breath of life the *ruach*, in Hebrew the spirit of God that comes from God by the breath. All seems well by the end of chapter 2 of Genesis, but it is not.

Chapter 3 begins what most call the Fall of Man or humanity. It is the *Nachash* in Hebrew, the Serpent, Viper, or Snake, who appears to the woman and by twisting the truth, or lying, creates for the woman an illusion of truth by which she, still not having a name, is convinced that the fruit is good to eat.

The fruit, a metaphor in the word, is the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil and immediately she knows that she has acted incorrectly for she recognizes that both she and her husband are naked (fully exposed including spiritually). Metaphorically the lesson is that she has made possible, the ability to know good and evil, which for humanity becomes the source of sin that separates us from God. In time, women became the ones who bear the blame for sin. It became the view a male dominate religion - Judaism. The man and the woman now fear God and seek to hide from God which is not possible. The *Nachash* becomes "the liar" Satan.

There is another question that theologians have wrestled with through the ages. Why did God make the fruit of knowledge of good and evil so easy to access? The answer maybe that God did this knowing what would happen and it was intended. Why? The answer may be so humans, unlike all other animals, have free will or the ability to make choices for living their lives freely. Humans have the ability to make moral and ethical choices unlike all other living things that act from instinct only. Free will gives humans the opportunity to accept Gods

love or to reject it by knowledge that allows us to make choices as no other creatures in all of Creation can. As in all love relationships it is built upon the ability to choose our partner. It also allows God to make the love that is part of the Being of God more fully known in Jesus and in the act of redemption of humanity by Jesus' death and resurrection. It sets humanity apart and makes us also redeemable. If we are condemned it is not due to Eve, but to our own choices in life.

The man, Adam, now names his wife as he has named all the animals. Her name is Eve. Eve in Hebrew means "source or bringer of life." Eve is the source of life in giving birth to two sons, Cain and Abel (* where did their wives come from). Her name is fitting. Eve is truly the mother of life for all humanity. In this she fulfills the will of God and she should be remembered as we give to her our gratitude for life. Yet, too many people use the "first sin" as a reason to put womanhood down.

Sarai become Sarah

Women in the Book of Genesis are not mentioned by name until Adam names his wife Eve in Genesis 3:20 and from then on women are only mentioned as wives and not by name until Genesis 11:29 well after the Flood of Noah where his wife's name is not recorded. But with Abram being selected by God to be the Father of God's Nation, Israel, we find Abraham getting a new name and the wife of Abraham is named. Sarai is the given name of the wife of Abram, but her name will be changed in part from Sarai to Sarah. This is 20 generations from Adam. The generations are counted by the male names in the biblical genealogy passages. Women were important, but not in the scheme of naming individuals from the Creation to the Flood and then to the time of Abram. This was after some scheming on the part of Sarai with Hagar an Egyptian maid in chapter 16 of Genesis. Two women are clearly named and important to the work of Abram and the nation that is to born from the marriage of Abram and Sarai.

The result of the scheming is that Hagar gives birth to Ishmael and Abram was 86 years of age as reported in Genesis 16:16. The name Ishmael in Hebrew literally means "man from God." Ishmael becomes the father of the Arabic speaking nations via Egypt and Hagar who is Egyptian.

Abram and God create a covenant and Abram is promised by God to be the father of many nations (the 12 tribes of Israel). Abram becomes Abraham by God's word and by the act of circumcision which was and still is to Jews an act of

sacrifice and identity. He is further told that Sarai is to be called Sarah and she shall bear him a son. To this Abraham laughs as if this is a joke. But God was not joking he was creating a miracle in the consummation of a child for Abraham and Sarah who are 100 and 90 years old. The male child is named Isaac.

The name Abraham means "father of a multitude." The name Sarah means "princess." The name Isaac means "Laughter or he will laugh." Put the three names together in meaning along with Hagar and Ishmael and you have a story. It is the story of the beginning of the nations of people who are God's chosen ones as the 12 tribes of Israel become a nation of Israel, the Israelites or people of God. It is a story that comes out of conniving and human misuse of others that God weaves into a tapestry that is beautiful and meaningful with a chosen people.

Ruth and Esther

There are only two books in the Bible named after women: Ruth and Esther. These two women are very important in the Old Testament of the Bible and they should be reviewed. There are no books in the New Testament named after women although there are several very important women in the New Testament beginning with Mary the mother of Jesus. However, we should continue with the story of Ruth.

Ruth — A Virtuous Woman (Read Ruth 1:1 – 4:16)

The Book of Ruth should, in my opinion, be required reading for new Christians and longtime Christians. Why? Because the book teaches unadulterated love and all its aspects of reality in relationship to God and to our fellow God created humans. Jesus says that God is Spirit in John 4:24 and in 1st John 4:7 God is love. Ruth is the very essence of what it means to love God and thus be able to love others. God through Ruth is revealing a God full of love in spiritual presence.

The Period of the Judges in Hebrew history is from the death of Joshua about 1,406 B.C.E. until the establishment of the Jewish monarchy with Saul at 1,021 B.C.E. The judges were usually military leaders who controlled specific areas like Moab that was East of the Dead Sea.

Ruth 1:16 is a well-known and quoted passage that sets the tone for the entire book. *"But Ruth said, 'Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from*

following you; for where you go, I go and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God." Ruth's loyalty is complete for Naomi, her mother-in-law, and demonstrates that she is a loyal friend as well as daughter-in-law. This might be considered the form of loyalty Christians need in relationship to God and Jesus and others as modeled by Ruth.

Elimelech was married to Naomi. He was a man from Bethlehem of Judah. The name Elimelech in Hebrew means "God is King" Naomi in Hebrew means "my delight" as in pleasantness or sweet. Naomi gave birth to two sons named Mahlon and Chilion. Mahlon in Hebrew means "man of sickness". Chilion in Hebrew means man who waste or is wasteful. These boys were born after Elimelech took his family into Moab during a famine in Judah. While in Moab the two sons Mahlon and Chilion took Moabite women to be their wives and they are Orpha and Ruth. Orpha was the wife of Mahlon and her name means "back of the neck". Ruth was the wife of Chilion and the name Ruth in Hebrew means "friend." These names will make sense as the story unfolds.

Naomi's husband Elimelech dies while they are in the country of Moab. Naomi stayed in Moab for about 10 years after the death of her husband. She then lost both of her sons in death as being prophesied by the meaning of their names. Naomi was filled with grief and so she planned to return to Judah, but she also gave consent to her two daughters-in-law to remain in their own homeland which was her right under the law. This is when Ruth demonstrates her love for Naomi and pledges her devotion to her in being willing to go back to Judah with Naomi. Note what she promises and especial that she is willing to accept Naomi's God as her God and she then becomes a willing agent of God in her love for Naomi. The story that continues places Ruth in the tradition of being a prophetess making known the message of God. Strange maybe to some Jewish and Christians that God would use a Moabite to do the Divine will. God is the God of all peoples.

With these thoughts in mind, one should read the beautiful message of redemption and salvation that shall come forth. As noted, this message of love is timely for us today. Listen to God speaking to us through Ruth who becomes a part of the very genealogy of Jesus while speaking to redemption and salvation just as Jesus and her kinsman did. **Read the four chapters of Ruth.** Enjoy the message and look to become like Ruth, a person dedicated to love and compassion in a world waiting for Good News. Maybe the love that becomes salvation.

Esther the Woman Who Became Queen

(Read Esther 1:1-2:1-23)

The Book of Esther is a book about trusting and obeying God. Its author is unknown, but was a Jewish person most likely with a working knowledge of the traditions and events of the Persian/Babylonian court during the reign of King Xerxes. This would date the book's setting at circa 485 B.C.E. to 465 B.C.E. However, the date for its writing was most likely between 470 B.C.E. and 420 B.C.E. This fits with the approximate date for the Exile of the Jews to Persia/Babylon under King Xerxes. The tone of the book lends itself to believing that the author was pro-Jewish and may have lived through its history. It could also be that Esther is just a fictional character that helps Mordecai work to resolve the crisis. Some scholars and Rabbis suggest that the author might be the central character in the book named Mordecai. There is no solid proof for this view. However, there is among Rabbis a view that Mordecai is the unspoken personification of God. Rabbi Shalmon in 1972 revealed to me that the book may not have been written until the late 3rd century before the common era. I cannot defend this date, but it may be real as if looking back in time through the history of the Exile

One factoid is that Esther is the only book in the Bible that does not mention God. God is at work in the book like a director of a stage play moving the story along to its happy conclusion of release from the suffering of being exiled in a foreign land. This is just like life today as God involves the Divine self in our lives and moves us to a place where we should be in life and in our relationship with God, often with us not even being aware of what is happening.

In Judaism the book of Esther is directly related to the origins of the feast of Purim that is traditionally set for the 14th day of the Jewish month of Adar. It is a day of joyful feasting and gift giving, noisemakers, cake and candles. It remembers the survival of the Jews during the exile of the 5th century B.C.E. in Persia/Babylon as noted in the book of Esther. Purim is a major Jewish holiday.

The book of Esther is often viewed as being in three parts. Part 1 sets the scene of life in the Persian court where a plot against the King is exposed by Mordecai in chapter 1:1-2:23. Part 2 Describes the crises that exist for all Jews at that time and the resolution that will avert the threat to the People of Israel being held in captivity as in Chapter 3:8;14. The final part 3 sees the resolution and results including the celebration. This is the section that clearly sets the

parameters for Purim, a celebration of God's redemption and salvation of Israel from Chapter 8:15 to 9:32 and then chapter 10:1-3 is the Epilogue that gives praise to Mordecai. The Jewish Rabbis take the view of Mordecai as a metaphor for God from this epilogue.

It is suggested that each part should be read separately while reviewing the emphasis of each division and looking backwards into the scriptures to understand its unfolding in history and again asking about our own time and what threats maybe Christianity is experiencing. Then how should the response be in the Church and in our individual lives today? This should be done looking forward to the salvation of God for humanity and the world. There is a real lesson in King Xerxes, for he is shown to be a person prone to act impulsively depending upon whims and emotions rather than truth and faith in God. Sound like anyone you know in life today?

NOTE For Consideration

The world of the Bible, historically, was one where many writings are written as allegory or metaphor that reveal truth. They are not meant to be taken as factual events as we might think of history today. This is a point that is especially true in the Old Testament. However, it can also be true when reading some passage of the New Testament. In fact, the Book of Revelation is full of views taken from writers, like Enoch, who was of the 7th generation of the biblical fathers prior to the Great Flood of Noah. He did not die by the flood, but was taken up to heaven by God. He was also considered as the 1st prophet of the Hebrews. He is credited with writing books before the flood which was not common as most people were not literate and most communication in writing was done on clay tablets. Much of the first 5 books of Moses are writings from the oral traditions of the Hebrew people that became the chosen people of God – the Israelites or Jews. By the time of the Exodus clay tablets had been given up to the first form of paper – papyrus. These writings were then made into scrolls. The first five books of the Bible are commonly known as the books of Moses, but it is more likely that it was the Levitical priest of the Tabernacle that actually wrote the books under Moses' supervision. These are the books of a Mosaic view known as the five books of the Pentateuch of the Old Testament or the Torah (Law).

Women of the Bible

The Three Big M's

Mary the Mother of Jesus, Mary Magdeline, and Martha

Mary the Mother of Jesus (Read Luke 1:26-38)

There are six different Mary's in the New Testament. Mary in Hebrew is Miryam and is usually understood to mean "beloved." There is a lot of information about Mary in ancient Christian sources, but there are serious questions about the accuracy of the information in the views of the scholars. That said, we do know that Mary was the child of two Jewish parents and that she was probably born ca. 20 BCE in Sepphoris in the region of Galilee just north of Nazareth. Some scholars give the names of Joachim and Anne to Mary's parents, but this is not for certain. It is certain that Mary the Mother of Jesus married Joseph the carpenter and they lived in Nazareth which is about 20 miles south of Sepphoris.

Tradition holds that Mary was betrothed to Joseph when she was 14 years of age. This would be within the Jewish cultural norm of the time. In the Jewish community after a girl had her first menstrual cycle she was eligible to be betrothed in marriage.

According to the Gospel of Luke 1:26-38, An angel named Gabriel came to Mary in the sixth month of the year name Elul and would be in late August and early September by our calendar. Gabriel is the name of God's archangel. Gabriel in Hebrew means "God's strength." Listen to his message to Mary.

"Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus (Jesus in Hebrew is Yeshuah and means "to save")."

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David; and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end."

Mary a young teenage girl is to be the handmaid of God becoming pregnant during her betrothal time and thus she would have been easily under the Levitical law "put away" or divorced from her state of being betrothed. This would have then made her an adulteress. However, God did not select her so she might be

killed when she is to bear the "Son of the Most High" who has a royal Divine destiny.

Mary then says to Gabriel the angel; *"How can this be, since I am a virgin?"* The answer is given, that she is to become pregnant with child by the Holy Spirit and thus the child shall be holy and called the Son of God. Mary's virginity would be intact and thus the birth will be a holy birth of a virgin. This birth is a miracle! Mary knows that tongues will wag, but she doesn't shirk the call to be a servant to God. She bears the pregnancy and gives birth to the Son of God and she becomes the mother of the Son of God who is faithful even unto his death upon the cross for the sins of the world. Mary stands firm at the foot of the cross and weeps. Then comes the resurrection and she is filled with joy.

This was made even more possible, because of the faith of Joseph in her role. He does not seek to put her away, but supports her after listening to God and this is again important to making Mary the Mother of God on earth.

Mary Magdeline (Read John 20:11-18)

Mary Magdeline is very important in the story of Jesus and has by many theologians been disgraced. She in fact is part of those who were in the inner circle of the followers of Jesus. She may be the woman who washed Jesus' feet with the expensive nard oil. In Judaism this was a common practice for wives only, but they did not usually use such an expensive oil. There are those who degrade her past calling her a harlot. This cannot be proven, but what most people are missing is that Mary Magdeline was the wife of Jesus. The scriptures do not say this, but the evidence from scripture makes it clear based upon the teachings of the Babylonian Talmud that was important in Judaism at the time of Jesus along with cultural practices.

The Talmud speaks clearly of how a deceased person is to be properly handled and buried. In the Talmud it is the responsibility of the Mother and wife to prepare the body for burial. Also, it is clear from the scriptures that it was Mary the Mother of Jesus and Mary Magdeline that were at the foot of Jesus on the cross. These women were responsible for the care of the body of Jesus after his death according to Jewish custom and law and the Roman authorities allowed it. If Mary, Jesus' mother and Mary Magdeline were responsible for the purification of the body of Jesus and his being properly wrapped for burial then Mary

Magdeline must have been the wife of Jesus according to the law and customs of Israel.

Now consider one more proof. The people addressed Jesus often in scripture as Rabbi. Again, according to the Babylonian Talmud, section 5, a person that was to be called a Rabbi had to be married. There are many reasons for this culturally, but suffice it at this moment to say, that it had to do with Sabbath rituals that were to be performed to make holy the Sabbath. The life, ministry, death and burial of Jesus were in full compliance with Jewish tradition, scripture and Law. The two Mary's in Jesus' life and death were faithful in the will of God and in the Law or Torah and Talmud of Judaism. Can we be so faithful in our relationships with God?

Martha – One dedicated to Jesus (Read John 11:1-5 and 21-32)

The name Martha is an Armenian name that means "lady or mistress." She was a sister to Mary and Lazarus both of whom loved the Lord and Jesus loved them. Martha seems to have had a sincere desire to serve Jesus and make him comfortable when he was at their home. The house in Bethany is even noted to belong to Martha which may imply that she was a widow who owned the home by inheritance. This would make Martha unique in the Jewish culture at the time of Jesus.

It is the confession of faith made by Martha at the time of Lazarus' death and resurrection in John 11:21-32 that is notable. The resurrection of Lazarus is a prophetic moment to what will happen in the life of Jesus. Martha is a believer in resurrection and in Jesus as the Son of God the Almighty. Her faith is unquestionable and it is a model for Christian believers who love the Lord, Jesus and God, the Father.

Elizabeth the One with the Fullness of God (Read: Luke 1:39-45)

Elizabeth is a kinsman of Mary the Mother of Jesus who lived with her husband Aaron in Nazareth where Mary and Joseph lived. There are many different ways to translate the name of Elizabeth, but in Hebrew it is taken to mean "the fullness of God or God is fullness." Elizabeth is already expecting when Mary visits her and it was then that the child "leaped" in her womb almost as a

moment of recognition of Mary's child, who is Jesus. For Elizabeth's child will become John the Baptist who will baptize Jesus his cousin as he enters formally into ministry. There are many family connections to Jesus that are overlooked.

Conclusion

The Bible is full of men, some good, some bad, but it is dominated by men. God who is androgenous is almost always referred to in the masculine. Yet, God created women and they were in the beginning equal with men as both genders were to be helpmates to the other. God used women to fulfill the Divine will and to move history forward even as men were used, yet they are often lost from the bigger picture of redemption and salvation.

The challenge today is to read the Bible and seek to understand its wisdom and truth for us without a gender heavy bias. We need to understand that God is the God of all the children. This study has not been as in-depth as it could have been, but maybe you can begin to understand a new openness to reading and appreciating the women who have demonstrated the will of God in their lives as they lived in faith just as men did.

Today, some churches are working hard to eliminate women from ministry, especially from being Pastors or Ministers. Too many churches that are ultra-conservative are also working to remove women's rights under the law of the land. As my father has said many times, "what goes around comes around" and maybe that is true with women's parity with men and rights under the churches as well as our nation. God created women to be equal with men and God has historically used women to forward the Divine will. Equality in the Church is demanded by the Word of God. God bless the women who are important in our lives and may we learn to be as One in Jesus Christ.