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Women Who Made a Difference in the Hebrew Bible

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Abstract: The Hebrew Bible discloses women who are leaders, prophets, queens, midwives, harlots, mothers, widows etc. The author argues that they could be brave and risk their lives for others. Be they leaders of the community, judges, prophetesses, queens, wise women, mothers, widows etc. they all played a vital role in the history of Israel. Frequently, it is a woman who emerges in a time of crisis to lead and preserve Israel. Some are known while others are unknown; some are powerful, while others are powerless. But no matter what their individual personalities and contributions, their stories are often crucial to understand the history of Israel. It is true that they have not enjoyed a uniform status in the society; however, the Hebrew Bible does not neglect their importance and influence, and the invaluable contribution they have made. It is unfortunate to consider them as shadowy, subordinate figures in the society. Instead they were all protagonists in their own *Sitz im Leben*.

Keywords: Women in the Bible, Hebrew Bible, Prophetesses, Unnamed Women.

The Hebrew Bible presents many women characters, named and unnamed, who played a vital role in the history of Israel. No matter what their individual personalities and contributions, their life and vocation have been permanently influential both in the religious and communitarian life. Most of the women characters in the Hebrew Bible are portrayed as enterprising, resourceful, and courageous. They are engaged in vital tasks and roles that benefitted God's people. The Hebrew Bible discloses women who are leaders,

prophets, queens, midwives, harlots, mothers, widows etc. There are also women whose names are not included in the biblical narratives but whose stories live on to teach, guide, and instruct us in life. The Hebrew Bible also reveals symbolic women as examples of what to be or what not to be. From the myriad of women characters presented in the Hebrew Bible, readers will find a message from days gone by that, named or unnamed, women played a vital role in the history of Israel, as they continue today.

1. Judges and Prophetesses

Female judges and prophets appear in different phases of the history of Israel, and their stories are recorded in each section of the canon, proving they are not aberrations. Their stories in the Scriptures show that they had messages for their times and for ours, and they need to be heard. The life and message of a few characters will illustrate this fact clearly: Deborah is the only female judge, and also the only judge to be called a prophet (Judg 4-5), and she is acclaimed as a woman of faith and courage. There is no other heroine like Deborah in the Hebrew Bible who motivated the people and acted courageously. Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, is the first woman in the Bible designated as a prophetess (cf. Exod 15:20-21; Num 12: 1-15; 20:1; 26:59; Deut 24:9; 1Chr 6:3; Mic 6:4), and she is praised as a woman of moral authority and Leadership. Huldah, the wife of Shallum ben Tikvah, is regarded as a prophetess accustomed to speaking the word of God directly to high priests and royal officials, to whom high officials came in supplication, who told kings and nations of their fates, and who spoke in a manner of stern command when acting as a prophet (2 Kgs 22:14-20 and 2 Chr 34:22-28).

2. Women of Royalty and Wealth

Women of royalty and wealth played a significant role in Jewish history. While some defied their father's orders, others, although seemingly intelligent, married fools. In Pharaoh's daughter we have a woman who dared to oppose the royal order by rescuing baby Moses from the Nile River (Exod 2:5-10; cf. Acts 7:21-22; Heb

11:24). In Abigail we have a wise woman who knew God's plan for the nation (1 Sam 25). She was an ideal wife, always protecting her husband's interests, taking the initiative when he was unable or unwilling to act, and apologizing for his rude behavior. What we appreciate in Queen of Sheba is her relentless search for wisdom, desire to learn from others, ability to appreciate the strengths of others and generosity in giving gifts (1Kgs 10:1-13; 2 Chr 9:1-12). The noble Shunaamite woman is well respected in the society (2 Kgs 4:8-37), and she is content (2 King 4:11-13), compassionate (2 Kings 4:8-17), and had a persistence that was not weakened by time (2 kings 4:18-37). Esther is described in the book of Esther as a Jewish queen of the Persian king Ahasuerus, someone who takes a decisive role in her own future and that of her people. As the narrative develops we see a beautiful maiden (2:1-7), favoured by everyone (2:8-16), crowned as queen (2:17-23), who is willing to perish for her people (chs. 3-4), seeking divine guidance in times of difficulty (4:15-17), and courageously acts to save her people (chs. 6-7).

3. Everyday Heroines

Some of the women characters in the OT became heroines by simply acting with compassion, standing up for what is right, sticking close to family etc. They were nurses, midwives, daughters, housewives, harlots, servant girls etc. revealing that God can use anyone to accomplish his purposes, if she is brave enough to trust and obey him.

Deborah was Rebekah's loyal servant throughout Rebekah's life (cf. (24:59, 35:8). Through her fidelity to Rebekah and Jacob, she had transformed the bonds of servitude into those of love, and earned the devotion and gratitude of those whom she had so long and loyally served. Shiphrah and Puah (Exod 1:15-21) served as midwives in Egypt, and they saved many lives during a time when the Pharaoh had issued a decree that would lead to the death of many (Exod 1:15-17). They valued the lives of the children whom they were commanded to kill (Exod 1:15-19). The daughters of Zelophehad stood for Justice (cf. Num 27). Their story celebrates

their boldness to argue for legitimization of a limited right of Israelite women to inherit land. It is their courage to demand. Rahab has assisted the Israelites in capturing the city (Joshua 2:1-24) by defying the ruler. She risked everything to protect the spy Israelites, but she asked for a promise from the spies not only to spare her, but also all those bound to her by human ties (Josh 2:13). This is faith lived out: thinking of others, putting their needs ahead of our own (Josh 2:14).

Ruth is a woman of character and faith. She had so many reasons to shrink into a shell and live in obscurity. But she did not. She did not allow her past to hold her back but believed there was life still to be lived and move forward in that confidence. She is a symbol of abiding loyalty and devotion (Ruth 1:16-17; 2:11-12; 3:10; 4:15). She refuses to return, preferring to stay with Naomi - expressing her devotion in words of matchless beauty (Ruth 1:1-17). She believes that God would provide and redeem her (Ruth 1:18-22). She moves from emptiness to fullness (Ruth 1:21; 3:17; cf. 1:1,3,5-6,12,21-22; 3:17; 4:15), from destitution (Ruth 1:1-5) to security and hope (Ruth 4:13-17). She was determined to do what she set out to do (Ruth 1:14:18). She obeyed her mother in law (Ruth 3:5). In short, in Ruth we see a faithful, committed, virtuous, kind, persistent and strong woman who found favour in the sight of the Lord.

4. Nobodies: Unnamed Women of Faith and Action

Several Old Testament women are unnamed, but they are protagonists in the narratives in terms of faith and action. These women took initiative and acted independently and bravely. While they are nameless, they are not without an identity. For example, we have the woman of Thebez: the woman with heroic courage (Judg 9:50-57; cf. 2 Sam 11:21); the women of Bahurim: the women who showed extraordinary bravery (2 Sam 17:17-21); the wise woman of Abel Beth-Maakah: the woman skilled in persuasive diplomacy (2 Sam 20:16-22); maid of Naaman's wife: the woman who shared her faith (2 Kgs 5:1-19); Shallum's Daughters: the builders of the wall (Neh 3:12, etc.

5. The Unnamed Partners Who shared the Mission of their Husband

We also see quite many unnamed wives in the Hebrew Bible who shared the mission and struggles of their partners. They often acts as models of support, listening, building relationships, trust, reliability, forgiveness, sharing, nurturing, obedience, love, motherliness etc. For example, Noah's wife and his sons' wives are considered as the nurturers of the universe and humanity by sharing the vision of Noah (Gen 6:18; 7:13; 8:16.18; 9:18); Cain's wife is the first wife in the world within the institution of family and marriage (Gen 4:17); Lot's wife became a reminder to obey God's voice in all circumstances (Gen 19:12-17); Abimelech's Wife becomes an instrument of God's blessing and visible manifestation of God's intervention in the life of Abimelech (Gen 20:2-17). Ezekiel's wife became a sign of Yhwh to the people of Israel (Ezek 24:15-27); Jeroboam's wife became a symbol of a mother's love for a sick son (1 Kgs 14:1-18); Isaiah's wife is a prophetess who shouldered the mission of Yhwh (Isa 8:3); Naaman's wife, carried the grief of her husband (2 Kings 5:5) etc.

6. The Unnamed Widows of Faith and Action

There are also widows in the Hebrew Bible who faced the challenges of the widowhood in their life and became models of faith and action. They never pitied on themselves but dared to face the reality in their own way trusting in the Lord. For example, the Widow of Zarephath: the widow who was rewarded for her faith (1Kgs 17:10-24); the Widow whose oil was multiplied (2 Kgs 4:1-7) etc.

7. Mothers who Made a Difference

There are some Old Testament women who made a difference in the lives of their children, their families and their communities. For example, Eve, "the mother of all living" (Gen 3:16, 20) brought human relationship, friendship, companionship, and marriage into the world (Gen 2:21-24); Sarah: a mother of determination and

promise brought God's covenantal promise as "the mother of many nations and kings" (17:15-16); Hagar: a mother who spoke with God (Gen 16:13), and to whom God promised that she would be the mother of a great nation, paralleling God's promise to Abraham (Gen 16:10); Leah and Rachel: the matriarchs of God's blessing who were affectionate to their husband and children (Gen 29-49); Jochebed is the courageous mother of Moses who acted wisely (Exod 6:20; Num 26:59); Hannah is the devout mother of Samuel who trusted God unconditionally (1Sam 1:1-2:10); Rizpah is the faithful mother of murdered sons who fought for justice (2 Sam 21:10-14); Samson's mother is the woman who conversed with the angel of the Lord (Judg 13:2-23); Lemuel's Mother is the woman who inspired the king (Prov 31:1-9); Sisera's mother is a mother who showed extraordinary motherliness (Judg 5:28-30) etc.

Conclusion

From the above discussions we see that many women in the Hebrew Bible could be brave and risk their lives for others. Be they leaders of the community, judges, prophetesses, queens, wise women, mothers, widows etc. they all played a vital role in the history of Israel. Frequently, it is a woman who emerges in a time of crisis to lead and preserve Israel. Some are known while others are unknown; some are powerful, while others are powerless. But no matter what their individual personalities and contributions, their stories are often crucial to understand the history of Israel. It is true that they have not enjoyed a uniform status in the society; however, the Hebrew Bible does not neglect their importance and influence, and the invaluable contribution they have made. It is unfortunate to consider them as shadowy, subordinate figures in the society. Instead they were all protagonists in their own *Sitz im Leben*.

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