

Behind the Waterfall – Women of the World

1 Samuel 25:1-42

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Samson, Samuel, David, Solomon, Nehemiah, Ezra, Job, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Amos, Hosea, Jonah, Micah, Zechariah, Zephaniah, Obadiah, Haggai, Malachi – to mention just a few – you'd be forgiven for thinking that the Bible was little more than the historic annals of a boys' club. It seems that women hardly get a look in, and certainly rarely feature in the headlines.

In 1898 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, with others, wrote a powerful feminist critique of the first five books of the Bible, which is well worth reading today. She wrote, *“Although the mosaic code and customs so plainly degrade the female sex, and their position in the church today grows out of these ancient customs, yet many people insist that our religion dignifies women. But so long as the Pentateuch is read and accepted as the Word of God, an undefined influence is felt by each generation that destroys a proper respect for womankind.”* (The Woman's Bible, p.76) One of the key phrases here is “undefined influence”. The evil aspects of patriarchy are all the more influential precisely because they're undefined – they work their way in even when we're engaged in pious, god-focused devotion.

One of the traditional daily blessings said by Orthodox Jews to this day, goes, “Blessed are You, O Lord our God for not making me a Gentile, a slave, or a woman.” By contrast, the women are instructed to praise God for making them “according to his will.” The women's prayer encourages them meekly to accept the same fate which the men rejoice in avoiding. Now, that prayer is based on Biblical faith: faith written up in the Bible by men, and consistently interpreted in the community by men. It diligently builds *“an undefined influence in each generation that destroys a proper respect for womankind.”*

And not only that – in my own experience, I've heard that prayer quoted many times in sermons and lectures by men - men posing as “enlightened” - always they do so with a little smile or a jokey apology. They totally fail to grasp the seriousness of centuries of this offence, and through this subconscious but deliberate failure of nerve they actually perpetuate it. Even today, the fact that I as a man, the patriarchal leader of this church, am the one with position to make these points forcefully, almost conspires to be counter productive. I say “almost” however, because in fact women need the advocacy of men in a man's world, just as men need the advocacy of women in a woman's world. We talk about misogyny in the church, but as a reaction you also come across an equally destructive misandry (hatred of men). So we need to be advocates for ourselves and for each other.

Women in the Bible vs other Ancient Cultures

So where are the women's voices in the Bible – and particularly in the Old Testament? How can we let them be heard when they're not readily on show in the text - the only raw materials we have? Fortunately, in spite of many damaging assumptions in the culture of both Bible writing and reading, the Scriptures give quite a lot of space – relatively speaking – to women's participation in the story of God's people.

The reasons for this are various: The creation stories of Adam and Eve are couched in terms of gender intimacy and tenderness rather than the animosity and trauma which you find in some other ancient accounts of the beginning. The prevailing Biblical cultural assumption is that men and women are in productive family partnership, whereas the cultural assumption among Greek and Roman writers is that men and women are constantly at war with each other, vying for control. Many Old Testament narratives take place in the home where women were key players, rather than on the battlefield for example. Much of the story has to do with travelling families and people – and while people are on the move the status of men and women is much more equal than when things later become established. These are just some of the reasons why, when we take the trouble to look, we can actually find many great women of the Bible to celebrate, give thanks for and learn from. I want to spend the rest of this sermon giving a small sample of them, their voices, and the qualities the Bible shows these women possessing.

Truth Tellers

Firstly, these women are shown to be *truth-tellers*. They have a natural transparency which often reveals what the men are covering over. Sarai laughed when she heard Abram being promised they would have children in their old age. So often the Bible shows men posing as they try to give a lead, and the women provide a vital, safe, self-effacing, truthful foil to this maintaining the reality of the situation.

Faithful Travellers

Two: they're portrayed as *faithful travellers*. Rebekah travelled 600 miles by camel, to marry Isaac whom she'd never met. She then continued to journey with him as he and the family moved from place to place. You may cite this as female subservience, but granted the cultural expectations it's actually a picture of faithful steadiness. Rebekah, and later Ruth who travelled with her mother-in-law Naomi, are pictures of loyalty.

Passionate Lovers

Three: Bible women are passionate lovers. One of the earliest Bible narratives is the love story between Jacob and Rachel – Rachel who captivated him from the word go, won his love, waited seven years to wed and then another seven years when he was tricked by her father into marrying the wrong daughter. Rachel must have loved with a burning love to command and sustain such commitment.

Personal Risk Takers

Four: Bible women take personal risks for the sake of justice and life. Tamar was denied children by her husband and unjustly shamed by her father-in-law. She risked public degradation and being burned to death in order to extract her legal rights from him, and perpetuate her family line.

Righteous Fighters for Social Justice

Five: women of the Bible are *righteous fighters for social justice*. At the beginning of Exodus the Egyptian Pharaoh orders that all Hebrew male babies should be killed at birth. The Hebrew Midwives, Shiprah and Puah, we read, feared God more than they feared the king. They refused to let the babies die and when interrogated by the Egyptians concocted a clever reply. Those women saved generations by their principled, astute, and fearless stand.

Practical

Six: women of the Bible are characterised as *practical* – concerned with the practicalities of saving lives. Moses' mother, Jochebed, hid him for three months and then made a water-tight basket to hide in the reeds.

Clever

Seven: Bible women are therefore universally seen as *clever*. Miriam, Moses' sister, waited close to the basket as it lay with her brother inside. When she saw the king's daughter discovering the baby and taking pity on it, she immediately spoke up: "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?" What a good idea! So Miriam fetched Moses and her own mother, and she was able to nurse her own baby right under the nose of the Egyptian court.

Creative & Expressive

Eight: Bible women are *creative and expressive*. Two people are named as dancing in the Bible: the second is David, but the first, again, is Miriam, who led all the women in a dance to celebrate their escape from Egypt. She led the way and all the others followed.

Wise

Nine: women of the Bible are *wise*. Wisdom in the Bible pours from the fountain of the Godhead, and in the New Testament is seen as incarnate in Christ. Yet in the Book of Proverbs, wisdom's personified as a woman, and the Holy Spirit is described using a feminine word *Ruach*. Not long ago I watched Mike Leigh's latest film, "Happy Go Lucky". At first you get the impression that the main character is a likeable but slightly brainless girl, simply out to have fun where she can. In fact, she turns out deeply wise, insightful, compassionate, relationally perceptive. In a man's world, wisdom is defined in certain ways which often prove ill-founded – but God's

kingdom defines wisdom differently. One of the wisest women of the Bible, was Rahab the prostitute of Jericho. Rahab read the signs of the times; she knew the Israelites were about to take the city; she realised she could do a deal with their spies, she acted to protect her family and she made a new life under a new regime. That's wisdom – and by the way, she also became an ancestor of Jesus.

Leaders

Ten: women of the Bible *take the lead*. Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth held court under a palm tree during the time of the Judges. Her name means “fiery woman” and the Commander of her army was scared to fight without her. She was outspoken, prophetic, and stressed the importance of political unity among the tribes of Israel. As a result, under her, the land had peace for forty years.

Decisive

Eleven: Bible women are *decisive*. Most of us, not being rural types, would blanch at killing a chicken. Jael was an innocent looking woman when Deborah's enemy Sisera asked to rest in her tent after being routed. Jael recognised him at once, knew where her duty lay, got him to relax and sleep, and then took a mallet and rammed a tent peg through his temple. End of story for Sisera – peace for the land.

Prayerful & Spiritually Perceptive

Twelve: Bible women are *prayerful*. Manoah's wife isn't known to us by name but she was certainly known to God. Sometimes we think that in the Bible God spoke to women only through their husbands, but in Judges 13 it was the other way around. God spoke to her through an angel not once but twice, and then she got her husband and the angel spoke to him too. The woman was the mother of Samson. Hannah was another woman of prayer, pouring her heart out and weeping until she was heard. Bible women are spiritually perceptive, available to God, and open before him.

Resourceful Diplomats

Thirteen: women of the bible are *resourceful diplomats*. Well someone has to be with all these posturing men around locking horns with each other. Another film I saw recently was the film Cous Cous – set among the North African community on the South Coast of France. It was probably a bit too long, but was basically about the various antics of men in the community, their hopes and arguments, and how the women consistently save them from themselves.

Abigail was like that – a woman who saved two proud men from themselves - a woman described as both clever and beautiful, and married to a fool called Nabal. Nabal's pride would have resulted in the

torching of his farm and the murder of his family by David. No-one really wanted that. Abigail implemented a plan directly opposed to her husband's wishes, completely disregarding his permission, finds words of suitable humility with a light touch of humour to explain her husband's idiocy, acts as if she's the one in charge, offers David whatever hospitality he and his men need, and gently reminds him that wholesale murder will not improve his rankings with the Almighty. About ten days later, Nabal died suddenly. David then wooed Abigail and she became his wife. David knew a good thing when he saw it.

And more...

There are many more skilful and spiritual women of the Old Testament we could mention: the wise woman of Tekoa, who boldly and skilfully revealed to David how he was to move in his family troubles, (2 Samuel 14); the little servant girl who told her mistress where Naaman could find healing for his leprosy (2 Kings 5); Huldah the prophet, whose spiritual advice was sought by the greatest theologians in the land (2 Kings 22).

And those they stood with...

These are women of the world, not in the sense of immorality, but in that they had the stature to make their own space and cast their own shadow. And they stand also with the women who were abandoned such as Hagar, unloved such as Leah, raped such as the Levite's concubine, taunted such as Hannah, and abused and robbed such as Bathsheba.

Where is the Woman's Voice – Where is the Woman's Way?

Yet the women's voice is rarely heard. Our songs, readings, sermons, still collude with the patriarchy of millennia. When I first came to St James' I was warned by more than one person: "be careful about how far you promote women up front: there some people who won't come to church if a woman's preaching or leading, and won't receive communion from them. The good people who warned me of these things were afraid offence being caused. But what about the offence *already* being caused by centuries of male domination?"

So often the church has colluded with gender abuse through our corrupted submission teachings and their consequences. Why are men allowed to get away with sexist attitudes, thoughtless asides and hurtful put-downs in the church, but not women? We sing songs proclaiming "Jesus saves" but the questions remain, "Who does Jesus save?" "How does Jesus save?" Do we proclaim liberation but still keep women firmly "in their place"? The Gospel *has* to be good news for women as well as men – and we need to think hard about what that means. Instead of colluding with our own sinful nature, the church needs to be at the forefront of modelling God's intention for his creation. That's why, from the word "go", even though it so happens that our paid ministry team are mostly

men at present, I have actively sought to include and promote women at all levels of leadership and teaching. And we need more on the leading and preaching team, not only to provide a woman's face and woman's voice, but the female contribution to spiritual leadership that God has created and is so passionate for.

So if you're a man here, confronted by this list of women some of whom you may not have been aware of before, ask yourself why you weren't aware of them. And which women's voices do you listen to? As men, we're very good at filtering out and dismissing voices too challenging to our egos. And if you're a woman, don't simply accept the rubbish characterisations men put upon you: stand up and be counted with your spiritual forebears in the Bible. Your womanly ways, just like the many feminine personality traits within God, are totally indispensable. Ask yourselves, "What is it that's so special and valuable in my female contribution? Take hold of it, be proud of it, and exercise your ministry powerfully as a woman in this world.