

Wonderful Women of the Old Testament by Janet Shepherd

Having always had a keen interest in history and literature, it's not really surprising that I should be absorbed by the histories and poetry of the Old Testament. I make no apologies for always quoting from the Authorised Version since its poetry is without parallel. Such a vast account precludes doing more than sharing a tiny portion of the whole and, to that end, recounting a little of the lives of those women who have been such an inspiration to me.

Genesis 29 and 30

Genesis records the story of two sisters, Leah and Rachel. It states that Leah had 'beautiful eyes' but that Rachel was 'lovely in every way'. Such detailed descriptions of so long ago add such authenticity to this family life for, from time to time, I've met with a girl who suffers the presence of a beautiful sister whilst being somewhat plain herself.

Despite Jacob's adoration of Rachel, culminating in a seven-year wait for his bride, Leah is sent to him, under cover of a darkened tent, and only in the cruel morning light does he discover his father-in-law's deception. With neither thought nor compassion for the effect upon his daughter, Laban then proceeds to give Rachel to Jacob just one week later. The immeasurable unhappiness and rivalry that thereafter ensues between the two sisters may only be guessed at. When I read today of a girl whisked abroad and there forced to marry a man of her father's choice, I remember Leah.

Exodus 1.16-21

Courage and enterprise feature quite frequently among the women of the Old Testament. When, in Exodus, the midwives ignore the King's command to kill all male Hebrew babies and their defiance is revealed, they face him with the information that Hebrew women have so short a labour that their babies arrive before the midwives can get to them. Their actions are justified when Moses is discovered and adopted by the Egyptian princess. The quick-thinking Miriam promptly offers to supply a nurse and I love the dramatic irony that ensues as Jochabed is paid to raise her own son and teach him the faith of his fathers. These are excellent examples of indigenous women and captives alike, boldly resisting authority and thus participating in the greater future plans.

Joshua 1.8-9

Leaping ahead to some poetry in Joshua I would just like to mention two succinct verses which have meant so much to me over the decades. God's promise to Joshua surely is as relevant to our needs today as on the day it was written:

'This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth
But thou shalt meditate therein, day and night,
That thou mayest observe to do all that is written therein:
For then thou shalt make thy way prosperous
And then thou shalt have good success.
Have not I commanded thee?
Be strong and of a good courage:
Be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed:
For the Lord thy God is with thee, whithersoever thou goest''.

Joshua 2.6

With this glorious promise ringing in his ears, Joshua sends his two spies to Jericho. What better place for two strangers to sojourn than a brothel, but suspicion still falls on the men.

At considerable risk to herself, Rahab hides the spies with an account as good as any World War 2 escape plan. The tale recounts: ‘She brought them up to the roof of the house, and hid them with the stalks of flax, which she had lain in order upon the roof’. Resourceful and daring Rahab may have been, but her motives were driven by her observation that Joshua’s God was no everyday God. Recognising His sovereignty she bargains her family’s future safety on Joshua’s promise which he fulfilled.

So a woman who might otherwise have been scorned, acts on her new found faith and becomes accepted. Consider the women in Europe who hid, fleeing Jews during the Second World War and remember Rahab.

Ruth 1.16

Another beautiful dedication of loyalty from one woman to another surely has to be that of Ruth to her mother-in-law, Naomi.

“Beseech me not to leave thee
nor to return from following after thee;
for whither thou goest, I will go;
and where thou lodgest, I will lodge:
thy people shall be my people,
and thy God my God.
Where thou diest, will I die and there will I be buried
The Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me”.

This, from a Moabite woman, who knew nothing of the country to which Naomi was about to return. When Naomi leaves Moab, her principle concern was the lack of kinsmen available to marry her daughter-in-laws, but after a short time back in Bethlehem, she recover from saying “The Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me” and develops a strategy. Now she becomes a woman of intent, with a purpose. These two women must have been very close indeed for now Naomi instructs Ruth to make herself as attractive as possible and wait until Boaz is wined and dined and then go lie at his feet! (Chapter 3.3).

We should not overlook the integrity of Boaz who first establishes his kinsmen’s prior claim to Ruth and Naomi’s property before taking this lovely young woman as his wife. It’s clear, however, that Ruth was a risk-taker who took chances that few women would be prepared to take. (Chapter 4)

Thus a widowed peasant-immigrant became part of a nation’s most important family tree – ultimately that of the King of Kings. Famine drives people from their homelands to this day. What joy and relief it must be to them when they are, at last, able to go home again.

1 Samuel 1 and 2

Twenty first century woman does not need to look far in order to identify with Hannah. In the depths of her childless grief she whispers her pleading prayers to the Lord, with such intensity, that Eli mistakes her exhortations for drunkenness. How wonderful then is the outcome, as sharing her misery with Eli, he prophesies that all will be well and that the God of Israel will “grant her petition”.

In her overwhelming yearning for a son, she promises the Lord that, if He grant her request, the boy shall be given back to Him. This promise has to be the ultimate in any mother’s giving. Not merely nurturing his faith but handing him over bodily to a life of service and denying herself in the process. How she could so relinquish him is beyond my

comprehension. She promises to keep him only “until he was weaned” – probably no more than three years, and then she takes him to the temple. Note how so many benefit from her integrity: Eli gets a second chance to influence a child seeing how disappointed he must have been at the “vile” behaviour of his own sons. Living daily in the presence of this promising, godly, small boy must have been such a solace to him.

Hannah goes on to have a sizeable family but not before she has lifted up her voice in praise and rejoicing at all the many blessings her God has heaped upon her. Here is Mary’s Magnificat in Old Testament parlance:

“There is none holy as the Lord:
For there is none beside thee:
Neither is there any rock like our God”.

All Israel would be blessed by the presence of this remarkable prophet who was to lead them for decades to come and choose David to be their king.

Today’s barren women may well conceive as a result of IVF treatment. It would be good to know how many have been blessed as a result of meditative prayer.

Although I have by no means listed all the OT women here, I feel all womankind is represented from prostitute to nobility. Surely what they all had in common was trust, summed up in the Proverb:

“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart:
And lean not unto thine own understanding.
In all thy ways acknowledge him
And he shall direct thy paths. (Proverbs 3.5-6)