

Appendix: Bringing the Women of the Bible Out from the Shadows

Growing up in an evangelical church, I heard some about the women of the Bible. Not much. Just enough to tell me that Godde's will for me was to grow up, get married, and have kids. That's what Christian women did. That's what the women in the Bible did. And sure enough, whenever I heard about the women in the Bible, they were wives and mothers, taking care of their families.

But submission of wives to husbands was not the only thing I learned growing up evangelical. I also learned how important it was to read the Bible and know what the Bible says. As far as I'm concerned, the "knowing your Bible" emphasis backfired on the movement with me. Because I started noticing something. I started noticing women weren't only wives and mothers. I learned women didn't always submit to their husbands. I learned there were single women in the Bible who never married or had children.

The women in the Bible I came to know through my own study were totally different women than I grew up with in Sunday Schools and sermons. These were tough women, strong women, and intelligent women. I found out women were judges, prophets, worship leaders, and business women. I found out a man would not go to war without a certain woman by his side. I found out women were evangelists, preachers, and patrons of the church. I found out these women had been set to the side and put in the shadows. They had been marginalized and ignored because they weren't simply wives and mothers. They showed women could be more, much more.

Thanks to women coming into Biblical studies and theology, these women's stories are being told. But we have a long way to go. So how do we go about bringing these women to center stage? How do we bring them out of the shadows?

How do we go about bringing the women of the Bible out of hiding?

The most important thing you can do is ask two questions: What does the story say? What doesn't the story say? We come to the Bible with layer on layer on layer of interpretations and tradition. We come to the Bible with layer upon layer of assumptions and other cultural norms being imposed on the story. We come with our own assumptions and cultural baggage. Reading and re-reading and reading again the story and seeing what's

there and what isn't there is the most important thing we can do. In the process of reading and re-reading the story and asking "what does this story say," "what doesn't this story say," we begin to peel away the layers of interpretations and traditions and assumptions. We begin to see the cultural baggage of our own time and past times that have been hung on the story.

This is particularly important when reading the stories of biblical women. A *lot* of cultural baggage regarding what women are supposed to be like gets attached to these women. We've seen this again and again with the women we have studied in this book.

Deborah gets buried under a lot of baggage (Judges 4). The part of Christianity that believes women were made to be helpers to their husbands, that women are to be submissive wives and mothers, do not like Deborah. They do one of two things to her: 1) they ignore her or 2) they explain away her leadership roles. If they have to admit Godde does call women to lead in both religious and civil settings (including leading men), they have to admit their interpretation of the Bible is wrong. Instead they marginalize the women leaders in the Bible, like Deborah. Here's how they diminish Deborah's role: 1) the only reason Deborah is a judge is because no man would step up to the plate. Deborah is Godde's last resort. 2) Deborah and Barak were married, so Barak was the leader and Deborah was his helpmate. 3) Deborah's husband Lappidoth was a commander with Barak, so Deborah is under her husband's authority.

This is why it's so important to read and re-read the story and see what is really there. And just importantly, to see what's not there. A lot of what we believe about biblical women and how Christian women should behave and act simply is not in the Bible. It's all been added on. Or the stories that back up the presuppositions are the ones we hear about while the rest are changed or ignored.

The second thing we need to realize is the Bible is all about action. The Bible is not all that interested in motives. In the Bible, you show who you are and what your motives are by what you do. Actions always take precedence over motive. When we look at the stories of the Biblical women, one of the first things we ask is what does this woman do? What are her actions? Then we ask, what do these actions say about the woman? And what do the woman's actions say about Godde?

After we ask what does the story say? What doesn't it say? And what do the actions in this story say? We look at

the history and culture these women lived in, which changes throughout the Bible.

Women's and men's roles change from culture to culture and from one era to the next. During the time of the Hebrew Scriptures, it was the women's job to not only make the tents, but to put them up and then take them down again. So when we read in Judges 4 that tent pegs and a hammer are in Jael's tent in easy reach for her, this rings true. Of course the pegs and hammer would be in her tent; she assembled the tent and broke it down when it was time to move on. When the Israelites started settling down in houses, the men built them. But it was the woman's job to repair them by replacing bricks and fixing the roof. It may be considered man's work today, but 4,000 years ago, it was women's work. Gender roles do change from culture to culture and over time. They are not static.

Another thing we need to know is that the more the government is centralized, the less of a role a woman has in the public sphere. We saw this with Deborah: during the time of the tribes—a decentralized government—a woman could be a military leader. That will change with the monarchy. During the monarchy when power is centralized to the king, the priests, and the ruling elite, women leaders disappear. The only two woman leaders who really appear at this time are Jezebel and Huldah. Jezebel had power and knew how to use it, which is why I think she gets cast as "evil," idolatry and all (1 Kings 16:29—22:40; 2 Kings 9:30-37). At the end of the monarchy in Jerusalem Huldah appears, but she is a safe woman leader (2 Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 34). She is married to the keeper of the wardrobe for the palace, so she is upper class. And she is a prophet, which was still a safe role for women. You would not find a Deborah during this time.

The last thing to remember about the Bible is that obedience is more important than cultural norms. Read that again: obedience is more important than cultural norms. The cultural norm in Egypt at the time Moses was born was to throw baby boys into the Nile (Exodus 1--2). Jochebed obeyed God by breaking both the law of the land and what was culturally expected of her. She was a slave; she was expected to obey her human rulers, period. She didn't. She obeyed God. In Genesis the cultural norm said it was the patriarch who decided who would be the next clan leader and the heir of the covenant with God. Isaac was going to bless Esau and pass leadership on to him. But the matriarch, Rebekah, knew Jacob was the child of promise and the heir. So Rebekah became a trickster (a role that ran rampant in her family) and manipulated the situation so Jacob received the blessing (Genesis 27).

The three historical and cultural things to remember when reading these women's stories are: gender roles change, the more decentralized a government the more power women have in the public sphere, and in the Bible obedience is always more important than cultural norms.

Bringing the Women of the Bible Out from the Shadows A Cheat Sheet

Ask these questions:

- † What does the story say?
- † What doesn't the story say?
- † What does this woman do? What are her actions?
- † What do these actions say about the woman?
- † What do the woman's actions say about Godde?

Learn about biblical history and culture and remember:

- † Gender roles change from one culture to another and one age to the next.
- † The more centralized a government is, the less power women have in the public sphere.
- † Obeying Godde always takes precedence over culture norms and mores.

Bible Study Helps

Here are a list of books that can help you get on your way in studying the Bible. I've given two sets of Bible dictionaries and commentaries. For my more conservative readers who have a more literal view of how the Bible should be read, you'll want to look at the dictionaries and resources from InterVarsity Press. On the other hand, if you're more liberal and don't believe the Bible needs to be interpreted literally, you'll want to check out the resources from HarperCollins Publishers. The same goes with the two women's commentaries I've listed: the one edited by Katherine Clark Kroeger and Mary J. Evans is for the more conservative, and the commentary edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe is more liberal. All of these resources believe in the full equality of women.

Forth, Sarah S. *Eve's Bible: A Woman's Guide to the Old Testament*. New York: St. Martins Griffin, 2008.

Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories*. New York: Schocken Books, 2002.

Keener, Craig. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993.

Kroeger, Catharine Clark and Richard Clark Kroeger. *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992.

Kroeger, Catherine Clark and Mary J. Evans. *The IVP Women's Bible Commentary*. Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002.

Mays, James L., ed. *HarperCollins Bible Commentary*. Revised edition. New York: HarperCollins, 2000.

Meyers, Carol, ed. *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmanns Publishing Company, 2000.

Newsome, Carol A. and Sharon H. Ringe, eds. *Women's Bible Commentary*. Expanded edition. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.

Powell, Mark Allan. *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011.

Pritchard, James B. *HarperCollins Concise Atlas of the Bible*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997.

Vamosh, Miriam Feinberg. *Women at the Time of the Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008.

Walton, John H., Victor H. Matthews and Mark W. Chavalas. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*. Downer's Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2000.