

From Widows to Warriors

Women's Stories from the Old Testament

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Introduction

It is All Saints' Day at a Roman Catholic elementary school. The students are dressed as saints and biblical characters. The boys dress as the twelve apostles, Joseph, Jesus, and Pontius Pilate. No two boys wear the same costume, because they have learned about so many male religious figures. The girls are all dressed as either Eve or Mary, because these are the only two female religious figures they know. The student who described this event wondered why she had not learned about more women in the Bible who could be role models or examples for her faith.¹

After reading the story of Deborah, another student wondered why she did not learn about her in Sunday school. "It would have made me and other girls grow up so much more determined and powerful." She had been taught that women were either sinful like Eve or pure like Mary. She wondered why neither society nor religion could find a more realistic view, which acknowledged that women could be both virtuous and sinful.²

More than a century earlier, Elizabeth Cady Stanton also wondered why preachers did not talk about Deborah. "We never hear sermons pointing women to the heroic virtues of Deborah as worthy of their imitation. Nothing is said in the pulpit to rouse them from the apathy of ages, to inspire them to do and dare great things. Oh, no! The lessons doled out to women, from the canon law, the Bible, the prayer-books and the catechisms, are meekness and self-abnegation; ever with covered heads (a badge of servitude) to do some humble service for man."³

Every semester in my Christian Feminism course, my students and I spend several class periods talking about women in the Bible. The students are surprised to find stories of rape, incest, prostitution, and murder. They are equally surprised to find positive stories about strong, talented, and faithful women. Some have regularly attended church and Sunday school or religious schools, and they wonder why they have never heard these stories before.

The obvious answer is that the stories are not being told. A quick scan of more than two hundred sermons by twentieth-century preachers found only five that featured a biblical woman.⁴ Why don't preachers preach and teachers teach more about biblical women?

Lectionary preachers might claim that women rarely appear in the lectionary. It is true that many stories about women are either omitted or truncated; but it is also true that approximately twenty texts about women are used in the three-year cycle of Old Testament lessons. There are also occasions when the prescribed text could easily be expanded to include a woman's story.

Sometimes we bypass the stories about women because we think men will not be interested in them. Ironically, we assume that the women who make up two-thirds of most congregations are endlessly fascinated with yet another sermon on Abraham or Moses. If women can learn from the lives of men, why can't men learn from the lives of women?

People who are unfamiliar with these stories often assume that they are uninteresting and not worth preaching. They might think that all biblical women do is have babies, whine, and manipulate men. My experience with these stories has been just the opposite. Students and parishioners find them fascinating. The stories may be strange and difficult, but they are also surprisingly relevant to contemporary issues of warfare, poverty, and justice. They provide a welcome alternative to yet another sermon on the Prodigal Son or the Good Shepherd.

Another reason for caution is that many of the biblical stories that include women are about sex, violence, or sex *and* violence. Some texts might not be suitable for Sunday morning, but there are other opportunities to present them, particularly in educational settings where conversation can occur. The rape of Tamar might not be appropriate for first-graders, but it is certainly relevant for everyone older than thirteen. Students of Scripture might ask themselves why they are so reluctant to deal with sex and violence in the Bible. Our culture is permeated with sex and violence, and many of us are eager for some kind of biblical perspective on these issues. If the Bible can talk about sex and violence, perhaps we should be willing to do so as well.

Those who choose to explore these texts face some significant challenges. First, people know very little about women in the Old Testament, and what they think they know is often wrong. The first step in studying them, then, is to reexamine what people think they know about the text, particularly the stories about Eve, Bathsheba, Delilah, and Jezebel.

Second, teachers and commentators throughout history and down to today have read their own assumptions (and, often, their own prejudices) into the text. For example, in his commentary on the story of Sarah and Hagar, John Calvin describes Hagar as a stubborn, rebellious slave girl who did not appreciate the privilege of being pregnant with Abraham's child. Naughty Hagar ran away when she did not get her way. She was the sinner in the story. Yet Old Testament scholar Phyllis Tribble finds in the same text a very different story about a young woman who was forced into a sexual relationship with a man old enough to be her grandfather. She ran away because Sarah abused her. Tribble recognizes that Hagar was not the sinner but the sinned against.⁵

How do two authors draw such different conclusions from the same text? In part, interpretation is based on the author's social context. Calvin wrote in a time when slaves and women were supposed to know their place in the world and accept it without questioning. When Tribble wrote four centuries later, she was acutely aware of those who were oppressed because of their race, class, and gender. Preachers and commentators try to interpret the text in a way that makes sense in their own contexts.

We humans constantly seek to explain the mysteries and uncertainties in our lives.⁶ Biblical interpreters (commentators, teachers, preachers, readers) encounter texts that are strange, mysterious, offensive, contradictory, and weird. Jephthah killed his daughter, but he is named as a hero of the faith in Hebrews 11. God tolerated Lot's slow and reluctant departure from Sodom but turned Lot's wife into a pillar of salt when she looked back on her burning city. David forced Bathsheba into a sexual relationship and then had her husband killed to cover up her pregnancy, but David is considered the best Israelite king. These texts beg for more explanation, but the text itself does not explain, so commentators look for a way to resolve the tensions: Jephthah's daughter died willingly. Lot's wife disobeyed. Bathsheba seduced David.

Sometimes the Bible praises a character whose behavior is heinous, and then commentators tell a story that justifies their actions. Samson was an angry man who did not live up to his potential, but commentators blame Delilah for bringing down this "good" man. At times

even God's strange behavior seems to need justification. Why did God tell Abraham to send Hagar away? She must have been a bad woman. Interpreters often want to tell a story in which God's actions always make sense and biblical characters do not commit heinous acts. They want the Bible to correspond with their vision of morality and justice. They want to believe that the biblical heroes are indeed heroes. They want to believe that bad people are punished and good people are rewarded. So if Rachel had no children, it is because God had closed her womb. If Dinah was sexually assaulted, it was her fault. Unfortunately, the Bible's vision of morality and justice does not always correspond with ours.

Many of the stories we tell ourselves in order to make life less mysterious and threatening turn out not to be true—and thus wind up being destructive. The same is true of the way preachers approach biblical stories. When interpreters misread the story of Eve and blame women for sin, they contribute to centuries of sexism, leading society to view women as inferior and dangerous. When commentators criticize a biblical woman like Miriam for speaking out or taking initiative, their words have a chilling effect on contemporary women readers. The stories we tell ourselves about the Bible have extraordinary power, but they are not always correct.

In this book I explore the stories that have been told about the women in the Old Testament. In preparing it, I read a number of commentaries⁷ and often found helpful explanations and wise insights. A few commentators, however, told stories that said more about their own agendas and anxieties than about the texts themselves. They blamed women for men's sins. They made sweeping generalizations about female nature based on one woman's behavior. They filled in the gaps of the stories with elaborate imaginative description. Most of these emphasized women's weakness and sinfulness.

I am not without my own biases in my interpretation of these texts, and the stories I tell are also shaped by my own concerns. In the interest of transparency, here are some of the lenses through which I view the texts.

- People in the Bible are rarely entirely good or entirely sinful. They have mixed motives. The heroes of faith demonstrate tragic flaws; the sinful, messy people demonstrate moments of grace and goodness. Even the people who seem profoundly bad (Delilah and Jezebel) might be honored as heroes by their own people.

- There are examples of sin and grace in these stories, but not always where we expect to find them. Rahab has often been dismissed as a sinful prostitute, but she was the vehicle of grace. Tamar (Gen. 38) has been labeled as a naughty woman who seduced her father-in-law, but she was actually the righteous one. Interpreters have often focused on the sin of sexual impropriety, while the text itself is more concerned with injustice.
- There are signs of strength and courage in these stories, but they are not always immediately obvious. In the cultural context of the Old Testament, women were not educated and often not permitted to learn the Torah. They had few resources and little formal power or authority. Simply to take initiative or to speak up demonstrated a great deal of courage, even though it seems a minimal effort to modern readers. When Rizpah sat with dead bodies, it was a powerful example of courage.

Reading Stories of Old Testament Women Today

Some who read these stories try to make sense of them by discerning the moral lesson they teach. The story then becomes either an example of good behavior or a warning to avoid bad behavior. This strategy usually oversimplifies the story and underestimates the vast cultural difference between the Bible's time and ours.

It is more helpful to focus on discerning God's action in these stories. How is God being gracious? How is God bringing about shalom? How does God redeem human brokenness? How does God work through human beings to bring about God's purposes?

Some texts about women are so ugly and devoid of good news that they are difficult to read and interpret. Some feminist critics have even said these stories should not be proclaimed as the word of the Lord. Perhaps the better approach is to ask where we find the word of the Lord in such stories of human brokenness and sin.

At my church, following the reading of the Old Testament lesson, the reader says, "The word of the Lord," and the congregation responds, "Thanks be to God." When I have preached on a difficult text, I'm sure that my intonation added a verbal question mark. "The word of the Lord?" Can it be the word of the Lord if it seems to approve of Jephthah killing his daughter or Hosea beating Gomer?

What does it mean to say that the text is the word of the Lord? Some

people claim that all parts of Scripture are inspired and infallible, but some biblical stories are horrible examples of human sinfulness. The “word of the Lord” in this case is “Do not do it this way!” These stories are not meant to be imitated but rather challenged and critiqued. I believe that all the stories of the Bible, even the ugliest, should be taken seriously. They deserve our attention, our conversation, and our criticism. We can challenge and critique the stories without fear, because we care about the texts and respect them, even if we cannot agree with or affirm them. Wrestling with the texts shows that we trust them and God enough to talk back.

One way to approach the most difficult stories is to ask how we might write a new ending for them. One of my students played the role of Martha in Lillian Hellman’s play *The Children’s Hour*. Her character shot herself out of despair at the end of the play. In a panel discussion after the play, I asked her how she dealt with the unremitting sadness and lack of hope and redemption. She said that she tried to write a new ending to the play. How might things have been different? Who could have intervened to change the course of action? Where might grace have been found?⁸

Those are wise words for difficult biblical stories as well. In the story of the rape of Tamar, for example, what might the characters have done differently? Rebekah tricked Isaac to get the blessing for her favorite son, Jacob, but then Jacob left home and she never saw him again. How might that story have been changed?

The biblical stories function as a mirror to say something true about human experience, both in the ancient world and in the twenty-first century. They can be horrifying and depressing. People dominate, hurt, and abuse each other, both then and now. The stories also show people being courageous and graceful and resisting evil.

A final word on how to read and use this book: Every section on one of the women of the Bible begins by briefly telling her story. Sometimes I will toss in something that a famous commentator has said—often to highlight how we have gotten these women’s stories wrong. Then I will suggest ways to “dive deeper” into the character’s story, and ways that story might connect to our own. These are certainly not exhaustive, and I invite readers to find many other ways to apply the text. It is my hope that both individual readers and Bible study groups will find resources here to enrich their encounter with Scripture.

1

The Matriarchs

EVE (Genesis 2–3)

Eve is second only to Mary the mother of Jesus as the most written-about woman in the Bible, but authors come to radically different conclusions about her. She is described as both the culmination of creation and an afterthought. She is portrayed as a flawed, stupid woman easily tricked by the serpent; as a seductive, conniving woman who tricked her innocent husband; and as an intelligent woman in search of wisdom. The story of Eve is simple enough to be told in a children's picture Bible but complicated enough to mystify commentators and theologians. The simple story sounds like this: God created the first man, Adam, out of the dust. Adam was lonely, even after God created the animals for him, so God took one of Adam's ribs and made a woman to be his helper. They lived happily until the serpent convinced her to eat the forbidden fruit and she tricked Adam into sharing it. God drove them out of the garden of Eden and cursed Adam with hard work and Eve with painful childbirth and subordination to Adam.

This version of the story has several errors, but it has still been used to define the roles of men and women in life, marriage, and the church. The author of 1 Timothy wrote: "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was

deceived and became a transgressor” (1 Tim. 2:12–14). Other interpreters conclude that because Eve was second to be created and first to sin, all women are intellectually and spiritually inferior to men. Some feminists have told the story in the same literal way and concluded that the Bible cannot be a good book for women if it teaches that they are the “second sex.”

The story is actually more complex and nuanced. Genesis 1–3 is not intended to be a science textbook or a verbatim transcript of what actually occurred at the beginning of time. It is a story or poem that people recited to explain the origins of the world and humanity. In fact, Genesis 1–3 contains two different and conflicting creation stories. They should not be read as literally true in all their details.¹ Still, the details of the text should not be dismissed as irrelevant, because the stories are embedded in our culture. Even people who do not read the Bible are vaguely aware of Adam and Eve and the apple.²

In a groundbreaking essay first published in 1973, Old Testament scholar Phyllis Trible offered a detailed retelling of the Genesis 2–3 story. She focused on the nuances of the Hebrew text itself, without the influence of the interpretations that said women were secondary and sinful. She saw that God created a human being (*adam*) out of dust (*adamah*). Later, after deciding that the “earth-creature” needed a partner, God put the *adam* to sleep, took out a rib, and built another human being. Both were made in God’s image. The woman was not fragile or weak or less intelligent than the *adam*. She was the culmination of creation, not an afterthought.³

Trible also noted that the relationship between the two was an equal partnership, not that of a leader and a follower or a master and a servant. The Hebrew word for help, *ezer*, usually refers to God’s strength and power, as in “Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth” (Ps. 124:8). If God was the help that was stronger than the *adam*, and animals were the help that was weaker, the woman was a help equal to him. She was not there to do his chores or raise his children, but to be an intimate partner who saved him from loneliness. She was his equal, with the same mind, rationality, soul, spiritual sensitivity, and connection with the creator.⁴

The man delighted in the woman, and they were naked and not ashamed. They had a relationship of trust, openness, and mutuality. Whether Adam and Eve were real people or not, the author says that in the beginning, human bodies and sexuality were good and valued.

Unfortunately, this openness and mutuality did not last. A serpent,

one of God's own creatures, suddenly appeared and engaged in a conversation about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The woman said they would die if they ate from the tree. The serpent assured her that they would not die, but the tree would make them wise. She wanted to be wise, and the fruit was appealing; so she ate it and gave some to the man.

Some commentators conclude that Eve was gullible, stupid, naive, and easily seduced by the serpent. Ironically, they also say that she was smart enough to trick Adam into eating the fruit, since he was not present for the conversation with the serpent. Perhaps he was pulling weeds somewhere else in the garden. If he had been there, he would have nipped that conversation in the bud and saved Eve from a major mistake.

This is a popular interpretation, but it is not supported by the text. Eve gave the fruit to her husband *who was with her* (Gen. 3:6). If Adam was intellectually and spiritually superior to Eve, why didn't he challenge the serpent? Why didn't he refuse to eat the fruit? Phyllis Trible pointed out that the man does not appear to be very intelligent or spiritually discerning in this story.⁵ The woman was thinking, questioning, and wrestling with the meaning of God's command. Adam said nothing, and when she gave him the fruit, he ate it without question.

Why was this so sinful? Were they disobedient? Arrogant? Proud? Or were they more like toddlers who were irresistibly drawn to touch the forbidden object? Was God an angry tyrant who set them up for failure?

These questions have intrigued readers for millennia, but the Bible does not answer them. The point of the story is that everything changed. Adam and Eve obtained knowledge, but it was not what they expected. The first thing they knew was that the nakedness that once delighted them now made them ashamed. They feared the judgment of God and each other, so they sewed fig leaves together in a pitiful and itchy attempt to cover themselves.

Their fear of exposure involved more than their bodies. They no longer felt comfortable encountering God in an easy, familiar way, so they hid. God came looking for them, saw their fear and shame, and asked if they had eaten from the tree. The man blamed the woman and indirectly the God who had given her to him. She was no longer a partner; rather, she was the source of his downfall. The woman blamed the serpent.

The consequences were devastating. To the woman, God said, "I will

greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (3:16). This verse has been used to justify male dominance, privilege, and even violence toward women. It has been used to exclude women from leadership in church and government, because they must be subordinate to all men, not just their husbands. Women have been denied the right to vote, to speak, and to be educated because of this verse.

Again, it is important to read the text carefully. The “curse of Eve” has been used to describe menstrual pain, labor pains, and the subordination of women, but God does not actually curse her. Still, life for women will change. They will experience painful labor, multiple pregnancies, and death in childbirth, but instead of refusing the sexual contact that produces pregnancy, they will desire men. This desire will cause emotional pain as well as physical. How often does a woman love a man who does not love her in return or is abusive to her?

The man experienced consequences in his vocation. The ground was cursed (though not the man), so the gardening that was originally pleasurable would be compromised by drought, tornadoes, and insects. Work would be hard.

Both shared equally in the most damaging effect of the fall. They lost the mutuality they shared in the beginning. All their relationships were distorted: with God, with their work, with their bodies, and with each other.

The creation that was so good in the beginning was now compromised by sin and brokenness. The two humans did not die immediately, but their lives were different and difficult. Adam and Eve experienced pain and loss. Their son Abel would be murdered by his brother Cain, who was then banished. They would never know the same kind of intimacy with God or each other as they had known in the garden. But there would be children, work, and a future of sorts. God would not abandon them. Life would continue in a different way.

Diving Deeper

Liberating Eve. Despite what many people have heard all their lives, this text does not say that women are secondary, inferior, or the cause of sin. Other ways to tell the story are better rooted in what the Bible actually says and not so influenced by an irrational fear of the power of women. How would you go about telling this story differently?⁶

Very good and very broken. This story illustrates the reality that the world and human beings were created to be very good. A new telling of it might explore what it means to be created in God's image and whether that image is the same for men and women. Glimpses of that original goodness still exist, but all of creation has been bent or damaged.

Ah, the humanity. We are limited, and much is beyond our control. We live with fear and doubt. We are lonely, sometimes in the midst of relationships. We have deep longings, for intimacy, for achievement, for clarity, for belonging. We want to make a difference. We want to be valued and appreciated. We want to be remembered. As we age, we realize our humanity and mortality in different ways. We get sick. We lose some of our abilities. We feel life closing in rather than opening up.⁷ The realities of fear, loneliness, and loss are often labeled as sinful attitudes that religious people must rise above, but they are not sinful so much as they are part of being human.

"Flesh of my flesh." The story demonstrates the power of intimate relationships rooted in commitment, trust, and vulnerability. We experience such joy when we find a person with whom we can be fully ourselves. To be naked with a partner and confident of being loved, admired, and respected is all too rare in a society that often shames people both for being sexual and for their imperfect and inadequate bodies. Marriage and family can be a place to celebrate the goodness of love and relationships.

Marriage can also be the place where human brokenness is most profoundly evident. Intimate relationships are hard work, and they require a high degree of vulnerability and trust. It can be terrifying to be so close to another person, in part because our own fears and flaws become so evident. The story of Eve and Adam might help us to talk honestly about the joys and struggles of marriage. This passage does not give advice about specific gender roles, but it raises broader questions of how flawed people live together. What are realistic expectations of marriage?

Adam and Steve. As people you know debate the issue of same-sex marriage, it might be helpful to turn to this text. This story speaks of a man and a woman, but the dynamics of relationship are also true for two men or two women. It is human nature to long for a person with whom we can have a relationship of trust and intimacy, and yet we also struggle with our own insecurities. We waver between our desires for independence and for connection. This Scripture tells a story about

what it means to be a human being in a relationship, with all its potential for brokenness and healing, sadness and joy.

The world was created to be very good, but we all know that the world is now a broken place. It is not the way it was meant to be. We live in a world with glimpses of goodness and overwhelming signs of evil. And yet, it is still God's world, and God is still creating, still gracious, still inviting human beings into relationship.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Thinking back over what you've heard about Eve in church and elsewhere, was it more negative or positive? In what you heard, did she bear more responsibility in the story than Adam, or less?

How would you tell the story of Eve differently than what you have usually heard?