

Worship for Women in the Old Testament

I. Introduction:

- A. "What was the place of women in biblical worship? On one hand, women had certain ritual limitations: They were not allowed to officiate at the altar, and were not required, as men were, to appear at the three pilgrimage festivals (Ex. 23:17, 34:23; Deut. 16:16). Nor, in later times when set prayers were instituted, were they required to pray at regular intervals. In Psalms, women appear as giving praise only twice (68:25, 148:12). On the other hand, many biblical stories indicate that women had special channels of communication with the Creator. (1)
- B. In the earliest days of the Israelite spiritual experience, while the tribes were still wandering in Sinai, women as well as men contributed their valuables for the construction of the Tabernacle (Ex. 35:22), and spun blue, purple and scarlet yarn as well as fine linen to be woven into cloth (Ex. 35:25) for use in the Tabernacle. *"They made the bronze basin and its bronze stand from the mirrors of the women who served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting."* (Exodus 38:8). (2)
- C. Although women are clearly bound by the terms of the covenant, they seem not to have had the same access to God in the Tent of Meeting. Why does the Bible mention women at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, but not inside? Women may not have been allowed inside the Tent of Meeting because of the belief that they were sometimes in a state that the Bible calls "unclean"...a ritually impure state resulting from the issue of blood.
- D. Before entering the Promised Land, women stood ready to enter the covenant with God (Deut. 29:11), and were required along with all of Israel to appear every seven years to listen to its teaching (Deut. 31:12). Daughters and female slaves are mentioned as among the celebrants after the bringing of offerings (Deut. 12:12) and at the Feast of Tabernacles (Deut. 16:13-14). Women brought offerings for ritual purification (Lev. 12:6; 15:28-29). They were also present when Joshua read out the blessings and curses to the people from Mount Ebal (Josh. 8:35), and much later, on the return from Exile after the destruction of the First Temple, when Ezra read the law out before the people (Neh. 8:2). Both women and men were subject to the death penalty for worshipping false gods (Deut. 17:2-5, 29:18), and both were required to atone through sacrificial offerings or monetary restitution for other infractions (Num. 5:6-7).
- E. Manoah and his unnamed wife (Samson's parents) made their offering together (Judg. 13:23). Hannah came to worship alongside her husband Elkanah at Shiloh (1 Sam. 1:9), and shared in the sacrificial meal along with her co-wife Peninah and all her sons as well as daughters (1 Sam. 1:4).
- F. Among the "whole house of Israel" that brought the Ark to Jerusalem in joyous procession, women were certainly present, because each woman later received from David's hand a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and cake of raisins (1 Chron. 16:3). (3)

II. How Did Women Express Their Faith?

- A. From the days of the Patriarchs, the Bible clearly shows men in charge of ritual activities (Gen. 22:9-14, 26:23-25, 28:18-19). But at least one religious function was open to women - **Prophecy**. The Bible regards Miriam as a prophetess, although her

actual prophecies are not mentioned. Also pertaining to Miriam, we learn that song and dance were a significant way for women to enrich their spiritual lives. Deborah, also called a prophetess, answers the criteria for that function according to Deuteronomy 18:18-22 - she speaks for God and her prophecies are fulfilled. In First Temple times there was Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20) and the unnamed prophetess in Isaiah 8:3 who gave birth to a son.

- B. There were also unworthy female prophets, whom Ezekiel 13:17-23 calls "*the daughters of your people*," seemingly unwilling to confer the title of prophet on them, and condemns them along with their male counterparts. These women were lambasted not for the act of prophesying, but for doing so "*out of their own imagination*" and for using magic charms and veils of various lengths "*to ensnare people*." There was another prophetess as well, Noadiah, who together with male prophets is listed as opposing Nehemiah's construction of the Temple because of the political stir it was creating abroad (Neh. 6:14).
- C. In a world where public ritual activities belonged mostly to men, the story of Jephthah's daughter (Judg. 11), stands out. Jephthah's daughter asks to be allowed to go to the hills to "*weep with my friends, because I will never marry*." Judges tells us that from this comes the Israelite custom that each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite" (39-40).
- D. Another women's ceremony was baby-naming. Such ceremonies contain elements of praise to God for deliverance for example Leah's naming of Judah (Gen. 29:35), or the joy at the literal deliverance from the perils of pregnancy and childbirth with her naming of Asher, which means "joy" (Gen. 30:13). To this day, Jewish women say a special prayer in synagogue after childbirth.

III. Home Worship

- A. "Household religious practices, especially those of women, were more prominent, in terms of the day-to-day experience of most people, than were extra-household religious activities and cultic events." The unearthing of hundreds of figurines in excavations throughout Israel shows that the home continued to be a focus of ritual activity. Some scholars see these figurines as depicting the goddess Astarte or Ashram (1 Kings 15:13; 2 Kings 21:7; 2 Chr. 15:16) and as imitations of cult figures from shrines. However these statuettes, though they may have fulfilled a religious/spiritual function, may not have been goddesses at all. It has been suggested by some scholars looking back at life in those days that the Israelite woman, striving to reproduce in keeping with the biblical imperative and to ensure the survival of her family, may have even fashioned such figurines herself as a symbol of her hopes. The fact that many; have pendulous breasts may emphasize the maternal role. (4)
- B. The religious culture of women in households was not concerned with matters of life and death as abstract problems. Rather, their concerns with life and death were immediate and direct. Household religious culture dealing with reproduction was almost exclusively female. Older women and specialists would have held authoritative positions within the culture of birthing. The Bible gives us evidence of at least 4 such groups:

1. **Midwives.** The matriarch Rachel is attended by a midwife (Gen 35:17), and a midwife--the one who ties a "*crimson thread*" around the wrist of one of the newborns--is present at the delivery of Tamar's two sons (Gen 38:28). Midwives are likely the women who are present at the birth of Ichabod in 1 Sa 4:20. And Puah and Shiphrah are the two heroic midwives who defy Pharaoh's orders at the beginning of the exodus narrative (Exod 1:15-21). The midwives were recognized as religious as well as medical professionals. Prayers and incantations went along with the care.
2. **Necromancers.** The older women are often the ones who enlist the aid of the dead to achieve fertility or to protect mothers and infants. Women such as the medium of Endor (1 Sam 28:7-25) may have functioned in this capacity. The presence of so many pillar-figurines in tombs may indicate their use there by elderly women engaged in necromancy--in mediating between the living and their dead ancestors - in the service of their daughters' fertility. The practice of necromancy by both men and women is strongly condemned in Lev. (19:31; 20:6, 27) and Deuteronomy (18:11).
3. **Sorcerers.** Sorcerers are the only ones among the forbidden cultic professionals *(Deut. 18:10-12) for whom female practitioners are specifically mentioned *(in Exod. 22:18 and Isa 57:3).
4. **Diviners.** A strong anti-divination passage in Eek 13:17-23 is addressed to a group of female prophets.

IV. Women at Prayer in the Old Testament

- A. The words "*God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and opened her womb*" (Gen 30:22), intimates that Rachel prayed. We can also assume from the words of Genesis 30:17, "*God listened to Leah,*" that she, too, prayed.
- B. Did the angel who appeared to Hagar in her hour of need in the wilderness (Gen 16:7) come in answer to a prayer? If we consider prayer a dialogue between God and human beings, then the angel who appeared to Manoah's wife is also in this category. She received the message from the angel regarding Samson's birth even when it is her husband who asks for it. Manoah's wife displays special faithfulness and understanding of God's will when she says "*If the Lord had meant to kill us he would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering from our hands, nor show us all these things and now told us this.*" (Judg 13:23).
- C. The Bible records only two express instances of women praying - and both women have the same name. In the Old Testament, that woman is Hannah (1 Sam 2:20), and in the NT, she is known by the Greek form of the name - Anna (Luke 2:36).
- D. There are cases in the Bible where women seem to serve as a special channel for God's work. For example, the Shunammite woman who urged the itinerant prophet Elisha to stay in her home says to her husband, "*I know that this man who often comes our way is a holy man of God*" (2 Kings 4:9-10). The story that follows, when the woman becomes pregnant after years of barrenness and the son she bears later dies and is revived by Elisha, shows God's works in the lives of women.
- E. Another woman who receives news from a prophet is Jeroboam's wife, sent by her husband to Shiloh to speak to the prophet Ahijah (1 Kings 14:1-10). However, Jeroboam's wife brings back a message of impending disaster for her son.

V. Women's Vows

- A.** Numbers 30:3-15 makes it clear that women made religious vows in Bible days. Fathers or husbands were permitted to annul these vows; only women who were not under the authority of a man were obligated to make good on their vows under any circumstance. The Bible makes no mention of whether husbands actually made a practice of annulling their wives' vows. Jeremiah accuses husbands of acting together with their wives to make illicit vows to "the Queen of Heaven"- possibly the goddess Ishtar or Ashram (Jer 44:25).
- B.** According to Numbers 6:2, both men and women could make the vows of a Nazirite. Samson's mother, who swore off wine during her pregnancy, might have been making such a vow. Lemuel's mother obviously made a vow - of an unknown nature - regarding her son, because she calls him "*son of my vows*" (Prov 31:2).

VI. Women Who Fasted

- A.** Two examples are mentioned in the Bible of a woman fasting (on other than the Day of Atonement, when all were required to do so) : Esther (4:16), and Anna (LUke 2:37).

VII. Women and Idolatry

- A.** According to Jeremiah 7:16-20, 4:15, 19, twenty-five Israelite women worshipped what he called the Queen of Heaven, probably Ishtar, a Canaanite goddess and in the Bible called Ashtoreth. More familiar is Asherah, mentioned 40 times in the Bible.
- B.** Some scholars point to the involvement of foreign queens in importing idol worship into Israel: **(5)**
1. Jezebel, infamous for the "*450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Ashram that ate at her table*" (1 Kings 18:19), was from Sidon.
 2. Maacah, whose grandmother of the same name was one of David's wives (2 Sam 3:3), and came from Gesh;our beyond Israel's borders to the north, was deposed by her grandson Asa for Ashram worship (1 Kings 15:13).
- C.** Other scholars believe that the worship of Asherah came from local roots. In any case, the worship of Asherah seems to sometimes have been part of the official state religion, both in Israel and Judah. There was probably a representation of Asherah in the temple at Bethel (2 Kings 23:15) on the border of Israel with Judah. The wooden Ashram poles were destroyed by Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:4), but they returned, to be destroyed once more by Josiah the reformer king (2 Kings 23:6).
- D.** A significant part of the population - "*our kings, our leaders, our priests, and our fathers*" (Neh 9:34; Jer 44:17) was involved in Ashram worship. Women's practical participation in the worship of the Queen of Heaven seems to have revolved around traditional women's activity: weaving (2 Kings 23:7) - apparently clothing to drape over a state, kneading dough (Jer 7:18, 44:19) and sewing (Ezek 13:17). The women kneaded the dough for the offering go f the cakes, which was a central, and apparently public, part of the worship of the goddess, and Jeremiah particularly excoriates the women for their role in this forbidden activity (44:25).

VIII. Music and Dance **(6)**

- A.** The Bible speaks of women singing, playing musical instruments or dancing in praise of God's saving power in some of its most dramatic stories, such as the crossing of the Red Sea, the victory of Deborah and Barak, and the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem. Praise-song and dance was a time that women could give full expression to their creativity in a public sphere. Women also gave thanks for the miracles in their lives, like Hannah's song. Archeomusicologist, Theodore Burgh, a post-doctoral fellow at Notre Dame asserts, "These figurines, and the Biblical record, clearly demonstrate that hand drums were used primarily by women." [34]
- B.** Scholars point out that Miriam's song in Exodus 15:20-21, following the rescue of the Israelites from their Egyptian pursuers can be seen as the inspiration for a number of praise s-songs sung by women throughout the Bible: *"Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing, Miriam and the women responded to the song of Moses and the Israelites with this chorus: ' Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.'"*
- C.** Perhaps the best-known victory song in the Bible is in Judges 5. Although the introductory verse says Deborah and Barak sang this song together, it has come down in history as "Deborah's Song," because it is her voice we hear.
- D.** Songs certainly must have been part of celebration following childbirth. The women recorded as speaking in unison in Ruth 4:14 and 17 are likely to be a vestige of such a song following the birth of her son, Obed.
- E.** Women sang and danced when welcoming a leader home as with Jephthah and David.
- F.** There was singing and dancing at festival times, marriages, and harvests.
- G.** Just as women in Bible times had special public functions when it came to dancing and singing on joyous occasions, the same was true in times of mourning. (Jer 9:17).