

# *Women in Scripture*



*A Dictionary of*  
Named and Unnamed Women in the  
Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books,  
and the New Testament



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JACKET ILLUSTRATION: *Women at the Nile*. The five women depicted on the jacket are part of the paintings on the west wall of the third-century C.E. synagogue at Dura Europos in Mesopotamia. The two figures at left probably represent two of the women walking along the Nile with Pharaoh's daughter in Exodus 2:5. The two women at right, who face the unseen Pharaoh, may be the two midwives of the exodus story, Shiphrah and Puah. The kneeling figure defies identification. She may be the Egyptian princess discovering the infant Moses or the baby's mother putting him into the river.

FOR FURTHER READING: Bird, Phyllis. "To Play the Harlot": An Inquiry into an Old Testament Metaphor." Exum, J. Cheryl. *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives*.

### JUDG 16:17 Mother of Samson

SEE JUDG 13:2–25, etc. Mother of Samson (Part II).

### JUDG 16:27

## Philistine Women

Philistine women are specifically mentioned, along with men, as being among the spectators in the temple of Dagon and on the roof when Samson pulls down the temple, killing them all.

J. CHERYL EXUM

SEE ALSO Part I: Delilah; Part II: Wife of Samson (Judg 14:1–15:6).

### JUDG 17:1–4

## Mother of Micah

A woman living in the hill country of Ephraim in the period of the judges discovers that eleven hundred pieces of silver have been stolen from her. She then utters a curse (Hebrew *'ālā*) in the hearing of her son Micah, who is the thief. The wording of the curse is not preserved, although that of a subsequent blessing appears in v. 3. The curse, which must have had a formulaic quality similar to that of the blessing, would have proclaimed her hope that God would punish the thief. Micah immediately confesses his theft and returns the sum — a goodly amount, indicating a prosperous household — thereby escaping God's punishment.

Apparently if a curse was spoken audibly (compare Lev 5:1, "audible curse"; NRSV, "public adjuration"), it constituted a conditional rather than an absolute imprecation: it allowed the guilty party to come forth and make restitution (in the case of theft). The use of both blessing and cursing formu-

las were part of ancient Near Eastern legal tradition, used either to protect property or to attempt to establish guilt. The mother of Micah clearly is presented as having the right to utter a legally valid imprecation; indeed this text is the only biblical narrative that presents a property-protection use of a curse.

The story does not end with the return of the stolen property. The woman decides that the silver, or at least a portion of it (two hundred pieces), should be consecrated to YHWH. She goes to a silversmith and commissions an "idol of cast metal" (v. 4). The idol is subsequently installed in the household shrine, which includes two other cult objects (an ephod and teraphim) and, eventually, a resident priestly officiant (Judg 17:7–13). This incident provides a rare glimpse into household, or private, religion. Most of the Hebrew Bible's cultic texts concern official public practices at the tabernacle or temple. Yet ancient Israelite religion in its totality included domestic as well as the more visible official practices. The narrative of Micah's mother, along with several other texts, indicates that women were major participants in household religious activities in ancient Israel, as is typically the case in traditional societies. It also suggests that women had some control over household assets.

CAROL MEYERS

SEE ALSO Part II: The Shunammite (2 Kgs 4:8–37, etc.); Women Worshipping the Queen of Heaven (Jer 7:18, etc.); Women Who Went to Egypt (Jer 43:6, etc.); Part III: Queen of Heaven.

FOR FURTHER READING: Bird, Phyllis. "The Place of Women in the Israelite Cultus."

### JUDGES 19–20

## Concubine (Secondary Wife) of a Levite

The story of the unnamed woman in Judges 19–20 is one of the most disturbing texts in the Hebrew Bible. The woman, who is from Bethlehem but lives with a Levite in the hill country of Ephraim, north

of Jerusalem, is referred to in Hebrew as the *pilegeš* of the Levite. The precise nature of the relationship between a man and his *pilegeš* is not always clear from the biblical texts, however, and scholars have sometimes disagreed about the term's meaning. It is usually translated into English as "concubine" and understood to refer to a wife or sexual partner of secondary status. Although certain men in the Hebrew Bible have both wives and concubines, no wives or additional concubines are referred to in Judges 19. The Levite is referred to as the "husband" of the woman (19:3; 20:4) and the "son-in-law" of the woman's father (19:5), who in turn is referred to as the Levite's "father-in-law" (19:4, 7, 9). The uncertain nature of the differences between a wife and a concubine reveals the complexities involved in understanding notions of kinship and marriage presupposed by biblical narratives.

The Hebrew text states that the woman "prostituted herself against" the Levite (19:2). Thus, it has often been assumed that she was sexually unfaithful to him. Certain Greek translations, however, state that she "became angry" with him. The latter interpretation is accepted by a number of commentators and modern English translations, including the NRSV, since the woman goes to her father's house rather than the house of a male lover. It is also possible that the woman's "prostitution" does not refer to literal sexual infidelity but is a sort of metaphor for the fact that she leaves her husband. The act of leaving one's husband is quite unusual in the Hebrew Bible, and the harsh language used to describe it could result from the fact that it was viewed in a very negative light.

Four months after the woman returns to Bethlehem, the Levite goes after her. Although the Hebrew text states that he wishes to "speak to her heart" (19:3; NRSV, "speak tenderly to her"), no discussion between the Levite and the woman is recounted. Indeed, the text never records any of the woman's words. The woman's father acts as if he is glad to see the Levite, but for several days he delays the return of the Levite and the woman to Ephraim. Because of this delay the travelers finally set out at a late hour and, due to the unwillingness of the Levite to

spend the night in a city of "foreigners" (19:12), arrive at the Benjaminite city of Gibeah after the sun has gone down.

Although hospitality to strangers was an important custom in the ancient world, the travelers initially have a difficult time finding a place to spend the night. They are finally offered hospitality by an old man who, like the Levite, is from Ephraim. While the travelers are eating, the house is surrounded by men of the city who, according to the Hebrew text, wish "to know" the Levite (19:22). "To know" is probably a euphemism for sexual intercourse here, as it is in other biblical texts and as the NRSV translates it. The Ephraimite host attempts to dissuade the men of the city from raping his male guest, offering to them his own daughter and the Levite's concubine in place of the Levite.

Several elements in this part of the story, including the offer of two women as objects of rape in the place of a male object, are very similar to elements of the story of Lot and his daughters (Gen 19:1–8). Apparently the sexual violation of women was considered less shameful than that of men, at least in the eyes of other men. Such an attitude reflects both the social subordination of women and the fact that homosexual rape was viewed as a particularly severe attack on male honor.

When the men of Gibeah refuse to accept the two women, one of the men inside the house throws the concubine outside. Interpreters generally agree that it is the Levite who throws her to the crowd, though the text only states ambiguously that "the man seized his concubine, and put her out to them" (Judg 19:25) without noting specifically which man is meant. The woman is then raped by the men of Gibeah throughout the night. They do not kill her, however, for in the morning she returns to the house from which she was thrown and collapses at the door. The Levite finds her there when he rises to leave and orders her to get up. When she does not respond, for she apparently is near death, he places her on the back of his donkey and returns to Ephraim.

The text does not tell us exactly when or how the woman dies. The Levite, upon his arrival in

Ephraim, cuts the woman's body into twelve pieces and sends these pieces throughout the land. As a result of this action, the Israelites gather at Mizpah, a traditional site of tribal assembly, to listen to the Levite's story and plan a response to the Benjaminites. A cycle of violence ensues, resulting in the slaughter of many Benjaminite men, women, and children (20:35-48), the slaughter of most of the inhabitants of the city of Jabesh-gilead (21:8-12), and the kidnapping of young women at Shiloh (21:15-24).

It is unlikely that any of the characters in this troubling tale are meant to be understood in an entirely positive light. The story is placed in a section of Judges (chaps. 17-21) illustrating the social and religious chaos that preceded the institution of Israelite kingship. The horror of the tale represents extreme disorder, to be rectified only by the establishment of monarchic rule. The fate of the concubine is particularly gruesome, however, and the story has appropriately been called a "text of terror" by one feminist commentator (Trible).

KEN STONE

SEE ALSO Part II: Daughters of Lot (Gen 19:8-17, etc.); Virgin Daughter of the Old Man of Gibeah (Judg 19:24); Young Women of Shiloh (Judg 21:21-23).

FOR FURTHER READING: Exum, J. Cheryl. *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives*.

Stone, Ken. "Gender and Homosexuality in Judges 19: Subject-Honor, Object-Shame?"

Trible, Phyllis. *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*.

Yee, Gale A. "Ideological Criticism: Judges 17-21 and the Dismembered Body."

## JUDG 19:24

### Virgin Daughter of the Old Man of Gibeah

When Gibeonite men seek to rape his male guest, the Levite's host offers them his virgin daughter and the Levite's wife (concubine) instead. Perhaps two women are offered because two women are offered

in the parallel story of Lot (Genesis 19). The host's daughter is not thrown to the mob. Literarily speaking, perhaps she is not sexually abused because, unlike the Levite's wife, who flaunted her husband's authority by leaving him, she has done nothing to deserve punishment in the narrative.

J. CHERYL EXUM

SEE ALSO Part II: Daughters of Lot (Gen 19:8, etc.); Concubine (Secondary Wife) of a Levite (Judges 19-20).

FOR FURTHER READING: Exum, J. Cheryl. *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives*.

## JUDG 21:7, 16-18

### Daughters of Israel as Potential Wives for Benjaminites

Civil war between Benjamin and the other Israelite tribes begins and ends with sexual violence against women (Judges 19; 21). Whereas unwarranted Benjaminite lust provokes the military conflict and the slaughter of numerous Benjaminites, the necessity for sexual relations with women to maintain a tribal group's patrimony legitimizes rape in another context.

The surviving Benjaminites need wives to continue their line, but a vow prevents traditional marriage alliances with other tribes. They had "sworn by the LORD" not to give their daughters to Benjaminite men: "Cursed be anyone who gives a wife to Benjamin" (Judg 21:7, 18). Israelite men solve this dilemma by allowing the Benjaminites to capture the virgins of Jabesh-gilead (Judg 21:8-12) and permitting them to kidnap the daughters of Shiloh (presumably also virgins).

This story demonstrates concern for perpetuating tribal properties by providing heirs, and it indicates the existence of appropriate marriage alliances. The tension in the story lies between the need to punish the Benjaminites and the need to preserve their territorial integrity.

RHONDA BURNETTE-BLETSCH