

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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Deborah 3

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(Tob 1:8)

The Deborah of the Book of Tobit, like her biblical namesake in Judges 4-5, is notable in that she performs a role traditionally considered a male prerogative. According to Tobit's first-person account of his background, he learned the law from his grandmother Deborah because his father had died and left him an orphan. The full impact of this astonishing casual remark takes a moment to be felt.

Rabbinic literature compiled many centuries after the Book of Tobit suggests that it was uncommon for Jewish women to study the law, much less to teach it to a male. Some rabbinic authorities in the Talmud were adamant that women not be allowed to study Torah (*Turkistan Talmud Soḥa* 3:4; *Babylonian Talmud Yoma* 66b) or even claimed that teaching a daughter Torah was equivalent to teaching her obscenity (*Babylonian Talmud Soḥa* 20a). The Talmud mentions only one woman, Beruriah, said to have been the wife of the famous Rabbi Meir, who was learned in the law (*Babylonian Talmud Pesahim* 62b; *Babylonian Talmud Erubin* 53b).

The fact that Tobit had no father to teach him may have sanctioned Deborah's unusual performance of a man's duty. However, in some rabbinic literature, if a father failed to teach his son the law, the son was supposed to teach himself (*Mekilta, Pisha* 18). Deborah, like Beruriah, may be an exception; there is no indication that the other three named female characters in Tobit (Anna, Edna, Sarah) know the law. Yet the author does not indicate that there is anything odd about the way in which Tobit receives his education. Tobit, who is presented as scrupulously observant of the law, seems proud of his knowledge and unashamed of how he got it. Perhaps what Deborah did was not, after all, as uncommon as later traditions have led us to believe.

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SEE ALSO Part I: Anna 1; Deborah 1; Sarah 2.

FOR FURTHER READING: Branner, Leila L. *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women*.

Kraemer, Ross S. *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World*.

Delilah

meaning uncertain; perhaps "flirtatious," related to Arabic *dallāṭum*, "flirt"; or "languid," possibly from Hebrew *dal*, "to languish"

(Judges 16)

Delilah is the only woman in the Samson story whose name is given. Whatever its etymology, her name is a wordplay on Hebrew *laylā*, "night," for as the night overcomes the mighty sun (the name Samson, *šimšōn*, is related to "sun," *šemeš*), so Delilah overcomes the apparently invincible strong man, Samson.

The biblical story, in which Samson falls in love with her and then the Philistines use her to learn the secret of his strength, leaves us with more questions than answers about Delilah. She is not, as biblical women typically are, identified in terms of a man (husband, father, or brother). All we know is her name, which is a Hebrew name, and the place where she lives, the valley of Sorek, which lay between Israelite and Philistine territory. She and Samson are apparently lovers but are not married. What is her status in society? Is she a wealthy widow, like Judith? A sexually autonomous woman, like the woman in the Song of Solomon? A harlot, as is commonly supposed?

Delilah is not called a harlot. Samson is the profligate, and it is perhaps because he visits a harlot in Judg 16:1-3 that some readers conclude that Delilah is also a harlot (the phrase "and after that he fell in love with a woman . . ." [Judg 16:4] also links the two women). Delilah is not even called a Philistine, though it is usually assumed that she is because (1) Samson is attracted to Philistine women, (2) she has dealings with the Philistine rulers and it is unlikely that the Philistines would seek to enlist the aid of an Israelite woman, and (3) she betrays the Israelite hero to his enemies, and it is unlikely that a biblical author would portray one of his countrywomen doing such a scandalous thing

without further comment. All are good reasons, but none is conclusive. Actually, only one of the three women with whom Samson is involved — his wife — is specifically identified as a Philistine.

Delilah accepts a bribe to reveal the source of Samson's strength to the Philistines. The bribe would make sense if the woman was Israelite — she would probably need enticement to betray a leader of her people. Each of the Philistine rulers (probably five of them, representing the five important Philistine city-states) pays her eleven hundred pieces of silver. On the other hand, if Delilah is Philistine, perhaps the bribe simply underscores what a treacherous woman she is.

The text reports that Samson loves Delilah (16:4), but not that she loves him — a hint, perhaps, that she does not love him and will have no qualms about betraying him.

Three times Delilah tries unsuccessfully to learn the secret of Samson's strength. The Philistines instruct her to "entice" (NRSV, "coax") Samson, which suggests something sexual, but the text reports only her persistent questioning and nagging. She makes no secret of her intention. By the fourth time, it is apparent that she will carry out whatever procedure Samson describes, but Samson tells her anyway, and she cuts his hair, enabling the Philistines to capture him. The Hebrew text has Delilah cut Samson's hair, just as she did the binding (twice) and weaving of his hair. The text is rather difficult, however, and some of the versions introduce a "man" or a "barber" and have him cut Samson's hair.

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See ALSO Part II: Wife of Samson (Judg 14:1–5:6); Pros-
titute of Gaza (Judg 16:1–3); Philistine Women (Judg
16:27)

FOR FURTHER READING: Bal, Mieke. *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories*. Exum, J. Cheryl. *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)ver-
sions of Biblical Narratives*.

———. *Plotted, Shot, and Punished: Cultural Repre-
sentations of Biblical Women*.
Sasson, Jack M. "Who Cut Samson's Hair? (And Other
Trifling Issues Raised by Judges 16)."

Dinah

"judgment, cause," from Hebrew *dyn*, "to execute
judgment, plead the cause"

(Gen 30:21; 34; 46:15)

Dinah is the daughter of Jacob, the father of twelve sons (and thus the twelve tribes) in the ancestor narratives of Genesis. She is born to Leah after Leah has given birth to six sons. Leah names her (Gen 34:21), as biblical women often did as part of the maternal role. Of Jacob's daughters (others are noted in Gen 46:15), only Dinah is mentioned by name.

The story of Dinah deals with the Israelites' attempt to establish social boundaries for marriage. It seems to advocate an inclusive perspective (represented by Dinah and Jacob) in which, when mutual respect and honor characterize the relationship, cooperation and bonding ("give and take") with outsiders (represented by Shechem, Hamor, and the Shechemites) can take place.

The story is set during the ancestral period in the city of Shechem, the geographical center of a movement in which people of diverse backgrounds, customs, and religious beliefs merged to become the community of Israel. Dinah goes out "to visit the women of the region" (the indigenous people, 34:1). The phrase implies an openness to and acceptance of outsiders. Dinah's subsequent sexual intercourse with Shechem, the Hivite prince of the region, is the ultimate symbol of acceptance. And Hamor speaks to Jacob about "giving" his daughter in marriage to Shechem, in the same way that the Jacobites and Shechemites will "give and take" wives, live and trade in the same region, and hold property together peacefully.

But separatist tendencies within Jacob's community (represented by Simeon, Levi, and the other sons of Jacob) are threatened by this possibility and by Shechem's intercourse with Dinah. They want to resist intermarriage. Their idea of "give and take" is "taking" the sword, killing all the Shechemite males, plundering the city, and taking their wives and children. The story passes "judgment" (the meaning of Dinah's name) on their friendly attitude.

The story invites two opposing interpretations.