



Seduction and Salvation

Women as Tricksters in the Jewish
Scriptures

Biblical Women and their 'Cameo Roles'

- ▶ Appearances in biblical dramas: Sarah, Hagar, Rahab, Deborah, Jezebel, Ruth, Esther.
- ▶ What kind of literary representation of women is offered?
 - Women as tragic victims
 - Women as key players in historical narratives



Women as Key Players

Women often set important events into motion (as mothers, daughters, wives).

Hannah's independent spirit is manifested through her decision to dedicate her only son (the prophet Samuel) to God's service (I Sam. 2:1-10).

Ruth and Naomi are remembered for their commitment, courage and perseverance.



Ruth and Boaz

Ruth marries Boaz and secures the name of her dead husband through her son Obed (Ruth 4:1-6) in accordance with levirate marriage laws. Note the family connection with Tamar (Genesis 38): Tamar's son Perez is a forefather of Boaz. This makes both women play a key role in the family line that leads to the birth of David.



The Women by the Nile

‘Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman’ (Exodus 2:1).

- Moses’ mother
- Moses’ sister (Miriam?)
- Pharaoh’s unnamed daughter
- The ‘Hebrew midwives’

‘Without Moses there would be no exodus, but without these women there would be no Moses’ (Cheryl Exum).



The Hebrew Midwives (Exodus 1:15-21)

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land'..... The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 'When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birth-stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.'

But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, 'Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?' The midwives said to Pharaoh, 'Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.' So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.

When you attend Hebrew women
at birth, examine the child. If it is a boy,
kill him. If it is a girl, let her live.



Shiphrah and Puah

- ▶ The women baffle the king with stories about birth customs.
- ▶ Are they Egyptian or Hebrew maidservants (1:15: 'midwives of the Hebrews' or 'Hebrew midwives')?
- ▶ They disobey Pharaoh because 'they feared God' (1:17).
- ▶ 'From a literary viewpoint, the brief appearance of Shiphrah and Puah within the larger exodus story is highly suggestive. As those who aid birth, they are the first to assist in the birth of the Israelite nation' (Drorah Setel).



Unnamed Women and 'the Birth of Israel'

Now Pharaoh commanded all his people, 'Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live' (Exodus 1:22).

She [Moses' mother] hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket (lit: ark) for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at the distance, to see what would happen to him (Exodus 2:1-4).

- Moses' mother is 'obedient' to Pharaoh's command.
- Is the unnamed sister Miriam (15:20), who is often named with Moses (Numbers 12:4; 26:59; I Chronicles 6:3; Micah 6:4)? The possibility of different oral/written traditions cannot be ruled out.

Pharaoh's Daughter

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. 'This must be one of the Hebrews' children', she said (Exod. 2:5-6).

Fresco from the synagogue of Dura Europos (ca. 245 CE).



Mothers of the Exodus

Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, 'Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?' Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Yes'. So the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.' So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses (*mosheh*), 'because', she said, 'I drew him out of the water' (Exod. 2:7-10).

➤ *Mosheh* - lit. 'the one who draws out'

'Moses Brought to Pharaoh's Daughter', William Hogarth (1746).



Rahab and the Conquest of Canaan (Joshua 2:1-7)

Then Joshua son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, 'Go, view the land, especially Jericho'. So they went, and entered the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab, and spent the night there. The king of Jericho was told, 'Some Israelites have come here tonight to search out the land'. Then the king of Jericho sent orders to Rahab, 'Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come only to search out the whole land.' But the woman took the two men and hid them. Then she said, 'True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they came from. And when it was time to close the gate at dark, the men went out. Where the men went I do not know. Pursue them quickly, for you can overtake them'. She had, however, brought them up to the roof and hidden them with the stalks of flax that she had laid out on the roof. So the men pursued them on the way to the Jordan as far as the fords. As soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut.

Rahab and the Conquest of Canaan (Joshua 2:8-14)



Before they went to sleep, she came up to them on the roof and said to the men: 'I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that dread of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites, that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. As soon as we heard it, our hearts failed, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below. Now then, since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me by the Lord that you in turn will deal kindly with my family. Give me a sign of good faith that you will spare my father and mother, my brother and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death'. The men said to her, 'Our life for yours! If you do not tell this business of ours, then we will deal kindly and faithfully with you when the Lord gives us the land.'

Rahab and the Conquest of Canaan (Joshua 2:15-21)



Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was on the outer side of the city wall and she resided within the wall itself. She said to them, 'Go towards the hill country, so that the pursuers may not come upon you. Hide yourselves there for three days, until the pursuers have returned; then afterwards you may go your way'. The men said to her, 'We will be released from this oath that you have made us swear to you if we invade the land and you do not tie the crimson cord in the window through which you let us down, and you do not gather into your house your father and mother, your brothers, and all your family. If any of you go out of the doors of your house into the street, they shall be responsible for their own death, and we shall be innocent; but if a hand is laid upon any who are with you in the house, we shall bear the responsibility for their death. But if you tell this business of ours, then we shall be released from this oath that you made us swear to you'. She said, 'According to your words, so be it.' She sent them away and they departed. Then she tied the crimson cord in the window.

But Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, Joshua spared. Her family has lived in Israel ever since. For she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho (Joshua 6:25).

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