

## WOMEN IN THE BOOK OF JUDGES

### Judges

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Women are featured more prominently in Judges than in any other book of the Bible. Women tend to play more positive roles toward the beginning of the book and increasingly negative roles toward the end. With the exception of Delilah, the women in the latter half of the book remain nameless. Their roles can be summarized under the headings of wives, leaders, mothers, and victims.

First, the prologue opens with the one and only positive picture of matrimony: Aksah is the wife of the ideal deliverer Othniel (1:11-15). The prologue closes by describing spiritual apostasy in terms of Israelites marrying non-Israelite "daughters" (3:6). This theme of marriage with outsiders appears to be illustrated in the body of Judges by the references to Gideon's concubine (8:31), Gilead's prostitute (11:1), and Ibzan's arrangements for his children (12:9). The theme is then overtly illustrated in Samson's illicit relationships with women: a wife, a prostitute, and Delilah (chaps. 14-16). The epilogue features a thematic reversal of the positive prologue (esp. 1:11-15) with its depressing stories about the estranged concubine (19:1-2), vows against marrying Benjamites (21:1, 7, 18), and the forcing of many women to marry Benjamites (21:12-14, 20-23).

Second, a few women in Judges are heroically depicted in leadership roles. Deborah uniquely leads Israel in her "judicial" function as a prophetess (4:4-5; 5:7). Jael and a "certain woman" (9:53 ESV) each singlehandedly slay ruthless villains (4:17-22; 5:24-27; 9:53).

Third, the biological mothers in the book are mostly portrayed negatively. Sisera's mother expresses a depraved fixation on plunder (5:30). Abimelek's mother is Gideon's Canaanite concubine (8:31). Jephthah's mother is a prostitute (11:1). While Samson's nameless mother is honored by the messenger of the Lord (13:2-23), she appears to be apathetic to God's instructions (13:4, 7, 14, 24), and her progeny brings her only dishonor (e.g., 14:2-3). Micah's mother invests her money in idolatry (17:3-4).

Finally, the most dark and disturbing depictions of women in Judges concern victimization. The first reference is to the Canaanite pillaging of conquered women through rape (5:30). The second instance is the sacrifice of Jephthah's only daughter (11:30-40). Next is the Philistine burning of Samson's wife (15:6). Then the epilogue features a cluster of horrific accounts, including the rape and dismemberment of the Levite's concubine (19:16-30), the slaughter of Benjamite women (implied in 20:48), the slaughter of married women from Jabesh Gilead (21:10-11), and the seizure of virgins from both Jabesh Gilead and Shiloh (21:12-23). Such stories are concentrated in the epilogue of Judges and are especially symptomatic of Israel's Canaanization and rejection of God.

