

WOMEN IN JUDGES

Judges

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We have already noted in our survey of recent study of Judges the way the significance of women in Judges has been recognized, especially in feminist Studies. In general, the way women feature in Judges is in line with the way they are viewed in the Bible as a whole. They are not stereotyped as either good or bad, passive or active, wise or foolish, but are shown as exhibiting the same basic traits of character and capacities for good or ill as men are. Most of the women are not named, but neither are most of the men (e.g., the men of Judah, the elders of Gilead, the Levites of chs. 17-21, and so on). Some women are portrayed as leaders and heroes who equal or outdo men (Deborah, Jael, and the woman of Thebez); some show themselves shrewd and able to manipulate men to their own advantage (Achsah, Delilah); some are pure victims of male power, insecurity, ambition, or folly (Jephthah's daughter, the young Timnite woman, the Levite's concubine, the young women of Shiloh); and one is a traitor (Delilah). Some of them are presented in a way that engages our sympathy at a very profound level (Sisera's mother, Jephthah's daughter, the Levite's concubine). All of them, as we have seen, function in one way or another as foils for the evaluation of the character and behavior of the leading men.

True, the perspective of Judges is patriarchal, but in this respect there is nothing unusual about it; the whole Bible is the same. It is assumed that men will and should normally exercise leadership in the home and in the wider covenant community, especially in crisis situations such as war. This is justified in the New Testament on the basis of the relationships between the sexes established at creation, the relationship between Christ and the church, and the relationships of equality and subordination within the being of God himself (1 Tim. 2:11-15; Eph. 5:22-24; 1 Cor. 11:3). The book of Judges cannot be viewed as out of step, in this matter, with Scripture as a whole, or with a Christian worldview that is grounded in Scripture. It is also important to note that abuse of women (unless that is taken to include any form of male headship) is viewed as abhorrent in Judges, and associated with idolatry and apostasy. It is something that happens when Israel moves away from faithfulness to Yahweh and descends into moral and religious chaos. The portrayal of women in Judges as a whole has been well summarized by Susan Ackerman as follows:

In the end . . . there is no easy categorizing of Judges: it is neither a handbook of patriarchy nor a celebration of matriarchy; it can neither be condemned as a remorseless portrait of unrelenting misogyny nor be heralded as an archaic precursor of twentieth-century feminism. It paints no picture of a world of men alone, but it portrays no women's garden of paradise [either]. It is, if anything, a book not of "either/or" but of "both/and," a book that both glorifies the deeds of men and embraces the tales of women. Perhaps, moreover, this multidimensionality is just as it should be, for multiple dimensions are surely a hallmark of all religious traditions, including the Israelite religious traditions from which the book of Judges springs.¹



¹ Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in the Book of Judges and Biblical Israel*. ABRL. (New York: Doubleday, 1998). pp. 201-2