

7. PROSPECTS FOR WOMEN IN THE PERIOD OF THE EARLY SETTLEMENT OF ISRAEL

The period of the Conquest and the Settlement of the land, the time covered by the Books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth and the early part of Samuel, is a troubled period. Judges describes it as a time when “every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” On the one hand, there was no established monarchy, no central sanctuary for worship and instruction, and no frequent vision by a prophet. And, on the other hand, there was polytheistic idolatry on every side as well as quite an array of marauding bands and warrior nations. With all of this there was a clash of cultures, and unless the Israelites were firmly rooted in the faith, they were not able to withstand the pressures of the day. We are not surprised, then, to see in these books the record of failure and corruption in the tribes of Israel; what is surprising is to see how faithful and righteous a few of the people were.

It is hard for modern Christians to understand this period. It was a time of great turmoil in the ancient world. Archaeologically, we fix the time at the transition from the Late Bronze Age (1500-1200 B.C.) to the Iron Age (1200-600 B.C.). It was the time of the Hittite-Egyptian conflicts (with Israel in the middle); it was the time of the Trojan Wars and the resulting migrations; and it was the time of the Philistine invasion of the land of Canaan. From the military and political side of things, that was about as great a change as from conventional to nuclear weapons in our age. It was a violent time for small nations because there were constant bloody wars and sacking of villages. No major nation was in power to dominate the area and control the peace (with its own form of oppression). Israel had no experience in these things, and so had to rely upon God to raise up warrior-leaders to deliver them from trouble. Ultimately, it was a spiritual conflict, for the oppressors came against Israel when they became idolatrous, and the leaders that God raised up rescued Israel as they turned back to God.

When we read these accounts, therefore, we must remember the times from which they come. But we must also remember that the passages are written in narrative form--they are descriptive and not prescriptive. In fact, Judges invites the reader's evaluation, for the purpose of that book is to show the failure of God's people under charismatic leaders, and the need for a monarchy.

This section of the notes will survey several of the narratives about women to see what can be learned about how to live for God in a chaotic and evil world. The mixture of cultures will now be very informative for the narratives.

Rahab the Harlot

The most notable woman in the period of the Conquest (Joshua covers about ten years) is Rahab (Joshua 2:1,3; 6:17-25; Matthew 1:5; Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25), the prostitute in Jericho.

Her Background

Rahab belonged to the Amorite people, an idolatrous race, living in Jericho at the time the Israelites arrived. Her family lived with her--her parents, brothers and sisters, but their names are not given.

The Bible identifies Rahab as a whore,¹ a prostitute. Several modern writers have tried to suggest the word used means "innkeeper," thus making her a landlady at the wayside inn (probably they wish to soften such a woman's presence in the line of Judah). Others have suggested she was a concubine with a respectable business. But the Hebrew text uses *zonah* three times; and the Greek always translates it *porne*. Rahab's house was built against the town wall with the roof level with the ramparts, and a stairway leading up to the flat roof. Thus, the townspeople could easily know of her trade. The fact that James and Paul add 'the harlot' when using her name simply stresses the marvelous grace of God.

Her Faith

¹ Different English versions prefer different words. On the whole, the British are used to "whore"; Americans make it sound a little nicer with "harlot," or "prostitute."

Rahab was obviously dissatisfied with her life, for when she saw the chance to get out she took it. Such women often have sad lives; often they are more sinned against than sinning. Man's lust for the unlawful is responsible for harlotry.

Rahab's coming to faith is a classic. She heard about the work of the LORD, believed it, fell in line with God's program, and waited eagerly for redemption from judgment. The story of Rahab shows that even though the nation of Canaanites were under condemnation, any individual who wanted to escape the judgment could trust the word of the LORD and be delivered--the same is true today.²

She had heard of Yahweh's power; indeed, they all had, But she believed the report and responded by faith. When the spies came to her (what better place for them to go where no questions would be asked?) she knew that they were different--they were not idol worshipers. And, they were not going to be deterred from their mission, the fulfillment of God's promise of the land. It is interesting to observe that had she had a reputable life she would not have met them; and because her being a whore made her house more accessible to the spies, it was her sin that brought the opportunity for salvation. When the spies came, she was already a believer in the truth she had heard: "I know . . . Yahweh your God, he is God in heaven above, and in earth below" (Josh. 2:9-11). She must have sensed a call from God as she saw her place chosen by the spies.

Her faith is courageous. Had she at any time been discovered she would have been killed. But her faith led her to change her allegiance to Israel. She knew God was giving Israel the land. So before the spies left Rahab secured their promise that she would be spared from the judgment. The sign of her hope, and of their identification of her place, was the scarlet rope in the window. This sign of her belief was not unlike the Israelite's putting blood on the doorpost to escape the devastation in Egypt.

Her Salvation

Jericho was a Canaanite city destined for judgment. It was the "Moon City" (*yareakh* = "moon"); *Beth Shemesh* was the "House of the Sun." Such pagan centers were to be destroyed as part of God's decree to exterminate the Canaanites.

² Many critics say it was totally unfair to condemn all the Canaanites, but the situation is more complicated. True, a sentence of death lay on all of the Canaanites, but they did not have to die. The same is true today: a sentence of death lies on everyone and will be exacted at the coming of the LORD--but anyone who wants to escape that judgment can do so by faith.

But Rahab's salvation sounds an important note: even though the Canaanites were to be utterly defeated, individuals could by faith in the LORD. That is the way of salvation is--all are doomed for judgment, but those who believe would be saved.

Not only was Rahab delivered from Jericho, and her life spared, she entered fully into the commonwealth of Israel. She eventually married Salmon, one of the two spies she had saved, and became an ancestress in the royal line to David--and Jesus. She is one of the four Canaanite women who by grace shared in the line of Judah (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and probably Bathsheba). The Bible, though, focuses on her amazing faith: there was a common whore in Jericho who received no more knowledge of God than the other citizens of Jericho, but she believed, and when the opportunity came, became a follower of God and eventually an important link in the line to Jesus Christ.

Deborah the Judge

In the early stages of the settlement in the land of Canaan Deborah appears on the scene (Judg. 4 and 5; Heb. 11:32-34). This remarkable woman is unique, not only in Judges, but in the Old Testament. There is no genealogical record of the warrior and writer. She was the wife of Lapidoth (Judg. 4:4). Their home was between Bethel and Ramah in the hill country not far from Jerusalem--Jebus then. The palm tree under which she sat to rule the people became a land mark. Occasionally such a woman breaks in upon human history and makes a lasting impact on events; Deborah was gifted with superior spiritual, mental, and physical strengths to do God's work in a difficult time.

She Was a Wife

We know nothing of her marriage to Lapidoth. There is no reason to speculate on his status or nature; we can only say he was one of those men whose wife overshadowed him (like a member of the Dennis Thatcher club). Marriage, then, was not incompatible with her other work.

Deborah is called "a mother in Israel"; but there is no record of children. The way she uses this description strongly indicates it was a title of some political value (like "father of the country").

She Was a Prophetess

Deborah is one of the women in the Bible endowed with the prophetic gift--she was given the ability to discern the mind and purpose of God and declare it to others. She also was inspired by God to write a song that became a part of Holy Scripture--another aspect of the prophetic office.

Prophets were strategic in the theocracy, even though they were not part of the cultic order for worship (not part of the Temple staff). But the people sought Deborah and listened to her declare God's word--in a theocracy the one who speaks for God carries the weight.

She Was a Judge

Deborah was the fifth of the rulers of Israel in this period. This is remarkable, for it was usually men who held the office of judge. When we speak of a judge in this period, we have to think of an aristocratic person who was the pillar of society, the administrator of the laws, and the champion of the people against oppressors. In Deborah's time, the men lacked the courage and the leadership qualities: "General" Barak was the military leader--but he would not go to war unless Deborah went too; and in her song Deborah lamented how the men would not come forth to help. This is probably to be seen as a sign that he knew she was a prophet and he needed the word from God before he went.

As a judge Deborah would have sole jurisdiction over a segment of Israel (assuming the judgeships overlapped). Decisions would be settled by her, because as a prophetess she had the wisdom of God. But a judge was also a warrior--they not only ruled but had to secure the peace. So she called Barak and told him God wanted him to drive out the Canaanites. This he did--but with the brave hearted and dauntless ruler, Deborah, at his side. The Israelites were up against hundreds of iron war chariots from the powerful northern Canaanite capital of Hazor. Outnumbered ten to one by Sisera, Deborah won the victory--with God as her ally. A terrifying hailstorm overtook the Canaanites and worked to Israel's advantage, for the chariots got mired in the mud and were of no use to Sisera.

Sisera was then slain by Jael. Here is another remarkable event for the time. Jael, appearing to be an ally, invited the fleeing Sisera to rest in her tent, but when he was asleep she hammered a spike through his head. Deborah's song dwells on this as the climax of the victory; but she adds a little touch that only she could feel--the women in Sisera's family, she imagines, were looking for his return and wondering why he tarried, wondering if it was because the soldiers were dividing up the women

(literally “wombs,” a crude, impersonal reference to women) from the conquered Israelites. But these women of Israel, Deborah and Jael, would be no spoils of war for Sisera.

She Was a Poet

Not only could Deborah prophesy, rule, and fight but she could also write poetry. Her song is one of the oldest and finest pieces of Hebrew poetry. The song of praise magnifies the LORD as the One who gave the victory, and thereby brought revival to the nation. Her gifts were great because she served God wholeheartedly, to the limit of her ability and capacity.

Jephthah’s Daughter

We know very little about the daughter of Jephthah (Judges 11:29-40). Jephthah is known for his great acts of faith as a leader of Israel; but like so many leaders there were major character flaws and personal failures (e.g., Moses was a murderer, David was an adulterer and a murderer, etc.). With Jephthah there was a foolish vow that ultimately made his virgin daughter the victim.

Jephthah was the son of a prostitute and an unidentified father. He became a mighty warrior (a fascinating study in its own rights) but still suffered for the sins of his parents. He was not socially acceptable, expelled from the houses of the pure, having fled from his brothers to the land of Tob, where worthless fellows rallied to him. This was the only group that would welcome him. So his background and place was not among the “righteous” folks of society--until they needed him to fight for them.

At the time of battle Jephthah invoked the LORD: “If you indeed give me victory . . . then whatsoever comes forth from the doors of my house to meet me upon my return . . . I will offer it as a burnt offering” (11:30). The words do not specify what he thought would come out, so we cannot be sure of his intentions. Neither God nor the people of Gilead required that a vow like this be made. It appears that this may not have been as magnanimous an act of faith as it first appears--it was certainly a foolish vow in that the victim is not specified, and it may also have been an attempt to coerce God to give him the victory. God would give him the victory, because he did at least believe in the LORD and rose up to drive off the oppressors; but God did not give him the victory because he promised to give God a gift.

Jephthah's own daughter became the victim. She came out to meet him first. The houses of the time appear to be split level; the ground floor with a low ceiling (about five feet high) would house the animals, and the main floor the people. Jephthah was expecting a goat or donkey to be the first thing he saw, but his devoted daughter rushed past them to greet him. Jephthah was distressed to see her, but did not think he could nullify his vow (he could have, for it was a vow that went beyond what was to be vowed--no one can vow the life of another person for any reason). His daughter, however, acquiesced to his vow, requesting two months to go and lament with her friends. The text ends: "he did to her his vow which he had vowed" (11:39).

Some have argued that Jephthah merely shut her off as a virgin. But a close reading of the text surely indicates that he killed her--she was to be a burnt offering. Such a sacrifice was more pagan than Israelite; the Law forbade it. Moreover, the Law gave procedures for redeeming foolish vows. Was Jephthah ignorant of all this? Was he merely a zealot who refused to break his vow to God, no matter what? What ever his motive, the virgin daughter was a victim. Whatever happened to her, she was ruined because of a foolish vow of an otherwise successful judge who had overcome family situations to serve God. When the Bible lists him as a man of faith, it does not condone everything he did--certainly not the destruction of his daughter (Samson is also on the Hebrews 11 list).

One can only contrast Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22. But Jephthah, though grieved, does not invoke God to deliver her. Neither does she question her father--possibly not knowing the content of the vow. She becomes one of the victims in a time when life seems to have been held cheap. A vow led to a victory in battle, and the fulfillment of that vow produced another victim--a virgin daughter, whose only "error" was running out to praise her father. The girl, then, became a tradition in Israel as year by year the women went out to mourn for her. Her memory lived on, but as a victim of a foolish father. The story is a sad reflection on the times, and a stern warning of how religious zeal can overstep the bounds of righteousness--and common sense.

The Samson Saga

And then we come to Samson, and the women he chose. The story of Samson both entertains and teaches. But what message does it teach? It seems that the prevailing theme of the story is the examination of competing loyalties. On one level

it addresses the tension between filial devotion and erotic attachment, providing a strange twist to the observation of Genesis 2:24 (“Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh”). On the other level this story calls attention to the broken vow and its consequences.

The story is set in the time when the oppressing nation was Philistia--the Philistines remained enemies of Israel through to the time of David. This oppressing nation lay on the southern coast of Palestine and held the cities of Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, and Gath--what is called a Pentapolis (five-city region). These Philistines were Greeks; the cultural and literary background of Judges is Homer’s *Iliad*. These tribes had migrated from the Mediterranean region (Crete, Rhodes, the Aegean) and had hoped to settle in the Delta of Egypt; but the Egyptians under Ramses III drove them back, and they settled in lower Palestine--today’s Gaza strip. They were not Canaanites, so they did not come under the Israelite plans of wars against the Canaanites; but they were fierce fighters and wanted their share of the land (and they had iron!). God raised up Samson first to hold them in check.

It is against this background that we have to understand the story. Several people have studied this in depth, and you may be interested in reading them if you have the chance and interest. Cyrus Gordon has written *Greek and Semitic Civilizations* in which he compares the contents of the Books of Judges and Ruth in the Bible to Homer’s writings. There are many connections. James Crenshaw has written a little book, *Samson, A Secret Betrayed, A Vow Ignored*, in which he tries to work through the details of the saga, especially the riddles of the story. And then there is the masterful work by John Milton, “Samson Agonistes.” There seems to be a general consensus that the story is cast in the literary genre of tragedy as well as heroic literature--Samson is a tragic hero. According to Aristotle, a hero in Greek literature is one who suffers a fall from a great to a lowly position and in turn redeems himself by risking everything in a decisive act to save the community. But there are comic elements to the story of Samson as well. So the material is very complex, but very fascinating.

James Packer calls Samson the “Popeye” of the Bible. He is never consistent in his service of God, and he is often in violation of the *Nazirite* vow he was under. He abandoned his parent’s advice and authority, and seems to have become a law to himself--he respects their ideas, but does not share them. There are many ways to study this material; we will of course focus on the women in the Samson saga. I look at him as the all-American male. He lived for the moment, did not live up to his parent’s vow but allowed them to hold it, looked for one exploit after another, a

greater act of “derring do,” took nothing seriously until he had to, and used women to satisfy his passions. When his life was over, he had made no lasting spiritual contribution to his people. One can only read and ask, “What might have been?”

The Ideal Israelite Wife (Judg. 13:1-25)

The Samson Story cannot be understood apart from the study of the account of his birth and dedication. The event takes place within the troubled tribe of Dan when it lived in the south next to Philistia. A man named Manoah had a barren wife--who remains anonymous in the story. All of a sudden the Angel of the LORD appears to her and changes her whole expectation in life. She becomes the object of God’s watchful eye. In the Bible, God often enabled barren women to have children of destiny--this way they knew the child was a God-send.

The words of the Angel to the woman seem harsh at first: “Look, woman, you are barren and have not given birth.” But this was followed by the announcement of a pregnancy. The Angel then proceeded to instruct the woman in her diet during the pregnancy--avoid alcohol and anything unclean. The reason for this is that the child was to be a life-long *Nazirite*, and he would deliver Israel.

The *Nazirite* laws are listed in Numbers 6. Whoever was a *Nazirite* had to refrain from wine or beer, could not touch anything unclean (according to Leviticus’ lists), and could never cut the hair (this was the sign). All these meant that the individual was dedicated to the LORD for life.

The second scene of the story records the woman’s report to her husband. She does not merely retell the message, but interprets it--the child will be a *Nazirite* until the day of his death. The woman is cautious and proper in the report.

The third scene sees Manoah trying to get in on the deal, but only finds the repeated warnings from the Angel. Perhaps Manoah did not believe his wife, but he prayed that the Angel appear to him too. He received no new revelation, but a stern warning to listen to his wife. In fact, in answering his prayer the Angel appears to the woman in the field, and she runs to tell him that his prayer is heard. And Manoah’s words are rough and rude to the Angel, and impolite to his wife (“this woman”). Manoah wanted more details about the child, but got none; and he wanted the name of the Angel, but only got a clue--“Wonderful.” And yet when he heard that he responded correctly. It seems from the details of the passage that the woman was

more mature in the faith, the man only trying to control the situation, and the Angel.

The fourth scene takes place around holy fire. The Angel of the LORD ascends into heaven through the fire of the offering Manoah made, proving who he was. Because of this Manoah fears that they will now die, having seen the LORD. But his wife reasons correctly that the wondrous events came from God and nothing could destroy her newfound hope--it made no sense for the LORD to come to promise a child and then kill them. So she gently rebuked her husband and confessed her faith in the God who had removed her reproach.

The final scene is the birth of Samson. The name is a positive one, capturing his role as a deliverer. It means "little sun" (*shemesh* is "sun"; *shamshon* is "little son"). And as Samson grew, the Spirit of the LORD began to stir him. Great feats lay ahead.

In this first segment, then, we find a picture of a devout and pious woman who believed and correctly interpreted the revelation from the LORD. She, and others like Hanna after her, put the men to shame by their true spirituality. Samson would have an auspicious beginning with this mother in Israel.

Marriage Based on Physical Beauty (Judg. 14:1--15:19)

Scene One: Preparation for the Wedding (14:1-9). In a chance meeting Samson saw a lovely Timnite woman and decided to marry her. Samson asked his father to arrange a wedding; after a mild protest the father acquiesced. The basis for the marriage was, "she pleases me." The narrator, however, tells us God was going to use this poor choice to defeat the Philistines.

Crucial to the story, however, is the fact that on the way to Timnah he slew a lion with his bare hands. Then, on the way to the wedding, he noticed that bees had been in the carcass. So he scooped out some honey and ate it. This all would defile his *Nazirite* vows, for a carcass as unclean. Samson seems not to have cared much about his vow or about his parents--but to avoid upsetting them he did not tell them about this--twice the passage says he did not tell his parents. And his father seems not to be able to instill any character in the lad. In fact, Samson seems to have had a fascination with animal carcasses. He simply saw no restrictions on himself.

Scene Two: Wedding Festivities (14:10-20). At the wedding festivities, a week

long period of revelry, the Philistines gathered around, somewhat suspicious of an enemy marrying their Timnite. But undaunted, Samson proposed a riddle for a wager, based on the lion and the honey. The lovely Timnite woman teased the answer out of Samson and betrayed him to her friends. And, hardly a gracious loser, Samson slew 30 men of Ashkelon and covered his debt. Little did they know.

Scene Three: Reconciliation Attempts (15:1-8). When Samson came back to be reconciled to his wife, he found a cruel twist of fate--her father gave her to the best man, claiming not to know what happened to Samson (although probably thinking he would never see him again). Samson would not break into a bridal chamber--he had some scruples. But the father did not stop with accusations; he added insult by offering the little sister to Samson.

So Samson decided to ruin their crops by sending jackals with firebrands tied to them into the fields to burn them down. He would vent his wrath and get even. But the irony is that the townspeople took revenge on the father, burning his house and the whole family in Timnah. So the enemy Philistines took revenge for Samson. But Samson, angered all the more by this, slew many of them and fled. In the midst of it all the poor woman is a victim of the vindictive and cruel men.

Scene Four: Hand to Hand Combat (15:9-17). Samson now wanted quiet and refuge. But the Philistines wanted war. And the fellow Israelite tribes, not wanting war, were willing to hand over Samson to the enemies. But Samson was more loyal to his Israelite brothers, and devised a plan whereby he would not have to kill any of them. So when they led him to the waiting 3000 Philistines, he broke off the ropes and slew a thousand of them with the jawbone of an ass, stopping only to immortalize the deed in song.

Scene Five: Call for Help (15:17-18). Thirsty, and fearing death, Samson cried out to God. He now prayed as effectively as he had fought. Unlike the tribe of Judah, God now came to his assistance. Water came out of the jawbone, and he drank.

The purpose of this little epilogue is important. It shows that behind all the exploits of Samson God was at work. It was the power of God, not the power of Samson. But if Samson ignored God and the vow, he would be like other men.

Physical Lust Outside of Marriage (Judg. 16:1-3).

This short section presents another relationship between an Israelite and a

foreign woman--a harlot. Samson drowned his memories in the arms of a harlot. The lovely Timnite had accused him of not loving her; so he now would seek a role in which love played no part at all. Not having to prove his love, he could spend his passions. It would not satisfy, though; he would yet seek love from a woman.

But whilst he slept with this woman in Gaza the Philistines surrounded him. The harlot appears unable to hold Samson in bed by any means, for he quickly arises and abandons her. The Gazites were not attacking; they were content to let him waste his strength till dawn. But Samson proved that their plans were futile. He arose and carried the city gates away, leaving Gaza vulnerable to attack. Hebron is about 22 miles away.

Samson proved his mastery over the men of Gaza; but what would he do when his enemy was a woman. Until now the two foreign women have figured in the story, but not as enemies. The Timnite taunted his love to get the secret out of him, and he crumbled under her pressure. The prostitute delayed him so that men came to surround him, but he managed to get away. Samson never loved a virtuous woman.

Unreciprocated Love (Judg. 16:4-31)

The final episode of the Samson saga consists of the story of Samson and Delilah. The episode has three scenes: Samson's secret, downfall, and revenge.

Scene One: The Discovery of Samson's Secret (16:4-20). Samson loved another woman, Delilah, in the valley of Sorek. This section will describe his folly in loving a woman who did not return love in kind, but was willing to sell him off. Is not this the reverse of his infatuation with the Timnite? On the other hand, here Samson proves the Timnite's words wrong--he did love; but on the other hand, Delilah like Samson was only toying, gratifying her sexual desires. The Philistines persuaded her to entice Samson to tell the secret of his strength. This suggests that he might not have been that awesome to look at--they could not tell why he was so strong.

Delilah is very interesting in the story. She is the only woman named in the Samson story--a name which may mean "darling" or the like--but we cannot be sure since she may be Philistine. Not even Samson's mother is named. The point is that she, for an exorbitant price, betrayed him. Her name would live in infamy. But she too was used by her people to get at Samson.

The narrative is Hebrew story-telling at its best, a weave of narrative and

dialogue. The verbosity of the Philistines' speech suggest fear and agitation. But they do not want to slay him; they want to capture him. And so by deceit and by flattery (see Proverbs 5 and 7) she enticed him to explain the vow. Samson teased her several times before his fatal surrender, a surrender drawn out of him by her pouting and manipulation. Did he not think there was any danger? Did he have no real regard for the vow? At any rate, he acknowledged that it was through the *Nazirite* vow that God gave him strength. So while he slept, she cut his hair, the symbol of the strength--and he did not know that the Spirit of the LORD had left him.³ This is typical of Samson's spirituality.

Scene Two: Samson's Downfall (16:21-22). The Philistines caught him, gouged out his eyes, and carried him off in humiliation to Gaza. In a way, the Philistines rescued Samson from the affliction of a greater enemy, the woman he loved, a woman who loved money more than him. Samson would never see her count the money, for he was fastened in chains and used as an animal to grind.

The rabbis caught the irony of this story: "In Gaza he first saw a Timnite and went whoring after foreign women; in Gaza he was blinded and became a prisoner." His weakness almost became the death of him; his sin brought him to the brink of ruin.

But the scene ends on a positive note--his hair began to grow. Here was that old stirring once again that hastens the story to its culmination.

Scene Three: Samson's Revenge (16:23-30). The final scene records a remarkable spiritual event. Not only did Samson's hair grow, but he called on the LORD a second time, this time to destroy his enemies. At a feast to their god Dagon, the Philistines called for Samson to make sport of him. But their joyous clamor did not drown out Samson's plea to God. Armed with faith alone he grasped the columns and brought the roof down. Blind, shackled, ridiculed, he slew more Philistines in his death than in his life time. And the final verse throbs with pathos--his brothers came to take his body for burial.

³ Remember, in the Old Testament before the great day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit temporarily indwelt/came upon theocratic administrators for specific tasks and missions--kings, priests, prophets, judges and the like. The Spirit's leaving Samson meant that God was no longer enabling him to do his work, but it did not mean that he lost his salvation (in the jargon of modern Christianity). In the New Testament the Holy Spirit permanently indwells every believer, and that is the seal from God of salvation.

Conclusion

Samson never quite caught on to what God wanted him to do as a judge, although God used him nonetheless and he was “in office” for a good long time. Over against his filial devotion to a Godly mother, Samson spent his energies on foreign women and the Philistines. His first encounter depicts the power of physical attraction; the second represents sexual gratification on a casual basis; and the third illustrates unreciprocated love. Samson’s story is filled with riddles; but his love for women who worshiped other gods is as big a riddle as there is.

There are many lessons in this story; the following are prominent: (1) God is able to work mightily even through the weaknesses of people, but those weaknesses work for their pain and humiliation; (2) Samson’s passions ultimately destroyed him, because God expects people to control their passions for right causes and in legitimate arenas; (3) Samson’s disregard of the *Nazirite* vow grew in significance and ultimately was his downfall before he cried out to God for help, thus showing that spiritual promises and responsibilities we have must not be taken lightly.

The Levite’s Concubine

Trible says, “The betrayal, rape, torture, murder, and dismemberment of an unnamed woman is a story we want to forget but are commanded to speak” (*Texts of Terror*, p. 65). The account in Judges 19 shows how bad things actually got during the times of the judges; fortunately, there was moral outrage over the events, an outrage that almost destroyed an entire tribe. In an age of anarchy, violence and vengeance ruled the day. But one must not overlook the fact that at the heart of this story is another woman who is a victim.

The story centers on a man of some status, a Levite, who took a concubine, a woman of low status, from the tribe of Benjamin. Some incident occurred that led the woman to return to her father’s house. The Levite went after her “to speak to her heart to bring her back.” Thus, he is sympathetic and expresses his love. The Levite and the woman’s father strike a cordial and necessarily cooperative arrangement before the company can leave. But this scene of hospitality is contrasted with the scene of violence at Gibeah on the trip back. When the travelers find no place to lodge, an old man takes them into his place. But, like ancient Sodom, the men of the town come to violate the guest sexually. And, like Lot in Sodom, the old man gives the concubine and his own virgin daughter to the men—license to rape them. The text reflects their

attitude to sin, their attitude to women, and the status of a concubine--to violate the guest sexually is a vile thing; to rape the women is to do with them what is “good in their sight.” It all shows how pagan the Israelite tribe had become. For such evil God had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. The Levite in this case seized the concubine and pushed her outside. There was no angel to intervene at this point. The woman was raped and tortured all night. At dawn she fell at the door where her master had been safe for the night. When he discovered her there was not a word to her heart, no remorse or compassion. He simply exhorts her that they must be going. Is she dead (as the Greek text says) or exhausted? Does she die on the way, or does he kill her? The violent abuse of the concubine ends when the Levite cuts her into twelve pieces and sends her throughout the land.

This woman may very well be the most sinned against person in the Bible. Her plight shows how social customs and laws could be ruthlessly misused by evil men. And in the way the Levite tells the story to Israel he absolves himself of guilt, but appears even more guilty.

The response to the events is violent. Israel demands the death of the wicked men of Gibeah, but when the Benjamites protect them a war breaks out. Twenty-five thousand⁴ men perished in battle, then the families and the villages. The tribe of Benjamin was virtually wiped out--except for six hundred who escaped. This brought a change of heart from Israel. To avoid having a tribe extinct, they arranged for forced marriages to populate the tribe. They vowed not to let their own daughters marry the 600, so they attacked Jabesh-gilead and took four hundred virgins and turned them over to the Benjamites--as the Levite had done with his concubine. One rape is followed by the rape of four hundred. But they were still two hundred short. So Israel arranged the abduction of young women from Shiloh who came out to dance to the LORD.

It is a terrifying narration. Rape and murder and dismemberment led to the near annihilation of a whole tribe--men, women, and children, and this was remedied by the

⁴ Bible translators have some difficulty with the Hebrew word *'eleph*, translated here as “thousand.” It certainly can mean “thousand,” but it can also mean a family, troops, general of the army, fighting unit, and even when required, cow. On occasion the numbers in the English Bible sound excessively high, given the estimates of populations. We leave the word “thousand” in the text until we know for sure it should be otherwise; but we keep in the back of our mind that this may not be the only way to translate the word. However we understand the numbers here, it was high enough to come close to the extinction of a tribe.

plunder of another clan and the rape and abduction of women. Where was the Law? Where were the righteous? Why did the Spirit of God not come upon someone? These were dark days in Israel's history, when every man did what was right in his own eyes, for there was no king in Israel. But did that make a great difference, for the kings did what was right in their eyes--David with Bathsheba, Ammon raped Tamar, and Absalom violated David's concubines.

We do at least find a welcome relief from other stories. Hannah also lived in Ephraim, and her plight was blessed and honored by God. And Ruth came to Bethlehem and experienced divine rewards for her faithfulness. While their experiences do not take away the concubine's, they do show that better people lived in these days. But the concubine who was faithful to her master to return with him found no such care and love. Hers was a night of terror and tragedy that was kept in memory by the prophets (Hos. 9:9; 10:9; Amos 5:13). For such sins the nation was eventually destroyed. If God champions the oppressed--the women, the widow, orphans, and strangers--he expects his people to do so also. In fact, he usually does this through other people. Such wickedness must never be tolerated; and no one must live with fears of such evil turning into reality.

Hannah's Supplication for a Child

The Scripture clearly teaches that a prayer with proper motives will ask for something that glorifies God, that benefits his program, that is his will. It may be something we enjoy or use, but it cannot be totally self-centered, or self-seeking. Hannah's prayer for a child is perhaps one of the best examples of a prayer for something that was not to be used of personal pleasure--the child would be given to God.

The Occasion for the Prayer

I Samuel 1:1-8 tells of the affliction of Hannah: She was the second wife of Elkanah, and she was barren. It was a time and culture that placed a high priority on childbearing, for social immortality was the preservation of the name and the family. And for a woman to be barren was particularly troubling. It did not matter that Elkanah loved Hannah and gave her a worthy portion, for the other wife, Peninnah, had children. Moreover, Peninnah let Hannah know she had children and Hannah did not, for "she provoked her grievously to make her fret"--and Hannah wept and did not eat.

What made it even more frustrating for Hannah was the fact that “the LORD had shut up the womb of Hannah” (v.5). She could handle Peninnah; but the LORD was against her too. Her plight was understood by all to mean that God was preventing her from having children. What other explanation could there be? In most cases people would simply say, “We can’t have children,” or, “It’s not God’s will for us to have children.” But not Hannah; she knew that creation itself and marriage’s purpose as well taught her what God planned for her. And so she sought the LORD.

The Prayer

Hannah’s prayer is very briefly recorded in verse 11 of the chapter; but there are other aspects of her earnest prayer that the rest of the chapter record that are instructive.

The Address. It is rather striking to see Hannah address the LORD as “O Lord (=Yahweh) of hosts (=armies),” for that is a strong military expression. It indicates that the LORD has at his disposal celestial and terrestrial armies to perform his bidding. Moreover, when you read Hannah’s praise in chapter 2:1-10, it too is a song of victory more at home in a battle than a maternity ward. But to Hannah this is a major struggle, and it will take the hosts of heaven to give her the victory.

Her Petition. Her request is rather simple--“give to your handmaid a male child.” This request is in harmony with God’s will for creation--had he not made male and female and told them to be fruitful?--and for marriage--had he not provided one woman for one man so that they together might produce a Godly seed and carry on the covenant people?

Her Humility. Hannah has the correct attitude for prayer--humility. The attitude or posture of prayer is that of a servant speaking to a Lord. Too often people treat God like a genie in a lamp--if we say the right things and do the right things he will pop out and give us our wishes. In other words, we treat him as if he is our servant, that if we do things right he has to respond. But that is diametrically opposite what the truth is. In Hannah’s one-verse prayer, the word “handmaid” is used three times. She is indeed the “servant of the LORD”--the highest title a human can have.

Her Appeal. Good praying gives God good reason for answering, either by quoting Scripture to him, or appealing to his honor or his plan. But here Hannah has two reasons why God should do this, and these two reasons motivate him to answer. Looking back on it we may say that God kept her barren to bring her to this point of

faith.

1. Her first appeal is that she is in affliction. She knows that God is the champion of the downtrodden, sorrowful, and afflicted. It was Israel's affliction under Egyptian bondage that caught the attention of God (if we may say it that way). This prayer is similar to another childbearing passage, Genesis 29:32, where Leah bore Reuben, and said, "The LORD has looked upon my affliction." No doubt Hannah knew that story, for she prayed with the same Hebrew words, "look on my affliction." God is a God of compassion; if there is affliction through adversity, it is of short duration for some purpose; and so we may pray for it to be removed.

2. Her second appeal is that she would give the child to the LORD as a *Nazirite*--she vows that here. In other words, if God answers her prayer, God will benefit, and so will his program. Here is one of the most vivid--and staggering--requests that truly will be for the glory of the LORD, and not for self-aggrandizement or individual pleasure. She will be satisfied that God worked through her to provide himself a servant.

Her Zeal. The next few verses describe how she continued praying--she was fervent in her prayers, and devout in heart. What is sad is that Eli the priest thought she was one of the worthless daughters of Belial. (So a believer can keep his or her faith in spite of corrupt spiritual leaders). As it would turn out, her son Samuel would replace Eli's family. But when Eli was corrected and rebuked, he did encourage her, and she was no longer sad.

The Aftermath

As is commonly known, the LORD did remember Hannah and she bore a son. The verb "remember" with God as the subject usually means that he activated his promise (see Gen. 8:1, "God remembered Noah"). This child was given to the LORD, and became one of the greatest servants of God.

Hannah's faithfulness is also displayed in her naming him "Samuel," which means "the name of God." She explains "Because I have asked him of the LORD." The name's sounds and meaning would forever remind Israel of her faith and God's answer--it was a commemorative name. And her song of praise even was incorporated into Psalm 113 as well.

Also noteworthy about Hannah is her song. God inspired this woman to write

a song of praise to celebrate the birth of her son. We say that God inspired this for two reasons, one it is part of holy Scripture, and two it is a prophetic oracle. So here was another woman who wrote part of our Bible. And what she wrote went far beyond her own experience, for it anticipated the time when there would be a king, the Messiah, in Israel. Hannah was one of the first people to predict the monarchy. This makes sense because her little boy Samuel was going to be the king maker--he would anoint Saul, and then he would anoint David, the king.

The Story of Ruth

The story of Ruth shows how the sovereign LORD God works through the lives of faithful people to bring about His will.

The historical setting is important to note, since the first verse of the book tells us that this all took place in the dark days of the Judges. It was a time of great evil, as any reading of the Book of Judges would display. But the Book of Ruth shines as a bright spot in that period.

And the geographical setting is also helpful. Bethlehem figures prominently in Israelite stories about births and deaths. It was here that Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin (Gen. 35:19). And at the birth of Jesus (Matt. 2:17) Herod killed the infants to try to destroy Jesus, a sad event that reminded the evangelist of the lament of Jeremiah about Rachel weeping for her children, a lament sung at the captivity of Zion. These, and others, tell that important births-and-deaths were prominent in this little town. And in our story, before there is the birth to Ruth of Obed there are hard and bitter deaths. In all these vicissitudes of life there is the absolute necessity of faith in the LORD who can turn emptiness into fullness, sadness into joy, death into life--which is what the Book of Ruth is all about.

Parallelism is the key structural device of the book. There is a symmetry between chapters 1 and 4, an antithetical or contrasting parallel structure: there is death (1:1-5) and birth (4:13-16; the stirring of the women (1:19-22) and the rejoicing of the women (4:24,15); and the responsibility of kinship ties appears in both (1:8-18 and 4:1-12). Moreover, the book begins and ends with genealogy.

But chapters 2 and 3 are completely parallel: both have an invitation for Ruth to stay, a blessing for her faithfulness, giving her food, her returning to Naomi, her report to Naomi, and Naomi's advice. But the second chapter is centered on the

meeting in the field, and the third at the meeting at the floor. The repeated motifs show how God was working through the circumstances.

Returning from Moab (1:1-22)

The first chapter traces the movement of the family from Judah to Moab where the husband dies, the sons marry, and the sons die. After about ten years Naomi hears that the famine has lifted at home, and so she decides to return. One of her daughters-in-law is resolved to return with her because she is loyal. Their return to Judah at the beginning of the barley harvest (April) creates quite a stir.

The critical material in his chapter centers on the speeches of Naomi and Ruth. Naomi, knowing her daughters-in-law cannot marry Israelites, tries to persuade them to go home and get married. They would have a bitter time in Judah, for Naomi is going back empty and without hope. But Ruth has come to faith, and is loyal to her mother-in-law and the family. The climax of the chapter is found when the town women see Naomi and are in a stir; Naomi says, “Why do you call me Naomi (pleasant), call me Mara (bitter) because the LORD has dealt harshly with me.” She has been through famine and three deaths, and she knows the hand of the LORD is against her. The life of a poor widow would be hard and seemingly hopeless. And an unwelcome Moabitess would have no hope whatsoever.

Meeting in the Fields (2:1-23)

The scene shifts now to Boaz’ field, and the dialogue is between Ruth and Boaz. The narrator lets the readers know that this is a kinsman redeemer, one who is eligible to pay off Naomi’s debts, buy her property, and marry Ruth--if he wants to. So this chapter traces Ruth’s faithfulness as she goes to glean in the field to gain food, “and she just happened to chance upon Boaz’ field.” Boaz immediately seeks to provide for her, protect, her, and ensure that she will stay gleaning in his field. Boaz goes beyond the requirements of the Law. Naomi, upon hearing this, is delighted, because she now sees a glimmer of hope in Boaz. The man is definitely interested in this virtuous woman.

The motifs of “grace” and “kindness” (=loyal love, *hesed*) abound in this chapter. Boaz knows she is a faithful woman, and now she learns of his grace and kindness. Naomi summarizes the point of the chapter--God has not forsaken her after all, but has been faithful to the living and the dead. She begins to see the divine plan.

Meeting at the Threshing Floor (3:1-18)

At the time of the wheat harvest (June) Ruth claims Boaz. Naomi, knowing the customs, instructs Ruth to clean up and go down to the floor and at the appropriate time claim Boaz as her kinsman redeemer. Boaz is delighted, but knows there is someone who has first choice. The fact that Boaz takes the matter to court proves that Ruth and he had not had sexual intercourse. So he gives her supplies of the good grain and sends her home to Naomi.

Here too the motifs of faithfulness surface. The whole town knows that she is a woman of virtue, who has shown faithful love and responsible acts to her family. Boaz was waiting to hear her claim him, because he knows that another man stands in the way, and he could not have presumed she wanted him. When he sends her home, he says that she should not go home empty (recalling chapter 1) but full. Naomi is again delighted, knowing that Boaz will indeed settle this matter.

Redeeming at the Gate (4:1-12)

The scene now shifts to the gate area of the city, where legal transactions were conducted. Here Boaz sets up a court with the ten elders to judge. In a clever ploy he announces that Naomi wants to sell her field, and the nearest relative had to buy it to keep it in the clan. Of course, the nearer kinsman wants it. But, Boaz points out, it is a package deal--buy the field and you buy Ruth, this Moabitess, to raise up an heir of the deceased who will get the field back. When the near kinsman refuses, Boaz marries her gladly. In time a child is born to them, Obed, who was the father of Jesse, the father of David the King.

At the beginning of chapter 4 when Boaz grabs the elders and the kinsman, there is a clever wordplay on the name of the near kinsman--the text says *p^eloni 'almoni*--"you old so and so." Translations have tried different things here: some like "my friend," are not even close; the old Bible had "Ho such an one," which at least leaves it neutral and the man nameless. Ancient versions tried to interpret the words and came up with things like "secretly" (he said to him secretly). Apparently, because he would not raise up the name of the deceased over his inheritance, the book left his real name out. The issue of why he backed out is not clear. He simply says, "I am not able to redeem her lest I mar my inheritance." He probably did not want to marry and have the land divided up more, and he probably did not want to marry a Moabite. The Law did say that no Moabite could every join the congregation (but that is the letter of the Law--she has shown in faith and works that she is no Moabite, so the spirit of the

Law, which is life, overrules the letter).

The theme of celebration and jubilation close the book, balancing the sadness and grief of the first chapter. The praise of the women is in strong contrast to their murmuring in the first chapter. Now it is clear--finding Ruth, the Moabitess, is better than having seven sons, for she was faithful and responsible.

The Message of Ruth

There is no question but that the book stresses the providence of God in the circumstances of life. The final genealogy in Chapter 4 lets us know that this is the purpose of the book--to show that God was working through famine, deaths, marriages, and births, to bring about the birth of Obed, preparing for the birth of David the King. When David tried to justify his monarchy, he could point back to the divine intervention in his family's history to bring him to it. The LORD proves to be no enemy of Naomi--she may have thought it evil under the duress, but God meant it for good, after it all worked together.

The events in the book that are from God's providence (even though he is hidden from the scene like today) are: the famine and the harvest are from him; the Laws about marrying the widow are from him; the book is filled with blessings and invocations when people see how things work out; Naomi knew that God had taken her husband and her sons; the seemingly coincidental meeting with Boaz in the field, and the final acknowledgment that the LORD gave them the child.

Believers in all ages attribute the issues of life and death to God under whose wings they have come to take refuge. Things that seem difficult must be endured to see what God will do in the end--without the sojourn in Moab and the decision to return, Obed would never have been born (and what then of David and Jesus?). We never know where God is going with the circumstances.

The key word in the book tells us what we should do--live faithfully (the word is often translated "loving-kindness," "loyal love," "faithful love"). Boaz has it; not only is he a righteous man obeying the letter of the law, he goes beyond the letter to show favor, kindness, and responsibility. Contrast him with the near kinsman who cared not for the family or the law.

And Ruth has it for sure. She was faithful to her new family and her new faith, even though it might mean poverty and widowhood in Judah (contrast her with her

sister-in-law who went home). Then she is faithful to the family by seeking a near kinsman who will fulfill the law. The point is that living a righteous and responsible life is a matter of determination to do so; and those who do so may trust the LORD to lead them through the circumstances of life to fulfill his will. Ruth and Boaz exemplify this in the turbulent times of the Judges.

Hubris or Faith in the Struggle for Women's Rights

*The Story of Ruth
with*

The Daughters of Lot and the Daughter-in-Law of Judah

Introduction

In her book *What's Right with Feminism*, Elaine Storkey identifies one of the major difficulties in the relationship between male and female:

Initially for Christian feminists as for others the issue is the same. Men constitute a problem for women, not as individuals necessarily, but as those who combine to impose certain attitudes and values, to uphold certain interests in society. . . .

One crucial feature of the stance we are adopting here is that Christian feminism is committed not just to the liberation of women, but to the liberation of men also. What is more, this liberation is not only from class oppression, from work alienation, but from the very slavery that a sin-ridden, male-dominated culture has produced.¹

This sin-ridden, male-dominated culture is, of course, evidence that the presence of evil in the human race has drastically altered the balance of creation. According to the oracle recorded in Genesis 3 alienation between men and women was one of the results of sin.² Now that the harmonious balance the Creator had designed was gone, it would be a perpetual struggle to regain a complementary relationship in the worship

and service of the LORD.

This section of the notes will call attention to several issues that have bearing on this struggle. It will survey three Old Testament passages that have several common motifs but one major concern, the bold actions of women attempting to gain their rights (that is, their privileges and opportunities in their culture³). Subsequent studies will have to correlate the findings of this survey with the rest of Scripture.

The Daughters of Lot (Gen. 19:30-38)

The Setting

Genesis 19 records the judgment of God on a morally bankrupt Canaanite society in order to warn Israel not to become like them. At first we may be amazed at the catastrophic judgment that God would bring on corrupt societies, but then our amazement focuses on how difficult it was to get Lot and his family out of Sodom, or the sinful influence of Sodom out of Lot's family. The passage leaves no doubt in our minds about how corrupt and how corrupting such a society could be.

There is a striking parallel passage in Judges 19:15-25 that also stresses the moral necessity of judgment on such horribly immoral societies. The corresponding sections are as follows:⁴

Incident	Genesis	Judges
arrival and reception	19:1-3	19:15-21
attack and repulse of attack	19:4-11	19:22-25
attack, demand to hand over	19:4-5	19:22
offer by householder	19:6-8	19:23-24
rejection and threat	19:9	19:25a
repulse of attack by guests	19:10-11	19:25b

The story in Judges 19 continues with the judgment pronounced on the city where the crime was committed, and Genesis 19 continues with the destruction of the cities of the plain.

The important point to note in the account of the wickedness of Sodom is that

Lot had lost his integrity and had become almost as corrupt as the people living there. When the men of Sodom sought out Lot's visitors for their vile purposes ("that we might know them" in verse 5), Lot warned them off ("do not do so wickedly" in verse 7). Here it seemed that Lot contrasted sharply with the men of the city in their evil pursuit, but in his alternative offer he appeared almost as corrupt (v.8). Rather than let the men sexually exploit his visitors, Lot was willing to sacrifice his daughters' virginity instead. The wording of the text is ironic: Lot offered his daughters to them to do whatever seemed "good" in their eyes, but even this perverted "good" was rejected by those bent on evil. So here was a man who had become entrenched in the society of Sodom. In the hour of truth he would oppose great wickedness but be willing to throw his daughters to the mob in the process. That Lot's opposition was a side of him that the Sodomites had not seen before is clear from their response--he was a hypocrite (v.9). Then, when Lot tried to convince his family to flee, they thought he was mocking (v. 14f)--they did not take him seriously. Even at the last moment Lot himself had to be dragged from the city by the angels (v. 16). Kidner appropriately says, "Not even brimstone will make a pilgrim of him."⁵ And Lot's wife, too attached to Sodom, looked back in fondness and is included in the judgment.⁶

The Incident

Narrative. Those who had grown comfortable in the wicked city retained some of its corruption, and so we have the incident of Lot's daughters in the cove (19:30-38). Believing that they faced extinction after the catastrophic judgment, Lot's daughters devised a plan by which they would be able to continue their family line. They would get their father intoxicated (not too) in the night and become pregnant by him.⁷ Coats describes Lot with these words:

The one who offered his daughters for the sexual gratification of his wicked neighbors now becomes the object of his daughter's incestuous relationship. If the story in 19:1-29 represents Lot as a buffoon, a passive object whose retardation in the movement of the story appears somewhat comic, then the same buffoonery certainly returns here. Lot not only reverses the direction of his fear, v. 30, but also in the hills loses his sensibilities to the wiles of his daughters. To be seduced by one's own daughters into an incestuous relationship with resultant pregnancy is bad enough. Not to know that the seductions had occurred is worse. To fall prey to the whole plot a second time is worse than ever.⁸

The significant point of this incident is bound up in the popular etymologies on

the names at the end of the chapter--the children of these incestuous relationships were Moab and Ben Ammi. So the narrative provides a short explanation of the origin and therefore the nature of the Moabites and the Ammonites. Dillmann goes so far as to say that this incident is a piece of coarse humor that expresses the hatred Israel had for Moab and Ammon.⁹ At least we may say that the account facilitates a correct understanding of those nations' conduct in later times.

Naming. The narrative leads into the popular etymology, punning on *'ab*, "father," as the motive word as if the name were *me'ab*, "from a father."¹⁰ The Old Greek translation provides the explanation rather than leave it unexplained: "saying, from my father." This addition is early derived from the narrative's point, for *'ab* in verses 32, 34, and 36 leads up to it.

An interesting understanding of *mo'ab* may be derived from a comparison with the use of *ben* "son" in the parallel name. *Mo* may be related to *me*, "water," figurative for semen. The name would then mean "seed of the father." The story is crude anyway, and such a bold, blunt stroke would not be out of harmony. It would underscore the narrative's point that the child was begotten by the father. "Water" is used for "seed" in Numbers 24:7, Proverbs 5:16, and Isaiah 48:1. This view was suggested by Schroeder (*Das erste Buch Mose*, p. 381) and recognized as possible by Delitzsch and Dillmann.

Although *mayim*, "water," could represent "seed," and would fit the story,¹¹ the motivation in the passage is simply *me 'abinu*, "from our father" (19:32,34) and *me 'abihen*, "from their father" (19:36). This shows forcefully that the *m* in "Moab" alluded to the preposition.

The younger daughter called her son *ben 'ammi*. The text draws the meaning from the narrative also. Normally the name of the Ammonites is written *ben 'ammon*, "sons of Ammon." The word *'am* could mean "people," "kinsman," or clan or the like. In this passage *ben 'ammi* should be interpreted with the idea of "kinsman" or "paternal clansman." A meaning of "son of my people" would be too general. It appears from the synonymous arrangement with *mo'ab* that *'am* carries a meaning very much like that of *'ab*. Both are named after being fathered by Lot: Moab is the son of the father and Ben Ammi is the son of the nearest kinsman.

Significance. The word play in the popular etymologies plays on the real sense of the names. Concerning Ben Ammi Zimmermann says,

It could be further explained to all those who were curious to hear that Ben Ammi as a name must have been quite appealing to Lot's daughter because she could employ it quite playfully for her son, diplomatically for her father, and innocently before strangers.¹²

With the name Moab, however, there seems only to be a phonetic word play within the context. Yet the name would also be ambiguous--until the tradition was told about its significance.

The narrative provides a glimpse into the origin and nature of these rivals of Israel. Genesis directs the reader's attention to the feeling of disdain toward them. This tradition, then, justifies the belief what lewdness (Num. 25) and the lack of natural desires (2 Kings 3;27)--which appear to be fundamental to the character of both nations--were inherited from their ancestors. Moreover, the connections of the story to the judgment of Sodom provides the proper perspective of such characteristics.

Observations

Here, then, were two women who faced the distinct probability--as far as they knew--of seeing their family end, for the men had died in the judgment. In their desperation they devised a plan by which they would become pregnant so that their family could survive. Their satisfaction with the plan may reflect the influence of Sodom on them and the mentality of their father who offered them to the men of Sodom. Had their father been the model of righteousness that God was looking for in the city of Sodom, perhaps the whole story would have ended differently. But in perusing what they thought was their only recourse, they overstepped a boundary. The Torah prohibited Israel from engaging in such incestuous acts--acts which were abominations to the LORD (Lev. 18). That the incestuous intercourse in this passage was an extension of the culture of Sodom, and that it produced the immoral Moabites and Ammonites, made it clear enough that the Torah condemned their actions. Their motives may have seemed worthy, but they went too far in their desperation.

The Daughter-in-Law of Judah (Gen. 38)

The Setting

The second narrative I should like to survey is Genesis 38. This bizarre little story concerns the struggle of Tamar for her right to become the mother of Judah's

children. Their story has many motifs similar to the preceding account: Tamar is childless, and there is the probability as far as she is concerned that Judah's line will cease; she devises a plan (at the sheep-shearing festival) by which she becomes impregnated by her father-in-law; two sons are born because of the scheme, and both are named with popular etymologies to express the significance of the event.

Although this story may have functioned at one time to explain how the lines of the tribe of Judah developed, within the collection of the Joseph narratives it serves another purpose. Joseph, the favored heir apparent and the younger son, had apparently been removed once and for all when the brothers sold him into Egypt (chapter 37). But when Judah, the new leader of the brothers, refused to give his youngest son to the widow Tamar, she took matters into her own hand (chapter 38). As it turned out, twins were born to Judah. But more importantly the second infant forced his way to the fore, signifying that the younger (Perez) would rise to prominence. So after all was said and done the repetition of this motif of the younger son stresses that God's design for Joseph's prominence could not be set aside as easily as Judah had thought. In his own family, and in spite of his indifference to Tamar, Judah saw the strange outworking of events whereby the younger gained priority in the family. And so in the next chapter, Genesis 39, the story reports that Joseph was alive and prospering in Egypt.

Tamar qualifies as a heroine in this chapter, for she risked everything to fight for her right to be the mother of the heir of Judah and to protect the family of Judah. She fought against circumstances controlled by men, but circumstances caused by the corruption and unfaithfulness of the men in the family. Of course, the theological point is that it was God who worked through her efforts to ensure the continuation of the line of Judah.

By recounting the corruption and unfaithfulness of the men, the story provides a rebuke and a lesson. Judah married a Canaanite woman and had three sons.¹³ His first son, Er, married Tamar. But Er displeased the LORD and so the LORD slew him. No details are given, except that he was wicked (*ra'*) enough to warrant an untimely death. By an application of the custom of levirate marriage Tamar was given to the second son, Onan. This custom, slightly different in its form here than in the Law (Deut. 25), had as its purpose the raising up of the name of the deceased over his inheritance. But Onan had no such interest. He was satisfied to use the custom to have sexual relations with Tamar, but was unwilling to raise up a child through her. So whenever¹⁴ he had intercourse with Tamar, he would withdraw and spill (*sihet*) his seed on the ground. Here was another corrupt member of the family, one who would

use the custom for the gratification of the flesh--exploiting Tamar in the process. Rather than take the responsibility bound up in the custom, he destroyed the seed. So the LORD slew him too.

Judah then proved unfaithful to Tamar: he withheld his youngest son from marrying her, fearing that he might lose this one as well (v.11). So Tamar, who according to the custom had the right to be the mother of the heir, was not given that privilege. She would remain a barren widow. If she was to have any hope she would have to take matters into her own hands because the men in her family either failed to please God or refused to fulfill their responsibilities.

The Incident

Narrative. If Judah is irresponsible in the first part of the chapter, he is profane in the second (vv. 12-23). When the time was right, that is, after the death of Judah's wife when there was no hope for an heir in any other way, and at the time of the sheep-shearing festival when people would be in a festive mood, Tamar lured Judah into what was for him an immoral relation with a prostitute.¹⁵

The result of Tamar's intercourse with Judah was that she conceived. She had done what justice and the death of her husband demanded of her--but in a very dangerous way. The plot could have failed at any step along the way, and it could have cost her life--as it almost did. The text of Scripture does not cast any moral judgment on her. Delitzsch may have been too generous in calling her a saint; but she is presented in the Bible in a favorable light (Ruth 4:13). It is not appropriate to judge her by modern ethics, for in her culture at the time her actions were lawful. She had the right to have a child by the nearest of kin to her deceased husband. It was only because Judah's family was corrupt and irresponsible that she had to play on the vice of Judah to accomplish this.

The confrontation (vv. 24-26) scene adds hypocrisy to Judah's lack of integrity. When Tamar was reported pregnant, Judah condemned her to be burnt--until it was proven that he was the guilty party. Then, rather than include himself in any punishment, he simply exonerated her. This is a classic example of the double standard that women have had to live with for centuries.

Tamar was exonerated by these words: "She has been more righteous than I." At the least Judah means that Tamar was more in the right than he, for he had not fulfilled his responsibilities. Although her struggle was desperate and risky, in the final

analysis it was held up as the right course of action. Brueggemann says,

The narrative contains a radical critique of morality for those who will pursue it. The text makes a judgment about relative guilts. Tamar has committed the kind of sin the “good people” prefer to condemn--engaging in deception and illicit sex and bringing damage to a good family. For a moment, until aware of his own involvement, Judah reacts on the basis of that sort of “morality” (v.24).

In that context, a new insight about righteousness comes out of the mouth of Judah (v. 26). He draws an unexpected conclusion. In the midst of this sordid story of sexuality, there is a new understanding of righteousness. The story may give us pause about the usual bourgeois dimensions of sin. What is taken most seriously is not a violation of sexual convention, but damage to the community which includes a poor, diminished female.¹⁶

This confrontation scene, then, is the evaluation. Tamar was exonerated as being righteous. In the process, however, Judah’s reputation suffered another blow--he was immoral and hypocritical as well as irresponsible.

Naming. The concluding section describes how the second child Perez broke out first (vv.27-30). The motivation for the name is the exclamation of the midwife: “How you have broken forth!” Elsewhere the expression refers to judgment breaking out (2 Sam. 5:20;6:8), a plague (Ps. 106:29), and even of objects breaking (Prov. 3:10). So *Perez* is explained to mean something like “he who breaks through” on account of the sudden and unexpected priority of this birth. The name and the motivation form a world play.

Zerah was named because a scarlet thread was tied to his hand before Perez forced his breach. Zerah is not explained, but the emphasis on the scarlet thread implies the meaning. In western Aramaic *zehori* is “scarlet, scarlet thread.” It is possible that such is behind the choice of the name, although it would involve a reversal of letters. In Hebrew, however, *zerah* would not mean “scarlet”; it refers to the rising of dawn. The name may have been shortened from “[God] has shone forth,” signifying that the deity was the source of light, or that his favor would shine on the person.

Significance. Concerning Zerah there does not seem to be any connection with “shining” in Genesis 38, unless the attempt to appear first was commemorated with a

name used often for the dawn. It may simply be that the name referred to the colored string.

But the primary significance is that the name Perez connected directly to the story. There is in this chapter a strange interweaving of human schemes and unexpected events that work together to bring the youngest to the fore. The naming of Perez completes Tamar's struggle to be the mother of the heir and depicts the destiny of the family that became predominant in Judah (Gen. 46:12; Num. 26:20-21)--in spite of Judah's hesitancy to act decisively and responsibly.

Observations

The Law takes an entirely different view of Tamar's desperate act than of Lot's daughters. Tamar may have conflicted with society's sense of propriety, but she did not violate any moral or legal boundaries as the daughters of Lot had done. Although in both cases the women were seeking the same end and appeared to use the same means, the former incest was more compatible with the life of Sodom than the law of Israel, and the latter *levirate* relationship was within the spirit of the law of Israel. Tamar's seduction of her father-in-law may have been outrageous and tremendously risky, but it was more faith than folly. And the entire effort was made necessary by the corrupt and irresponsible men in Tamar's life.

Ruth the Moabitess

The story of Ruth affords us with a fitting evaluation of the two passages surveyed above. The mere mention of Moab (1:2) or that Ruth was a Moabitess (1:22; 2:6; etc) would remind the Israelite reader of the incestuous beginning of that nation or of its corruption on the steppes of Moab (Num. 25;1-3) and certainly of the law that prohibited any Moabite or Ammonite or any of their descendants from entering the assembly of the LORD, even to the tenth generation (Deut. 23:3).

But Ruth, by coming to trust in the LORD (2:12) and by gaining a reputation as a virtuous and faithful woman (2:12; 3:10-11), demonstrates that she is not a Moabitess at heart. Moreover, her actions as the threshing floor show her to be in complete contrast with her infamous ancestress. She too found herself faced with the prospect of remaining a barren widow, especially if she went to Judah with Naomi. She too took a great risk in claiming her right to be the mother of Mahlon's heir. But in the

incident at the threshing floor there is not the slightest hint of seduction let alone sexual relationships. Had there been there would have been no reason to offer the next of kin the opportunity to marry her (4:5). On the contrary, Ruth symbolically claimed Boaz as her kinsman-protector--and he praised the LORD for her (3:10).

If Ruth's life shows that she stood in sharp contrast to the ancestress of the Moabites, her actions at the threshing floor invite comparison with Tamar. It is no surprise that the people make that connection and pray that the LORD will bless her as he had Tamar (4:12). In both Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth there were marriages to foreign women (Judah to the daughter of Shua, and Mahlon to Ruth); in both stories there was an application of some form of the *levirate* custom (Judah was unwilling but Boaz was willing); Tamar seduced Judah in disguise, appealing to his base instincts, but Ruth proposed marriage to Boaz under the cover of night, appealing to his honor under the law; Judah confronted Tamar in a judicial setting and was ashamed and condemned (38:24-26), but Boaz redeemed Ruth in a judicial setting and was praised and blessed (4:9-12); both Judah and Boaz became the fathers of children in their old age, and in both cases the descendants formed important links between Judah and David. It is important to note that it is Boaz who contrasts sharply now with his ancestor.

But here also the young woman Ruth had to seize the opportunity and call for Boaz to spread his garment over her as a symbol of his intent to marry her and raise up the name of the deceased. It was still a tremendous risk. But what made her task more pleasant than Tamar's was that Boaz was a righteous and responsible man. He was obedient to the LORD, faithful to the family, and willing to extend loyal love to Ruth in every possible way.

What happened in the story of Ruth is that Boaz had perceived, as had the town, the Ruth was no Moabitess but a Yahwist who was courageous and loyal in her faith. Although the letter of law prohibited her come coming into the assembly of Israel, the spirit of the law took precedence because of her faithfulness in fulfilling the law of the Lord. Finding a man like Boaz, who was willing to set aside ancient prejudices and follow the spirit of the law, enabled Ruth to accomplish her struggle for her right to be a mother in Judah with far less danger than Tamar. And since she was within the right as was Tamar she was blessed by all.

Concluding Observations

In these passages we find women struggling for their rights to be the mothers of the heirs. Their actions were outrageous at times and certainly dangerous, but then they were desperate. Insofar as their efforts stayed within God's conventions, they were acceptable, if not righteous. When they violated moral or spiritual boundaries, the Torah took a dim view of them, seeing nothing but continued immorality and violation of God's laws in the descendants of such unions. When they set aside social convention or the letter of the law in their quest for the spirit of the law, they were praiseworthy.

Those who are spiritually responsible will perceive that there are boundaries in any situation and that no matter how great the need or how expedient the method, they must be sure that the struggle for rights follows a righteous course. Every situation must be evaluated in the light of God's standard of righteousness; and every effort must harmonize with the will of God, not the spirit of a corrupt society.

But it seems to me that the point that comes through so clearly in these passages is that the struggle of the women was either necessitated or made more difficult by the corruption and irresponsibility of men. Should there be spiritual, responsible, faithful men like Boaz, the resolution of the inequity of women's circumstances would be far easier, and a more harmonious balance in privileges and responsibilities would be achieved.

Notes

1. Elaine Storkey, *What's Right with Feminism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), pp. 162-163.
2. The point of Genesis 3:16 must harmonize with the nature of the oracle, which declares the inevitable results of sin. Accordingly, I interpret the "desire" (*teshuqah*) to be a prompting to evil (cf. Gen. 4:7), and the verb "rule" (*mashal*) to be a dominating mastery. Human nature at its worst perpetuates this age-old conflict. In Genesis 19 and 38 the conflict is displayed in what amounts to a power struggle. The men control and use the women as if they were property. Here is the male domination. And the women struggle for power by disguise and manipulation. Here is the desire. Only in Ruth and Boaz do we see that the righteous can live above the curse.

3. It is interesting to note how times change the goals of the struggle, for in all these passages the women acted to obtain their rights to be the mothers of the heirs--not exactly what some modern feminists would champion. but in the ancient culture of Israel this was a most significant part of society.
4. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-26*, translated by John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), p. 297.
5. Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), p. 155.
6. The verb *nabat* (*wattabbet* in verse 26) signifies an intense gazing, not merely a parting glance.
7. Diamond comments on the use of *bekira* and *se'ira* in connection with his analysis of the Jacob and Leah incident, showing how the older woman devised the plan. His point is that the sexual intercourse along with the deception as to the presence or identity of the woman was possible because of alcohol (J.A. Diamond, "The Deception of Jacob: A New Perspective on an Ancient Solution to the Problem," *VT* 34 [1984]:211-13.
8. George W. Coats, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), p. 147.
9. August Dillmann, *Genesis* (Leipzig, 1886), I:113.
10. A. H. van Zyl, *The Moabites* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960), p. 179.
11. The fact that *mo* does not occur in Biblical Hebrew weakens the case. Plays on foreign names usually are made with Hebrew.
12. Frank Zimmermann, "Folk Etymology of Biblical Names," *VT Supp* 15 (1966): 320.
13. Benno Jacob observes, "He was also the first of his brothers to lower himself by seeking intercourse with Canaanites" (*The First Book of the Bible* [New York: KTAV, 1974 abridged edition], p. 257).
14. The point in verse 9 is *frequentative*: "Whenever he went into his brother's wife he would spill [his seed] on the ground."
15. Recall that there is an interesting interchange of vocabulary in the chapter. According to verse 15 Judah thought she was a prostitute (*zonah*) because she had covered her face. But when he sent Hirah to look for her, Hirah looked for a cult prostitute (*qedeshah*) and could only report back that there was no prostitute there (*qedeshah* in both verses 21 and 22). then, when Tamar's pregnancy was discovered, it was told to Judah that she had prostituted herself (*zanetah*) and gotten pregnant by her prostitution (*liznunim* in v. 24). The cult prostitute was higher class. The ploy of Tamar demanded that she cover her face, and by so doing may have satisfied the scruples of Judah who might not have gone to a cult prostitute. The deception worked well because of it, for Hirah went looking for the cult prostitute--who would have been present at the festival--but found none.
16. Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation*, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), pp. 310-11.

