

WOMEN & THE BIBLE

by Trevor Dennis

There is more good news in the Bible for women than we may think. Admittedly, there are not nearly enough stories about women, and women's spirituality (like that of children) is neglected almost entirely. But the stories we have got are frequently of particular and striking significance.

Good news

Let me begin by asking some simple questions, and then answering them.

Who is the only person in the whole Bible to give God a name?

Answer: Hagar in Genesis 16, who is not only a woman, but an Egyptian and a slave, and so three times oppressed.

Who defeated the first Pharaoh of the oppression in Egypt and his vicious policy of genocide, and made a fool of him?

Answer: the two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah of Exodus 1, the mother and sister of Moses, the Pharaoh's own daughter and her female slaves. Without their courage, their trickery, their compassion, the people of God would, by the terms of the story, have died in infancy.

Who puts that same people to shame as they are about to enter the Promised Land by her understanding of what God is up to, and her lack of fear?

Answer: Rahab, the Jericho prostitute, another woman who, with her house built into the city walls, lives literally as well as metaphorically on the edge of her society.

Whose rape marks the turning point in the long story of David?

Answer: Bathsheba.

When the famous book of the law is found in the Temple in Jerusalem in 2 Kings 22, which of the prophets do Josiah's advisors consult?

Answer: Jeremiah? Wrong. The prophetess Huldah, who was presumably more highly regarded by the establishment at the time.

Who is the one person in the Gospels to get the better of Jesus in an argument?

Answer: the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7.

Who plays the part of the High Priest, no less (not just any priest, notice!) in anointing Jesus as Messiah?

Answer: the unnamed woman with the jar of ointment in Mark 14.

Who, in John's Gospel, is the first person to be described as bringing many people to belief in Jesus?

Answer: the Samaritan woman Jesus meets at the well in John 4 – another woman on the margins.

Who is the one person listed in all four Gospels as a witness of the crucifixion?

Answer: Mary of Magdala.

Who, again in John, is the first person to fulfil the Pauline criteria for an apostle, namely an encounter with the risen Christ, and a commission from him to preach the news of his resurrection?

Answer: Mary of Magdala in John 20.

We could go on, of course. We could give other examples, and talk also of the material in the Bible that comes from women's circles, not just passages like the Song of Miriam, or the Song of Deborah, or the teaching of King Lemuel's mother in Proverbs 31, but others where we may hear, if we listen, the voices of women storytellers or poets: Judges 13, for example, or Proverbs 1-9, parts of Lamentations, the book of Ruth, perhaps, or the Song of Songs.

The smudge of patriarchy

All that is encouraging, of course...or most of it is. For the news even there, is not all good. Proverbs 31, for instance, is a classic example of a woman playing men's games in order to preserve the status and dignity men have accorded her. Furthermore, more generally and therefore more seriously, all the women in the Bible, except for Ruth and Naomi, and Esther, play the bit-parts on a stage dominated by men, in a book that wears the smudge of patriarchy on almost every page. The Bible arose from encounter between God and human beings, and most of those human beings took for granted the subservience of women in the public sphere, at least, as much as they took for granted the institution of slavery. It should not surprise us that the Bible generally reflects those assumptions, but it does mean that we cannot use the Bible uncritically to address the position and status of women in our own society or our Church.

A better way

God has shown us a better way. God has begun to set us free from the cramping assumptions of the past, and has shown us how we can accord to one another an equal honour, an equal dignity, an equal worth, an equal status. The Jesus of the Fourth Gospel promised that the Spirit of God would lead

us into greater truths as time went by That promise has not proved empty.

That, too, is hardly surprising! What is remarkable is the extent to which the Bible itself offers a challenge, either direct or indirect, to the prejudices of patriarchy. Some examples are to be found in the list of references with which I began. But more famous than any of them is its astonishing and highly subversive declaration that all human beings, women and men, are made in the image of God, and thus have a royal, near divine status as their birthright (Genesis 1.26-7). And in the New Testament, of course, it claims with equal courage and clarity that we are all one in Christ, and that our common life in the new people of God renders differences of gender insignificant (Galatians 3.28).

People before dogma

And does not the Bible also present us with a Jesus of Nazareth who refuses to be sidetracked by issues of gender when faced with women in any kind of need? Does it not speak clearly of a Jesus who consistently puts people before dogma, and does it not, in Job, give us a whole book attacking people who put cherished belief before anything and anyone else, who hide themselves behind their 'correct' theology, and are quite unable to see the humanity and the pain of those the other side? Does it not reveal a God and a Christ who denounce any kind of abuse or oppression, and who consistently call human beings to generous, creative, loving relationships with one another? And has not the Church come to celebrate the divine community of love in the Trinity, and do we not claim that the Church's great task is to embody that divine community on earth?

The God of the Bible

Yet surely one of the most difficult features of the Bible for women, and one of the most oppressive, remains the way in which God is generally described there. Most of the language, most of the images and metaphors used of God are drawn from the world of men of power (the same is true, of course, of most of the hymns we sing and the liturgies we use today). God is a king, to be feared and obeyed by us his servants, a warrior of invincible power, a judge who holds our destiny in his hands, and a father on whom we depend, even if we are independent adults, whose word must not be challenged or contradicted.

Here also, however, the Bible gives us some good news. God speaks to Moses 'face to face as one speaks to a friend' (Exodus 33.11), and the devastatingly honest prayer of the Psalms in the language of a friend, of those who look God straight in the eye, and not in the knee cap or the big toe. The same intimacy with God is enjoyed by Jesus of Nazareth, and indeed with him is so complete as to become a fusion of identity.

And there are some pages, few but still significant in number, where the God of the Bible is pictured as a woman in labour, as

a mother feeding, nursing, comforting, teaching a child, as a mother bird brooding her young, protecting them from the cold, the wet, the heat beneath the shadow of her wings. In Job 38-39, one of the finest poems in the Bible, the world is presented not as God's palace complex or kingdom, but a God's household or farm, and God is mother of the sea, the ice and the hoarfrost, as well as midwife to the ibex and the deer.

The image of God as midwife – midwife to human beings – occurs twice in the Psalms, at Ps. 22, 9-10 and Ps. 71.6, and in Isaiah 66.9. What a metaphor that is! For many women still, childbirth is a dangerous business, and the skills of a good midwife can make the difference between life and death, both for the mother and the child struggling to be born. We speak rightly of midwives 'delivering' mothers. God the Midwife is not the lord of the mother, but her servant, a partner in her pain and her joy, who joins with her in bringing new life into being. Or, if we identify ourselves with the infant, then to call God 'midwife' is to feel her hands upon us, covered in the mess of birth, helping draw us into the light of life from the darkness of the womb, helping us fill our lungs and breathe, helping us to find our voice. Does any biblical image speak more powerfully of the intimacy of God?

What might the Church have become, had it chosen to give the image of God as Midwife the same prominence as that of God the Father? What might it yet be, if it were to listen to such language and allow its resonances to fill its soul?

Final questions

Many think the most important question we can ask of the Bible is, 'Is it true?', or, 'Did it happen?'. More important are the questions, 'What does the Bible do to us?', and 'What do we do with it?'. What are the consequences of our believing what we do and of our appeal to the Bible? Do we use the Bible at the expense of others, or to promote their liberation and emphasize their worth? Does the Bible open our eyes to those around us and to their needs and aspirations, or does it make us blind like the friends of Job or some of the religious leaders encountered by Jesus in the Gospels? Does it lead us along the steep paths of love, or hide us in the stair-cupboard of our prejudice and fear? In our hands is the Bible an instrument of oppression, or a vehicle of the wild, bright Spirit of God?

It is what we do with the Bible that matters. We have come a very long way since those discussions and debates about the ordination of women to the priesthood in the Church of England, and even further since those first amazing ordination services, and yet we still have no women bishops. We are still far from being a church whose ways of doing things, and whose styles of leadership are determined by women as much as they are influenced by men, and whose understanding of who God is and who we are is as much shaped by women as it is by men. Are we going to allow a narrow and partial reading of the Bible to hold us back, or allow the challenge at its heart to drive us into the arms of God?

