



Interpretation of the Women in the Biblical Literature

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ABSTRACT

Bible as literature and Bible as religion are comparative. It is without doubt that Bible, as a religious doctrine, has played a great role in Judaism and Christianity. It is meanwhile a whole literature collection of history, law, ethics, poems, proverbs, biography and legends. As the source of western literature, Bible has significant influence on the English language and culture, English writing and modeling of characters in the subsequent time. Interpreting the female characters in the Bible would affirm the value of women, view the feminist criticism in an objective way and agree the harmonious relationship between the men and the women.

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While the Bible serves as source of religious instruction and inspiration for religious people, it also is a foundational document of western civilization and English literature. Quoted from Victor Hugo, England has two books, the Bible and Shakespeare. England made Shakespeare, but the Bible made England. Bible stories have been "retold, recast, and reinterpreted" in the works of English literature and Biblical images have been "re-embodied and reinvigorated" in English plays and novels (Lemon 2013).

In her lecture on several myths about the Hebrew Bible, Professor Christine Hays points out that "the Bible is not a book but a library, an anthology of diverse writings or books written and edited over an extensive period of time by people in very different situations responding to very different issues and stimuli. Each book sounds its own distinctive note in the symphony of reflection (Hays 2006)." The Bible, the book of the book, is a collection of sixty six books, which are categorized as the Old Testament and the New Testament. This thesis only deal with the Old Testament.

Shakespeare's declaration "Frailty, thy name is woman!" shows the stereotyped image of woman as weak and passive. The role of women in the Bible has attracted a lot of attention and triggered endless debate. The efforts to interpret, analyze, defend and attack the women in the Bible seem to be unstoppable and this is likely to continue. In some cases, it is more than whether the feminist should take the Bible as a target to defend the women's right. Offended by some of the negative description about the women in the Bible, some feminist insist that the Bible should be banned. Given all these hidden or public criticism, it is advisable to return to the Bible itself, read the book carefully and try to understand what the Bible is truly saying about the women.

It is undisputed that most of the Bible is “androcentric or male-oriented”. The interests of men are more reflected in it. Consider the following statistics. There are more than 1400 people mentioned and given names in the Hebrew Bible. However, only about 115 people of these people are women. Obadiah, Jonah, Habakkuk, Zephaniah and Haggai, these five books, don’t refer to women at all (Murphy 1998). As the French existentialist Simone de Beauvoir denounces throughout her book *The Second Sex*, the Bible is the paradigm which treats women as the second sex. Countless biblical narratives describe women as second-class status and justify the subordination of women to men.

Eve is without doubt one of the most controversial characters in the Bible. The story about her runs as follows. The Lord God created the heavens and the earth first, and then formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being (Genesis 2:7). The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone”, so the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep. And while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib (Ge 2: 21-22). This story often serves as justification of women’s submission to men by traditional scholars. However, Phyllis Trible, a twentieth-century theologian argues that the creation of Eve should be considered as the “culmination”, the masterpiece not “an afterthought”. After all, Adam is made from dust of the ground while Eve is made out of man. As the creation material is concerned, Eve is no inferior to Adam. What’s more, some eco-feminists point out that the very fact that Adam is made from earth, symbol of the mother, shows the birth of Adam is inseparable from the feminine influence. Eve is made from rib, something that is stronger than dust. Adam is not complete until Eve is made. So, Eve is not an attachment to Adam. In a series of publications written by Esther Fuchs, she argues that it is a concept that women are attached to men, which reflects no historical reality nor is it fixed law of human nature.

The story continues to tell that Eve, tempted by the serpent in the Garden of Eden, took the fruit from a tree that is in the middle of the garden and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it (Ge 3:2-6). The two sinned and were banished out of the Garden of Eden (Ge 3:24). Contrary to the popular belief that woman is believed to be “first in sin and last in creation”, Elaine Pagels, an expert on Latin, Greek, Coptic, and Hebrew and author of the book *The Gnostic Gospels*, denounces strongly against this interpretation about Eve. In her book *Adam, Eve & the Serpent*, she argues that the creation and the story of the temptation are “parables of human equality and free will, which means human beings are responsible for their own actions (Murphy, 1998).” Of Eve’s temptation by the serpent, Elizabeth Stanton tried to redeem Eve’s behavior in the *Woman’s Bibles*. Her interpretation is quoted as follows: “the unprejudiced reader must be impressed with the courage, the dignity, and the lofty ambition of the woman. The Tempter evidently had a profound knowledge of human nature, and saw at a glance the high character of the person he met by chance in his walks in the garden. He did not try to tempt her from the path of duty by brilliant jewels, rich dresses, worldly luxuries or pleasures, but with the promise of knowledge, with the wisdom of the Gods (Kern, 1991).

Similarly, as Frederick Greenspahn points out that Eve decides to eat only after determining that “the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom (Ge 3: 6), all of which is correct. Her action is disobedient, however, it benefits the whole human beings in the way that human species start to have “moral or intellectual autonomy”. They realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made covering for themselves (Ge3:7). By contrast to Eve’s initiative to act, Adam is quite passive. He is neither tempted nor seduced. Eve gave some to him and he ate it. To conclude from a comment by Karl Marx, Eve is indeed the first wise woman.

Readers who are determined to show that Bible does offer positive female role models would be encouraged by the book of Ruth and the book of Esther, two books named after women. It is not unusual for us to read books named after women today, but it is unthinkable, unbelievable and unimaginable at the time when it is a “androcentric or male-oriented” society, when the interests of men are more reflected, when women’s names were not mentioned publicly, but mainly with family patriarch.

The book of Ruth tells the story of a widow Ruth who preferred not to go back to her mother’s home to live a worry-free life, but to go with her widowed mother-in-law to a foreign land and provide for her by gleaning the leftover grain in the field. Under her mother-in-law’s thoughtful guidance and elaborate plan, Ruth was able to marry Boaz a man of standing and she gave birth to a son name Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David. Ruth is thus taken as the most independent and central biblical female and she is a paradigm of virtue. Hailed as more sincere and more beautiful than any novel by P. C. Hadley, the book of Ruth, however, is criticized for devoting to the themes of “barrenness and fertility” and the goal of finding a husband by Frederick Greenspahn. Feminists point out that in the book women’s main function is to have children, become mother and nurse the children. The reason why Ruth was remembered, praised and honored is she fulfilled her duty and had a son, especially King David was her descent. Cynically, once her duty was fulfilled, her name was not mentioned any more and at the

end of the book in the genealogy of David it reads, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz, Boaz the father of Obed, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David (Ru 4: 21-22).

It is hard to imagine a woman like Esther could attract attention from both feminists and traditionalist. Esther, an Jewish orphan adopted by her uncle Mordecai, risked her own life to save her people when she became the queen by begging the king to put an end to the evil plan of killing all the Jews in the country plotted by an evil man Haman. She was praised for her bravery to save her people. However, Esther was criticized for achieving prominence by “sleeping with her prospective boss”. In the evening she would go there and in the morning return. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name. (Est 2:13-14). Again it is by her beauty that she was saved when she approached the king without being summoned, which may cause a potential death penalty. It is more or less a “sex-trap” that she used to attract the king and draw his attention to her needs and request the king to save her people. It is undeniable that Esther’s success is inseparable from Mordecai, who adopted her when she was orphaned, who sent her to king’s palace and forbade her to reveal her nationality and family background, who every day walked back and forth near the courtyard to find out how she was and what was happening to her, who rebuked her selfness when she hesitated to save her people and urged her to take actions to save her people. Without Mordecai’s admonish, Esther couldn’t make those achievements. Cynically as well, the credit is given to Mordecai, not Esther, at the end of the book. Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to king Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews (Est10:3).

The book of Esther also gives an account of a different fate for another woman Vashti, the beautiful ex-queen, who was removed from her royal position simply because she refused to wear her royal crown to display her beauty to the king and nobles when the king was giving a banquet. Vashti is perceived as an arrogant, haughty and wicked woman who shows no respect for her husband. But what fault she has? She refused to take orders from her husband who is probably drunken at his banquet lasting seven days, who doesn’t have her interest at heart and treats her just as an object to show. He commanded to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at. (Est 1:10-12).

There are many more complicated stories and characters in the Bible and some women who are traditionally viewed as negative deserve to be reinterpreted. Delilah is one of them. Delilah, Samson’s wife has been characterized as a wicked lethally alluring woman who betrays her husband. However, it is the Philistines to blame for plotting to kill Samson (we may tie him up and subdue him (Jdg 16:5)). Even she did receive bribe from Philistine (each of us will give you eleven hundred shekels of silver (Jdg 16:5)), she never deceived Samson what she want to know about him (tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued (Jdg 16:6)). But Samson on the contrary lied to her three times. (Jdg 16:7, 11, 13)

The man and the woman are “co-existing species” and cannot be separated from each other. Even some women are mentioned briefly in the Hebrew Bible and “lost” at a bigger picture, compared to by literary critics Mieke Bal, “wandering rock”, they do have influence on men in some ways. Moses’s survival in infancy is supported by the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who refused to obey the Pharaoh’s command to kill every Hebrew baby boy and whose action helped save and maintain Israel. His life was saved by Pharaoh’s daughter when his mother couldn’t hide him anymore and had to leave him in a papyrus basket in the Nile River. (Both the name of Pharaoh’s daughter and his mother were not mentioned.) His life was saved by his wife Zipporah when she “took a flint knife, cut off her son’s foreskin and touched Moses’ feet with it (Ex4: 25)”. These women had functional role in Moses’s life, but once their function—mostly to promote, demonstrate, favor and endorse the heroic status and superiority of the male leader—is complete and fulfilled, they soon slip out of the narrative and drop out of the story. Both King David and King Solomon’s achievements are supported by women too.

Their “appearance and disappearance”, most of which are presented with little or no exposition, don’t interrupt the story line. They are “ciphers more than figures, satellites more than characters” to borrow the phrases from Esther Fuchs. (Fuchs, 2014). While women’s main roles are as mothers, nurturers and protectors of sons, severe punishment would befall on those who “lay claim to leadership or authority”. Unable to recognize her brother Moses’s uniqueness, Miriam questioned and challenged his power and authority. She was stricken with severe leprosy, like snow, (Nu 12:10), silenced for good and died in the desert (Nu 20:1).

As some scholars focus on and criticize some of the patriarchal theme in the Hebrew Bible, George and Dora Wintson discuss that it is not “gender”, but “relationship” which decides who has authority over whom. Both the man and the woman can have power over or be submissive to each other (Wintson 2003). Carol L. Meyers, a leading professor of archaeology and biblical literature argues that “a relatively egalitarian family structure” are found in Joshua and Judges. Women also take the responsibility for teaching and instructing children, which is reflected in the Proverbs 6:20 “My son, keep your father’s commandment, and forsake not your mother’s

teaching.”

Marcia Falk believes that the Song of Songs can serve as an “antidote” to the sex discrimination. What makes The Song, the great love poem so special and outstanding is the harmonious and balanced relationship between the male and the female, characterizes Robert Alter. Phyllis Tribble suggests “equivalence and equality between the sexes” are advocated by “the mutual desire, the unity of the male and female bodies and the fulfilling sexual relationship. (Harding 2008)” What’s more, those women in the Songs take initiative to seek love and not sustain the sexual desire. “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—for your love is more delightful than wine. ...Take me away with you—let us hurry! Let the king bring me into his chambers (SS 1: 2-4), My lover is mine and I am his (vv2: 16), All night long on my bed I looked for the one my heart loves. (vv 3:1)”, to name a few from the Song of Songs.

While feminist scholars continue to dig into the undesirable place of women in the Bible, to find out why women are treated so negatively in the Bible and to estimate what it all means for the understanding of “religion and human society”, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, a panelist concludes, “Bible is an extremely complex document that revels in multiplicity of voices, that critiques its own society and confesses its divided opinion about everything (Murphy, 1998).” Whether the women are portrayed as “schemers and tricksters”, active threat to “virtue and purity”, or as “pawns or victims”, passive disposable objects of masculine will, it is important to remember not to oversimplify the biblical characterizations. The beauty of the Bible is in the eye of beholder.

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