

THE MAIN FEMALE TYPOLOGIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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***Abstract:** The society of that long historical period contained in the Old Testament was certainly and unquestionably a patriarchal one, in which strong, brave, and God-chosen men would draw the lines of history. Even in the face of this prominent occupation by eminently male personalities, in the books of the Old Testament, women who enjoy great respect, such as Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel, at the dawn of holy history, the prophecies, shine through their conduct. Miriam (Moses' sister), Deborah, Jael, Hannah (Samuel's mother), Esther and Judith, the liberators of the Jewish people. These books do not lack the praises brought to the woman's fruitfulness (an essential aspect for a woman's appreciation), her worthiness, her faithfulness and devotion to her husband, the purity in marital relations, the mutual affection of spouses. Because of these unexpected qualities of the female, Wisdom herself would be portrayed as a woman in **the Song of Songs**, this wonderful hymn of love between a man and a woman. However, the reality has not ceased to be bitter for women in general.*

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In many Old Testament biblical episodes, as well as in post-biblical literature, women have often been marginalized, voiceless, isolated. By modern standards, most of the Jewish tradition could be characterized as misogynistic. On closer inspection, however, we can discover a multitude of active, vocal, strong, individualized and unique female figures. Many of them have their names revealed, which already gives them significant importance, even though they are named to a much lesser extent than men.

For those who are part of a “modern society”, the name usually has no special meaning, except that it is the choice of the parents and is sometimes passed down from generation to generation, sealing certain kinship ties. But in many cultures around the world, the name has a specific meaning, communicating to others something specific about the person wearing it.

This was true of the cultures of the peoples of the Old Testament. For example, the name of the first woman - "Eve" - means "mother of all living" and tells us something about her nature and her purpose. Basically, we can consider that in this name the identity given by God to the woman is captured. Most of the time, the names of the women were not specified, thus leaving a note of generality in their deeds and in their destiny.

In every case where a person is mentioned in the Scriptures, we can understand that he is given special attention and that his appearance in the Bible is not accidental.

We must start from the statement that the collective mentality of the ancient semitic societies and the laws that governed them imposed on the woman a submissive status, in a permanent dependence on a male representative of her family.

One of the perceptions of **Manu's Law** defines exactly the status of women in ancient Eastern society, in which

"a woman during her childhood depends on her father, during her youth on her husband, if her husband dies of her sons, if she has no sons, close relatives of the husband, because the woman must never behave as she pleases"¹.

Even so, some of the most striking female figures in the Old Testament happen to change the history of the Israelites on their own. We must not forget that two of the books of the Bible are named after women: Ruth and Esther.

Women who appear in the Old Testament can be classified in completely different typologies, by their age, appearance, social position, or the physical and mental traits they have. Not all of them occupy a privileged place in society, and not all of them are Israelites. In some of them, we find the structure of the mother of a family devoted to the sacrifice of her house, in others we catch a remarkable fighting or entrepreneurial spirit. They can be innovative or deeply traditional or both.

Without being able to fit into the Greek pattern: either goddess or heroine, or the medieval one: either saint or prostitute, biblical women are so different from each other that they cover an entire human spectrum. However, their common feature is that of "continuity agent". They are, after all, guarantors of the survival of families, tribes, peoples, faiths.

Most of them play a role in the economy of God's plan of salvation, as well as in the history of the "chosen people." In most of these female

¹ Ion Reșceanu, *Familia în Vechiul Testament*, Ed. Mitropolia Olteniei, Craiova, 2014, p. 57.

typologies one can notice a foreshadowing of some features found a few centuries later in the personality of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Eve is the antithetical figure of the Mother of God, the most obvious in similar and opposite features, the most interpreted from a theological point of view. In comparison with Christ, "the new Adam" (I Corinthians 15:45), the Mother of God will be called "the new Eve", an expression circulated by St. Irenaeus of Lyons († 202) and which will be repeated by the whole Byzantine hymnography. Just as "Old Eve" closed Heaven, so "New Eve" will reopen it. Also, the figure of Sarah, who through divine intervention gives birth to the biblical patriarch Abraham his son Isaac or other women remarkable for their courage and determination prepare us for the fulfillment of the messianic prophecy of the New Testament.

Even though women could almost never go beyond the background, their talent, courage, or intelligence can sometimes put them in the forefront of the action and be seen as protagonists or main decision-makers in some key episodes of biblical history. In other cases, even if the identity of the author is not explicitly revealed, all indications point to female personalities. This is the case with the greatest poem of all time - *the Song of Songs* - traditionally attributed to King Solomon, of which many fragments seem (according to modern exegetes) to have been written by a certain Avishag of Sunam, King David's alleged secret lover².

We cannot fail to mention the daughters of Jov, those born at the end of the book, named Yemima, Cheia, and Cheren-Hapuch. The fact that their name was mentioned not only ensured their perpetuity, but also indicated their status - that of heirs with equal rights as their brothers: "*And in all the land were no women so beautiful as the daughters of Jov, and their father made them partakers of the inheritance among their brethren*"³. The role of the legendary Jov seems to have been a major one in the ontological rise of women. In the apocryphal writing of Divra Jov - *The Testament of Jov* - the attitude of the old father is an ultra-valued one towards his own daughters, to whom he not only attributes the right of heiress of material ancestral wealth, but presents them to us as superior beings, endowed with the gift of it gives birth to a "new heart" in their bodies, to sing angelic hymns or to speak the "dialect of the heavenly rulers."

Let us not forget that four women gave birth to sons who would become the twelve tribes of Israel. It is about Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel, co-founders of Israel, along with their most famous husbands, Abraham, Isaac,

² cf. Amos Oz, Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Evreii și cuvintele*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 2012, pp. 82-83.

³ Iov, 42:15.

and Jacob. Even the subsequent distribution of the tribal territory of Canaan is made according to the identity of the mother.

Abraham's old wife - Sarah - will give birth to Isaac, through the miraculous intervention of the biblical patriarch, the promised son. The imminence of his sacrifice by his father, as an expression of his total love and obedience to God, foreshadows the birth of the One who would secure the salvation of the world. So in Sarah we can see the image of the Mother of God, and in Isaac the image of Christ.

Rebekah's story (revealed in **Genesis 24**) depicts a young woman who, even in those days, could enjoy independence. So when Abraham asks a servant to find a bride for Isaac in his brother's family, Rebekah somehow violates the customs of those times and decides for herself when she will leave to meet her future bridegroom. Moreover, she is the only "matriarchal figure" who enjoys the privilege of receiving information directly from Yahweh about the future of her twin sons Esau and Jacob (**Genesis 25: 22-23**).

Sisters Leah and Rachel come to complete the quartet of women who gave birth to the founders of the tribes of Israel. These were the daughters of Jacob's uncle, Laban, and their husbands' wives and cousins alike. Such kinship was common in Israelite society at that time, and marriages were generally designed to serve tribal needs and to keep the lineage as clean as possible. Jacob marries the two sisters as a result of treacherous ploys, not of his own free will. He had taken refuge in his uncle's house after depriving his brother, Esau, of the blessing of their father Isaac, who was on his deathbed. In order to atone for his sin and gain the goodwill of his uncle, Jacob would serve him for seven years. As a reward, little Rachel is promised. On the night of the wedding, however, he is cheated and is replaced by Leah. Scripture says that because Leah was not loved by her husband, the Lord endowed her with fertility as compensation, so that she would give birth to no less than six of Jacob's 12 sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun, and Jacob's only daughter, Dinah. According to **Genesis 30: 17-21**, Leah gave birth to Issachar, Zebulun, and Dinah after she reached menopause.

Thus, she is not only an exemplary matriarchal figure of Israel, but has become a telling metaphor to illustrate how much fertility was appreciated in those days.

Then comes the wonderful "women's team" of the Exodus consisting of no less than six remarkable women who brought Moses into the world and secured his place in it. The first tandem includes mother Jochebed and sister Miriam, the so-called prophetess of the biblical text and who sings the

miracles of God after the people of Israel passed through the Red Sea (**Exodus 15:20**). The second consists of the relics of Shirah and Puah, who are said to have witnessed the birth of Moses, and who, by the power of their character, opposed the orders of Pharaoh, who demanded that every newborn Jew to be killed. They should also be given the credit they deserve: as midwives, they are the first women in the Bible to have a profession. The third tandem consists of the pharaoh's daughter and her maid, with whom, in the most ingenious and courageous way possible, she manages to save and raise a little boy who will become the savior of an entire people.

We also meet real women leaders, such as: Deborah - the prophetess and the queen Italia - the evil usurper, women who exercised all the power that sovereignty had given them. Interestingly, a formidable opponent appears every time. This is what happened in the case of Deborah, who defeated the Canaanites, but the retreating general is killed by another woman - Jael, the daughter of another people, the Chenites. In turn, the evil Italia managed to destroy "all the royal tribe", except for the baby Iaosh, hidden and saved by Princess Jehosheba.

Although women's voices have never been encouraged to be heard in Jewish culture, here are three remarkable women — Miriam, Deborah, and Anna — who manage to become “vocal,” because they knew how to use words in such a way. to such an extent that they succeeded in changing history by means of verbal acts. All three played an important role, whether for a son, for a brother, or for an entire people. Each of them sang songs of praise to God Almighty and at the same time made their own significant human contribution to the event evoked in their verses. Thus, Miriam sang during the crossing of the Red Sea, Deborah, after the defeat of Sisera's army, and Ana, after her personal victory against her own infertility.

Another exemplary figure of the woman-hero is that of Judith, who played a special role in rescuing the people of Israel, bravely entering the camp of the enemies and killing her leader, the famous Assyrian general Olofren.

Widowed after her husband, Manasseh, "died at the time of the barley harvest," Judith is portrayed as a serious woman in her place, who "walked around with a sack around her thighs and wore her widow's clothes" and who respects all the canons specific to the status. In addition to her beauty, she also enjoyed financial independence because her late husband — Manasseh — had left her gold and silver, slaves and maids, cattle and land. Rarely is there a woman in Scripture who spontaneously becomes a leader, but Judith does. So, when the leaders of Bethulia are about to decide to hand over the city to the Assyrians, Judith gives a well-argued speech that

persuades her people to wait and let her act according to a known plan. She gives up the sifted clothes of the widow and beautifies herself as she knows best, so that beauty may serve as a weapon against her enemies. We realize, however, that this would not be his most valuable weapon, but his intelligence. She manages to carry out her plan, precisely because she is smart and knows how to use words.

Courage is another quality of her, which she uses when she goes to the camp of the enemy Olofern, accompanied only by a maid. Using his seductive power, he lures Olofern into her nets and, by a cunning ploy, cuts off his head. When she returns to Betulia with the head of the enemy as a trophy, her compatriots understand that the fortress is saved and that their heroine, Judith, deserves to be respected until death. Judith enjoys independence for the rest of her life, up to the respectable age of 105, even though "many have asked her to marry him." Moreover, he frees his maid from bondage, an exceptional gesture in the context of those times. For her saving deed, she will be celebrated by all the people and called "the pride of Israel" (Jude 13:17; 15: 9-10).

Esther, a young Jew from Persia, the wife of King Ahasuerus, famous not only for her social standing but also for her beauty, saved by God from death, will be the one who will save the Jewish people from captivity. She is the prototype of the woman who enjoys full bodily and spiritual beauty: pleasing in face and modest in soul (2:15), wise (2: 9-17; 5: 1-3), obedient (2:10), humble (4:16), courageous (7: 6), loyal, and persevering (2:22; 8: 1-2; 7: 3-4). The book that bears his name describes an event that took place in the lives of millions of Jews left scattered throughout the lands of the empire⁴.

Along with the book of Ruth, Esther is the only book in the Bible that bears a woman's title. This heroine of her nation was first named Hadasa, but her Jewish name was changed for the benefit of the imperial court to "Esther," which translates to "the star of the rising." Two young women shake hands over the centuries in their love for the Jewish people: Ruth and Esther. The history of Esther is entirely rooted in beautiful oriental tales. The whole action revolves around three feasts: the feast given by Ahasuerus in honor of all his rulers and servants (chapters 1 and 2), the feast given by Esther (chapter 7) and the feast of Purim (chapter 9). The red thread of the whole action is clear: God knows how to protect His people in the midst of the most adverse conditions.

Esther's husband, King Ahasuerus, who ruled over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia, valued the advice of his

⁴ <https://biblia.crestini.com/explicatia-cartii/estera/>

adviser, Prime Minister Haman, a proud man and a genuine anti-Semite. On the other hand, Mordecai, Esther's older cousin and the Jewish representative, asked Esther to use her influential position to speak to the king on their behalf.

According to the customs of the day, no one could address the emperor unless he called him. Otherwise, the punishment was death. Defying this danger, Esther decides to address her husband anyway, but first she prepares by praying and fasting for three days:

"On the third day Esther put on royal clothing and came to the inner court of the king's house ; the king was sitting in his royal seat, in the king's house, in front of the door of the house. And it came to pass, when the king saw the queen Esther standing in the court, that she passed through to him; and the king held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Esther came near and struck the top of the staff" (Esther 5: 1-2)⁵.

Taking advantage of the king's benevolent attitude, Esther reveals her Jewish origins and shows him that Haman plans to destroy his people and, implicitly, her. Enlightened by his wife's words, King Ahasuerus prevailed and remedied the situation, ordering Haman to be hanged, *"for he had lifted up his hand against the Jews"* (Esther 8: 7)⁶.

By order of the king, Mordecai sent letters to all the Jews in all the lands, ordering them to celebrate the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar every year, as days of victory for the Jews against those who wished to exterminate them.

The ten chapters of **the Book of Esther** tell a very old story, told in ancient times, but whose memory is still alive today, by celebrating it every year on the occasion of the feast of Purim.

In **Judges Book 16** we are told another story of a woman remarkable for her courage and intelligence. This time, she is part of the "opposing camp." It is about Delilah, a Philistine woman with whom the great King Samson had fallen in love. The Philistines commanded him to discover the source of his power, which he did, revealing that the hair was the "source" of his strength. Therefore, in order to put an end to the danger that Samson posed to them, his hair adornment had to be removed. Delilah is the one who carries out this mission, thus allowing the Philistine to capture him. Modern images of Delilah associate her with seduction as a typical

⁵ Livia și Sorin Rosen, *Meghilat Ester. Cartea Esterei pentru sărbătoarea de Purim*, FCER, București, 2004, p. 20.

⁶ idem, p. 27.

temptress. However, nothing in this story suggests that she was an easy woman. Her condemnation will be based on idolatry and association with Israel's greatest enemy, the Philistines.

In **I Kings 3: 16-28** we read the story of two women who complained to the king. They are not named, but are said to have been prostitutes. As such, they did not have a male partner mandated to speak on their behalf. Both women had recently given birth, but during the night one of the babies had been suffocated and died. Everyone claimed to be the mother of the surviving child. King Solomon, famous for his brilliant mind and ability to judge difficult cases, gave the following solution: "*Cut the living child in two and give half to one and half to the other.*" (I Kings 3:24)⁷. One of the women agreed, while the other protested in horror, saying that she would rather give up the child than see him die. Solomon ruled in her favor. This nameless woman has become a model of "true motherhood," while "Solomon's judgment" has also become a modern metaphor for the enlightened strategy addressed in court decisions.

We end the series of these Old Testament female figures with Lot's wife, who left the city of Sodom and was transformed into a pillar of salt because she looked back on her disastrous fate. There is not a hint of her name or identity other than that she was Lot's wife. The situation of this couple's daughters is similar. They are not named either, but are referred to only to report that they approached their father to give birth and secure offspring. The names of the children who were born from this incest are mentioned, but not that of the girls, a fact that emphasizes once again that women were often seen as mere means.

Despite the unfortunate status of women in the Old Testament, their role remains paramount. Over the millennia, their life stories send us various messages, such as that of Eve telling us that God is right, even when you fail, that of Sarah reminding us that God always keeps His promises, that of Rebekah by which we are encouraged that He always has a plan for our lives, that no one is forgotten and so on.

What makes all these women amazing? The fact that they loved God with passion, that they kept their eyes fixed on Him in the tumult of all the challenges in their lives, and that they submitted to His transforming Grace.

The great culmination of the merits of the "woman" comes with the fulfillment of the messianic prophecy and its elevation to the highest ontological level, made possible by the most honorable and most difficult mission entrusted to any mortal to date: the birth of the Son of God. Holy Virgin Mary.

⁷ <http://www.bibliaortodoxa.ro/carte.php?cap=3&id=68>

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