

## Wynkoop Center Bible Studies on Women in Ministry

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### Credits and Notices

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## Miriam—Exposition

### Scripture Focus

Exodus 2:1-10; 15:19-21; Numbers 12:1-16; 20:1;  
Micah 6:4

Exposition by Amy Jacober

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Many people are only recognized for who they really were after the fact. Painters such as Monet and Van Gogh were poor for much of their lives. Imagine what they would say were they to see their work on everything from the walls of prominent museums to umbrellas and mouse pads. I am quite certain Martin Luther King, Jr. never imagined a holiday named in his honor, nor did Rosa Parks imagine that, by not standing, generations would know her name. Leadership is one of those funny things often recognized only after the fact. History, and how one is remembered, bear out this significance in ways the present cannot.

Miriam was just such a leader, remembered long after she is gone. This is against the odds, not only for being in a patriarchal society, but also for being so young at the advent of her role (she was probably between 14-17 years old). Micah 6:4 includes Miriam—right next to Moses and Aaron—as one sent by Yahweh to the people of Israel. Miriam was not sent to the women of Israel, nor to a special subset considered fit for a woman. According to Micah, she is alongside her brothers with no distinction between them. The writer of Micah certainly knew of Miriam, even though we lack many details regarding Miriam compared with the details we have for Moses and Aaron. This suggests earlier records of her contributions that did not end up in the Bible. She is included in Scripture, however, and we have

much to glean from where her character is recorded.

### Miriam the Deliverer

Getting cut off while driving; incorrect change from a cashier; a noisy neighbor disturbing our sleep—every day we experience small injustices. What we do with these bears witness to our character. Do you fly off the handle and scream or suffer in silence, not wanting to make waves? Of course, there are many other responses in between these two extremes. For right or wrong, we must all discover how to live within the circumstances to which we were born. This does not mean, however, that we must simply accept these circumstances and not seek something better. Sometimes, seeking something better is for us or for our immediate family. At other times, our actions reach far beyond what we ever dreamed.

Miriam found herself in just such a position. She was not looking to make a political stand. She was looking after her brother and keenly aware of the circumstances in which she lived. Past generations had received blessing in Egypt but then, with several years and much change, Miriam's people were seen as a threat. The leadership of Egypt had forgotten Joseph and the good relations between their people. She could do nothing to change her ethnicity and life was getting difficult.

Miriam was her mother's daughter. Her mother could not stand the thought of her beloved baby being thrown into the Nile. With courage and wisdom, Moses' mother chose to follow a higher call rather than comply with the mandate from the leadership of the land. Miriam joined her mother in saving Moses by creatively following Pharaoh's command of casting all male babies into the Nile. As Moses lay in the Nile, Miriam stayed close. She could have been impetuous and blown the timing, but she was patient. She waited for the Pharaoh's daughter to discover her brother, conveniently appearing at the opportune time in order to offer help. She was key, being used to deliver Moses to safety. Moses would go on to be used by God to deliver the Israelites to safety, drawing them out of Egypt through the waters of the sea. Moses could not have done what he did without the prior deliverance of Miriam.

### Miriam the Worship Leader

We have no evidence Miriam knew what was coming when Moses was just a baby. As far as we can tell, she was a wise and courageous young woman looking after the well-being of her baby brother. She did the right thing. Her motivation was familial, but the long-lasting ramifications were enormous. By the grace and intervention of Yahweh, Miriam was present as Moses was drawn out of the water once again with the Israelites. This was a cause for celebration.

When good fortune comes, it can be a temptation simply to cheer and celebrate those who were instrumental in the actions. The danger comes when we praise those used by God and not God himself. Miriam and Moses

each responded with praises to the Lord! Miriam was a significant worship leader and the earliest for which we have record. There can be no mistake that she not only praised God publicly, but that she led others to do so as well with singing *and* dancing.

No small celebration would have ensued from an act such as the deliverance of the Israelites and defeat of the Egyptians at the Sea of Reeds. We know of other women in Scripture leading celebrations after great battles as well (Judg. 5; 1 Sam. 18:6-7). Miriam, however, was the celebration leader after Yahweh's greatest victory in the Old Testament, an event which dominated Israelite consciousness until the Exile. After this great event, Miriam led worship. This was not just merely a few women quietly singing praises huddled together. They were celebrating and leading for all to see and it is recorded in Exodus 15:19-21. "It is significant that probably the first great worship service celebrating that event {the Exodus} was led by Miriam and a group of women."<sup>1</sup>

### Miriam among the Prophets

Miriam was a prophet. She was not prophet-like, nor did she merely act like a prophet. She is given this title directly in Exodus 15:20. Of course, others had been called prophets as well, though in connection with specific prophetic actions—Abraham (Gen. 20:7) and Aaron (Exod. 7:1)—but Miriam is called a prophet simply as a qualifier of who she is.

Being a prophet is not a free pass to address any subject. Rather, it is a designation reserved for one through whom God speaks. That Miriam spoke out would seem to be

acceptable, but the message *must* come from God each and every time. In this text we see Miriam taking the lead in addressing Moses. “The verb ‘spoke’ is third-person feminine singular, agreeing grammatically with ‘Miriam.’ Apparently, Miriam was the chief spokesperson, and Aaron was present because he supports her views.”<sup>2</sup> An important point to take from this is that, indeed, Miriam was the lead voice. This detail is important for the following verses.

Miriam and Aaron acted out of what they believed to be their prophetic role. They were concerned with Moses’ relationship with his Cushite wife, but the text does not say why that relationship was a problem. It is easy to read a variety of issues into the passage, but the reality is no clear reason is present in the text. It is clear God was not pleased with the confrontation, so much so that He called out Aaron and Miriam, letting them know that, regardless of their roles, they had no business trying to speak into Moses’ life without having heard from God specifically on this issue. Moses was His special servant, chosen and favored.

Leadership and the prophetic role can have interesting consequences. To the best of our knowledge, Miriam was acting out of what she understood her role to be. We don’t know what conversation took place beforehand, but Aaron certainly went with Miriam to speak to Moses. Unfortunately, this time the result for Miriam was to be struck with leprosy. A temptation for us could be to talk of how a woman was being shafted! Aaron was there too; why was he not struck with leprosy? The

leprosy came as a disturbing affirmation that Miriam was the one in the lead. The verb, being third-person *feminine* singular, indicates she was the one speaking. Had Aaron spoken, or even if they had both spoken, the verb would have shifted to the masculine plural. (This same pattern can be seen in Exod. 15:1, where Moses and the Israelites ‘sang’ — masculine singular, indicating Moses’ lead.) The moral of the story is *not* that women get treated unfairly, but that a truly prophetic message requires a divine source.

Restoration is the conclusion of this incident. Aaron advocated for Miriam to Moses, who in turn cried out to God on behalf

**Miriam was a significant worship leader and the earliest for which we have record.**

of his sister. God responded, reminding them of the redemption He had already set in

place through the ritual prescription of the priests. In her obedience, Miriam was restored to her leadership role after seven days. Leprosy did not make her unclean or unfit for future work. In fact, she was so important the entire camp waited for her ritual purification to be completed before proceeding any further.

### **Miriam: Anointed, Chosen, and Human**

**W**ithout question, Miriam was a leader. She not only acted the part but was given the authority to back up her claims. Like many great leaders she also knew how to work on a team, to follow, and to own her mistakes. She listened to the Lord, waited, and was aware and prepared when opportunities arose. We learn from her that leadership needn’t be contrived nor forced. When God is in it, leadership will come. The beautiful lesson is that even when Miriam made a mistake, her

leadership was not over. She owned it, followed God's rules for purification, and was restored completely. Miriam offers a great example of being thoroughly anointed, chosen, and human.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Laurie J. Braaten, commentary section.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

## Miriam—Study Guide

Study Guide by Stefanie and Mark Hendrickson  
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### Notes for the Leader

A small group setting or class can use the following questions to guide the discussion of the biblical passage and exposition. Allow participants time to answer for themselves, making room for all group members in the discussion.

### Starting Thoughts

Miriam played a key role in the formation of the people of God. The story of the Exodus points to the faithful love God has for His people. As an older sister and later a prophet, Miriam led the people of Israel through the chains of slavery to freedom. As a response to God's faithfulness she led the people in worship—a prophet of God.

### Discussion Questions

1. Define what "prophet" means.
2. What is the prophet's role among God's people?
3. What causes people to think a prophet can only be male? How does this compare with the text about Miriam?
4. Identify the actions of Miriam that are consistent with those of a prophet.
5. The text identifies her as a prophet alongside Abraham (Gen. 20:7) and Aaron (Exod. 7:1). What is the significance of those two figures?
6. How do Abraham and Aaron as prophets relate to what you know about Miriam as a prophet in this text?
7. What is the significance of the crossing of the Red Sea?
8. What was Miriam's response to God prior to the Red Sea?
9. What does it mean that Miriam had a key role in saving Moses' life?
10. What was Miriam's response to God after the Red Sea?
11. What does it mean that Miriam had a key role as the worship leader at the crossing of the Red Sea?

12. What keeps us today from accepting Miriam as a prophet along with Abraham and Aaron?
  
13. If God clearly used a female prophet in this pivotal point in the Old Testament, is God free to call women and men to whatever role God chooses? What would this look like in the church? What would this look in your life?

## Miriam—Commentary

Commentary by Laurie Braaten  
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Is Miriam indeed among the prophets? It is a great surprise to find this woman held in such high honor in the Old Testament. She is remembered as one of Israel's great leaders in the Exodus by the prophet Micah. She was instrumental in preserving the life of the infant Moses, and is the first *person* to bear the *official* title "prophet."<sup>1</sup> Even her dispute with Moses in the wilderness over his marital conduct reveals something about her position of leadership. We will begin this study with a look at the way Micah remembered Miriam as one of God's deliverers in the Exodus. From there we will trace her story from childhood to death.

### Part I: Miriam's Prophetic Leadership Micah 6:4, Exodus 2:1-10; 15:19-21

#### Miriam in Ancient Memory

*For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery I redeemed you. And I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.* (Micah 6:4<sup>2</sup>)

In this passage Yahweh, through the words of Micah, was bringing a lawsuit against God's people Israel (6:1-8). Verses 4-6 establish that God did not deserve Israel's response of disobedience: Yahweh had been faithfully committed to the people since He brought them out of Egypt (the Exodus) and protected them in the desert. Yahweh sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam as a tangible sign of God's deliverance and guidance along the way. Although we know much about Moses and

Aaron from Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, we know disappointingly little about Miriam. Micah's claim of a major leadership role for Miriam no doubt indicates there was information about Miriam which was not clearly recorded elsewhere in the Bible, and so was eventually forgotten. As we shall see, however, there are occasional hints in Exodus and Numbers that Miriam might have had a stronger leadership role than is usually attributed to her.

#### Miriam the Deliverer

*Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a daughter of Levi. <sup>2</sup>The woman conceived and gave birth to a son. And when she saw that he was good she hid him for three months. <sup>3</sup>When she could no longer hide him she took for him an ark made of reeds and coated it with asphalt and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and set it among the reeds on the edge of the Nile River. <sup>4</sup>And his sister stationed herself at a distance so that she might know what would happen to him. <sup>5</sup>Now the daughter of Pharaoh went down to bathe in the Nile, and her female attendants were walking beside the river. And she saw the ark in the midst of the reeds and she sent her female servant and she retrieved it. <sup>6</sup>She opened it and saw the child, and there was the boy crying! And she had compassion on him and said, "This is one of the Hebrew children." <sup>7</sup>Then his sister said to the daughter of Pharaoh, "Shall I go and summon for you a nurse from the Hebrew women, so that she might nurse him for you?" <sup>8</sup>The daughter of Pharaoh said to her,*

“Go!” So the young woman went and summoned the mother of the child. <sup>9</sup>The daughter of Pharaoh said to her, “Take this child and nurse him for me and I will pay you your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed him. <sup>10</sup>When the child grew she brought him to the daughter of Pharaoh and she became his son. And she called his name Moses, for she said, “Because I drew him out of the water.” (Exodus 2:1-10)

### Literary Context

The first chapter of Exodus reveals a grave crisis for the people of God. Because of the wise actions of Joseph in preserving the Egyptian people, the children of Jacob had been allowed by Pharaoh to settle in Egypt (Gen. 40–50). But a new generation of Pharaohs forgot the kindness of the Israelites, and attempted to limit the Israelite population and keep them from leaving the land through harsh slavery and the killing of all newborn males. This action was in direct opposition to the promises of God that Israel would become a vast nation, and that God would bring them out of Egypt into their Promised Land (Gen. 50:24). As potential male leaders were threatened with death in Exodus 1, two women saved the day—two Hebrew midwives manage to trick the Pharaoh and disobey his command to kill the male babies. The chapter ends with a greater threat: Pharaoh commanded all of his people to cast the male Hebrew children into the Nile. In Exodus 2, three more women rose

to the occasion: Moses’ mother, his sister, and then the daughter of Pharaoh.

### Interpretation

The woman from the tribe of Levi, like the midwives of Exodus 1, could not bear to murder her child. “She saw that he was good” is almost a direct repetition of the language of Genesis 1, where after each act of creation God saw that the finished product was “good.” Perhaps this is a hint her child was destined for greatness in God’s eyes.

The child, like Noah and his family, was saved from the water in an “ark” (the Hebrew term does not mean “basket,” as it is usually translated.) As God began anew with Noah and his family, this woman, by making an ark for her child, was participating in God’s new salvation event. Ironically, she followed Pharaoh’s command; the child was placed in the Nile!

The sister is not named, but the only sister mentioned for Moses and his brother Aaron is Miriam (Num. 26:59; 1 Chron. 6:3). She is called a “young woman” in v. 8, which would indicate that she was probably between 14-17 years old. Her actions were deliberate and protective; she wanted to ensure the child would be safe.

The readers’ hearts drop—the daughter of Pharaoh discovered the “ark” with the child. But she was not like her cold-hearted father; her compassion moved her to act to preserve this Hebrew child’s life.

**Moses never would have lived without the saving actions of three women: his mother who placed him in the ark, his sister whose quick thinking was instrumental in restoring the child to his mother, and the daughter of Pharaoh who had compassion on the child and preserved his life by raising him as her son. Without Moses there would have been no salvation of Israel from Egypt, but without these women, especially Miriam, there would have been no Moses.<sup>3</sup>**



Miriam thought on her feet and offered to *help Pharaoh's daughter* by fetching a Hebrew wet nurse for her. Of course her real intent was to reunite mother and son until the child was weaned (which could be as long as three years). Her plan worked perfectly; ironically the child's mother was paid by a member of Pharaoh's house to do something forbidden by Pharaoh: raise her own child!

When the child's mother returned him to the care of the Egyptian princess, the princess gives him a name which ironically prefigured God's purposes for him. The name "Moses" sounds like the Hebrew word for drawing out of the water. The explanation of the name also foreshadows the child's destiny. The meaning of the name applies equally well to Moses' future: he would become the one to "draw out" God's people from Egypt through the waters of the Sea.

### Miriam the Worship Leader

**W**hen the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and horsemen came into the sea, Yahweh returned the waters of the sea upon them, but the children of Israel walked upon the dry land in the midst of the sea. <sup>20</sup>So the Prophet Miriam, sister of Aaron, took her timbrel in her hand and she went out with all the women behind her with timbrels and dancing. <sup>21</sup>Then Miriam sang to them, "Sing to Yahweh, for he is exalted, horse and rider he has thrown in the sea!" (Exodus 15:19-21)

### Literary Context

The Israelites had just crossed the Sea of Reeds through the intervention of Yahweh (Exod. 14:15-31). There were two worship responses to this event, one led by Moses (Exod. 15:1-18), the other by Miriam. The

responses did not necessarily occur in the order they are given in Exodus 15; some scholars think the response of Miriam is the earliest. Moses' response is a song which begins with the Song of Miriam. Miriam's actions reflect a fuller response of worship with song and dance. By appearing last, the story of Moses, from his birth to the Exodus, is framed by references to reeds and water (the reeds of the Nile and the Sea of Reeds) and the actions of Miriam.<sup>4</sup>

### Interpretation

Verse 19 concisely summarizes the events of Exodus 14:21-29.

Miriam is called a prophet. (This is the feminine form of the word, sometimes translated "prophetess.") While Abraham (Gen. 20:7) and Aaron (Exod. 7:1; see 4:14-17) were called prophets when they exercised some prophet-like function, Miriam is the first person in the Bible to be given this title outright. Since Miriam's actions resembled a priestly role, how can she be called a prophet? In the early days, many of Israel's religious leaders had both priestly and prophetic functions (Deborah in Judg. 4-5; Samuel in 1 Sam. 7:15-17; 9:3-21). Miriam was from the tribe of Levi, and the Levites later had functions in the temple worship that were both prophetic and priestly (1 Chron. 25:1-6). For Miriam the title prophet seems to indicate her leadership in worship. Women in Israel also led victory celebrations after great battles were won (Judg. 5; 1 Sam. 18:6-7). Here Miriam leads the first great celebration over the greatest victory in the Old Testament: Yahweh's salvation of Israel by His defeat of the Egyptians at the Sea of Reeds.<sup>5</sup>

Miriam and the women celebrated Yahweh's victory by reenacting the events with song and dance. This may have been the pattern for later Passover celebrations, when the events of the Exodus were remembered and celebrated. The Exodus is the central saving event in the Old Testament—analogue to the Cross and resurrection in the New Testament. It is significant that probably the first great worship service celebrating that event was led by Miriam and a group of women.

**Part II: Miriam Speaks as a Prophet**  
Numbers 12:1-16; 20:1

**Miriam among the Prophets**

**N**ow Miriam (and Aaron) spoke against Moses concerning the Cushite woman whom he married (for he had married a Cushite woman).<sup>2</sup> They said, "Has Yahweh only spoken by Moses? Has he not also spoken by us?" (Now Yahweh heard.)<sup>3</sup> But the man Moses was very compliant, more compliant than anyone on the face of the earth.<sup>4</sup> Then Yahweh suddenly spoke to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, "The three of you go out of the tent of meeting," so the three of them went out.<sup>5</sup> Yahweh came down as a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the tent. He summoned Aaron and Miriam and the two of them appeared. Then he said,<sup>6</sup> "Listen to my words: If your prophet is from Yahweh, in a vision I will make myself known to that one, in a dream I will speak with that one.<sup>7</sup> Not so with my servant Moses, he is entrusted with all my house.<sup>8</sup> Mouth to mouth I speak with him, visibly and not in riddles — rather, he looks upon the very form of Yahweh. So why are the two of you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?"<sup>9</sup> So the anger of Yahweh burned against them and he

left.<sup>10</sup> When the cloud departed from the tent there was Miriam, leprous, as white as snow. When Aaron turned toward Miriam there she was leprous.<sup>11</sup> So Aaron said to Moses, "Please, my lord, do not make us suffer for this sin which we have so foolishly committed!"<sup>12</sup> Please do not let her be like a stillborn child whose flesh is half rotted when emerging from its mother's womb."<sup>13</sup> So Moses cried out to Yahweh, "Please, God, please heal her!"<sup>14</sup> Yahweh responded to Moses, "If her father had merely spit in her face would she not be shamed for seven days? Let her be quarantined outside of the camp for seven days, then afterwards she shall be allowed back in."<sup>15</sup> So Miriam was quarantined outside the camp for seven days. And the people did not set out until Miriam was allowed back in.<sup>16</sup> Afterwards the people set out from Hazeroth and they encamped in the wilderness of Paran. (Numbers 12:1-16)

Numbers 12 is a very difficult passage to interpret. Why did Miriam, with the support of Aaron, complain about Moses' marriage to a Cushite woman? Why was only Miriam apparently blamed and punished, when Aaron was a partner in her charge against Moses? Were racial and gender biases being expressed here, first against a foreign woman (perhaps a dark-skinned Ethiopian), and then against another woman (Miriam) while Aaron, her male accomplice, went unpunished?

**Literary Context**

The events leading to the dispute in Numbers 12 shed some light on this passage. In Numbers 11 the people complained twice within the hearing of Moses. When Yahweh became "very angry" (v. 10) Moses complained he was not able to play the *maternal* role of leading this people by himself (note the

feminine imagery of vv. 11-14). Yahweh's solution was to enlist help for Moses through 70 elders, who assembled outside the camp, received God's spirit, and prophesied, but only once (vv. 16-26). When two of the elders who had remained in the camp also received God's spirit and prophesied, Joshua complained to Moses. Moses' response was, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" (v. 29. NRSV). When we come to Numbers 12, two recognized leaders, Miriam and Aaron, challenged Moses and claimed to be God's spokespersons—apparently emboldened by Moses' wish for prophetic help. In addition, since Moses' plea for help involved an acknowledgment that leadership involved feminine aspects, who better to step forward for the task than Miriam, who was already a recognized leader?

### *Interpretation*

In verse 1, the verb "spoke" is third-person feminine singular, agreeing grammatically with "Miriam." Apparently Miriam was the chief spokesperson, and Aaron was present because he supported her views. After this first statement, both Miriam and Aaron are represented as speaking, and both were addressed. The only seeming exception is when Miriam alone bore the physical punishment.

Cush is usually identified with Ethiopia. Did Moses have a second, "Cushite" wife, or was this woman his wife Zipporah, daughter of Jethro (Exod. 2:21)? If the former is the case, it is strange neither this woman nor the couple's children are named anywhere in the Bible (note how even the third wife of

Abraham and their children are mentioned in Gen. 25:1-4). It seems more likely, then, that the woman is Zipporah. Support is found from Habakkuk 3:7 where "Cushan" is mentioned in reference to Midian, which is where Jethro and his daughter Zipporah were from.

If Miriam and Aaron were complaining about Moses taking a foreign wife (Zipporah), they waited a very long time to bring this issue to light. Moses' relationship with Zipporah seems to have been a rocky one. After the Israelites left Egypt, Jethro came to meet them in the wilderness. He brought his daughter, Zipporah, and their two sons. The text says Moses had "dismissed her" (Exod. 18:2), a word root sometimes used to connote a divorce (Deut. 22:19, 29; 24:1, 3-4; cf. Deut. 21:14 and Gen. 21:14). An ancient and widespread Rabbinic interpretation may shed light (see the works by Fischer and Graetz in the bibliography). Since the couple apparently had no more children (the Bible only mentions the two sons born in Midian), the Rabbis speculated Moses neglected his marital duties toward Zipporah, adopting a life of celibacy to devote all his energies to leading the people. So Miriam's concern, the Rabbis said, was that Moses was wrongfully *neglecting* his wife. (They further speculated Zipporah had revealed Moses' neglect to Miriam, and had expressed her concern that the 70 elders who had become prophets with leadership roles would now follow Moses' example and start neglecting their wives!) While we would not want to accept all the speculation of the Rabbis regarding this passage (and there is much more!), the basic details make sense of all the information we have about the relationship between Moses and Zipporah.

The challenge of Miriam and Aaron in verse 2 concerns whether Moses was the only one who had the right to interpret God's will for the community. Miriam had already been given the title "prophet" in Exodus 15. As High Priest, Aaron would have had a role in declaring the words of God (some of the later Priestly leaders like Samuel were considered to be both priests and prophets; see 1 Sam. 7:15-17; 9:3-21). They claimed authority to challenge Moses' relation to the Cushite woman; the issue was whether or not it was God's will that Moses neglect his wife for the sake of his calling.

The Hebrew word translated in verse 3 as "compliant" is usually rendered "humble, meek." The sense here is that Moses was extremely submissive to, or compliant with God's will. He was more compliant than anyone else, indicating both that he was very careful to follow what

God told him, and that he kept a stricter standard than others.<sup>6</sup> Living apart from one's spouse is not demanded of every leader, but in this extremely significant era it may have been required of Moses. Note how Paul advised the Corinthians to follow his example by not getting married, because the second coming could occur at any moment (1 Cor. 7:8, 27-31).

Yahweh sent all three siblings outside. They had been in the tent of meeting where oracular

decisions were given to Moses on behalf of the people (Exod. 33:7-11).

Addressing Aaron and Miriam, Yahweh said He usually communicates with prophets indirectly through dreams and visions, but with Moses more directly and clearly, "mouth to mouth ("face to face," NRSV). Moses had this special relationship because he bore more responsibility, "he is entrusted with all my house." Because of his special responsibility and clear insight into God's will, they should not challenge Moses. The passage implies Miriam and Aaron had a prophetic revelation; what was denied is that they could apply their prophetic insight to the situation of Moses, who had a clearer sense of God's will here. Their concern about neglect of family, if applied to others, would be considered valid. A similar dispute took place in the postexilic community. For the sake of community

**There is no reason to believe Miriam was punished because she was a woman who refused to submit to the authority of a male leader. A closer look at the text shows the woman was not the only one to be punished—indeed Aaron, Moses, and even Israel suffered the consequences of God's action. Miriam bore a punishment in her body because she was the leader of this dispute against Moses, not because she was a woman who had no business in a leadership role. Rather, the text suggests it was imperative for her time of punishment to end quickly so she could resume her important leadership role in the worshiping community.**

survival, Ezra and Nehemiah insisted the people get rid of their foreign wives, because these unions led to idolatry (Ezra 9–10). But divorcing a foreign spouse—even an unbelieving one—was not to be a general rule for all God's people at all times. See the story of Ruth, where a faithful Moabite widow preserved her mother-in-law's life and family

by marrying an Israelite, and became an ancestor of King David. Christians also could point to Paul's advice not to separate too

quickly from an unbelieving spouse (1 Cor. 7:12-16).

Verse 9 says, "So the anger of Yahweh burned against *them*," yet why was only Miriam punished, and not Aaron? There is no indication in Numbers 12 Miriam was punished because she was a woman who refused to submit to the authority of a male leader. The issue was apparently more complex. It is often observed that since Aaron was a priest, he could not be punished with leprosy, since this would make him temporarily incapable of fulfilling his priestly duties (Lev. 22:4). But this fails to reckon fully with v. 11, where Aaron says "do not make *us* suffer for this sin." It therefore appears the punishment was not just directed against the woman. Miriam bore a punishment in her body simply because she was the leader of this dispute against Moses (see comment on v. 1). But what, then, was Aaron's punishment? Miriam's leprosy also punished Aaron, perhaps by impeding him from his priestly duties without her participation. Although the Bible has no direct record of Miriam's official role in Israelite worship, we know women served at the entrance of the tent of meeting (Exod. 38:8). We have seen, moreover, that Miriam's leading of the song at the Sea of Reeds may indicate she had a priestly function as a worship leader. Moses' unusually urgent intercession in v. 13, "Please, God, please heal her!" may also indicate the gravity of the loss of Miriam to the community.

Despite the urgency for Miriam's return to community service, the necessary cleansing ritual had to be followed. The Rabbis pointed out that even in her punishment and isolation Miriam was highly honored, because God

himself acted as the priest who healed her and declared her clean.<sup>7</sup> The importance of Miriam is highlighted by the observation in vv. 15-16 that the Israelites did not continue their journey until her time of ritual purification was over. When a later text prescribed the treatment for leprosy (Deut. 24:8-9), the Israelites were warned to remember Miriam! This is not to be interpreted as a warning that if someone acts like Miriam she (or *he*) might be stricken with the same disease. Rather, it is a warning to follow carefully the ritual prescriptions of the Priests; after all, even Miriam had to follow them and she was directly healed by God.

### Miriam's Death

*The whole Israelite congregation came to the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people dwelt in Kadesh. Miriam died there and there she was buried. (Numbers 20:1)*

The record of Miriam's death is very brief. In the same chapter, both Moses and Aaron's death is anticipated, when they were told they would die before Israel entered the Promised Land because of their disobedience at Meribah (Num. 20:9-13, 22-29; Deut. 34:5). Some claim Numbers 12 is Miriam's disobedience story, which functions like the Meribah incident for Moses and Aaron, showing why she was not allowed to enter the Promised Land. Yet no such indication is in the text. In the Pentateuch the sentence of death for a sin is always either announced beforehand or explained afterwards. It is very clear Miriam had already borne her punishment; there was no second penalty announced for her sin. This is simply the death record of an honored member of the community.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 102.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise marked, all Scripture quotations in the Commentary section are the author's own translation from the original languages.

<sup>3</sup> J. Cheryl Exum, "'You Shall Let the Daughters Live': A Study of Exodus 1:8-2:10," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, The Feminist Companion to the Bible, 6, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 52.

<sup>4</sup> Jopie Siebert-Hommes, "But if She Be a Daughter . . . She May Live! 'Daughters' and 'Sons' in Exodus 1-2" in Brenner, 70; Phyllis Tribble, "Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows," in Brenner, 172-73.

<sup>5</sup> See Carol Myers, "Miriam the Musician," in Brenner, 207-30; Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, "Some Recent Views on the Presentation of the Song of Miriam," in Brenner, 202-203; and Rita J. Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only through Moses?: A Study of the Biblical Portrait of Miriam*, SBLDS 84 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 11-40, 46-48.

<sup>6</sup> See George W. Coats, "Humility and Honor: A Moses Legend in Numbers 12," in *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature*, eds. D. J. Clines, David M. Gunn, and Alan Hauser, JSOT Sup 19 (Sheffield: Sheffield Press, 1982), 100-102.

<sup>7</sup> See Naomi Graetz, "Did Miriam Talk too Much?" in Brenner, 233.

## For Further Reading

(\*These works are especially helpful.)

\*Bellis, Alice Ogden. *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994.

Brenner, Athalya, ed. *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*. The Feminist Companion to the Bible, 6. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994. The following articles in this volume are particularly relevant:

\*van Dijk-Hemmes, Fokkelien. "Some Recent Views on the Presentation of the Song of Miriam," 200-206.

\*Exum, J. Cheryl. "'You Shall Let the Daughters Live': A Study of Exod. 1.8-2.10," 37-61.

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\*Myers, Carol. "Miriam the Musician," 207-30.

\*Siebert-Hommes, "But if She Be a Daughter . . . She May Live! 'Daughters' and 'Sons' in Exodus 1-2."

\*Tribble, Phyllis. "Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows," 166-86.

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Old Testament Supplement 19. Sheffield:  
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- \*Fischer, Irmtraud. "The Authority of Miriam:  
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- \*Sakenfeld, Katharine Doob. "Miriam." In  
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Eerdmans, 2000, 905.

## Wynkoop Center Bible Studies on Women in Ministry

UNIT 1: The Creation Mandate		UNIT 3: New Testament Women in Public Leadership	
The Crown of Creation	Gen. 1:26-31	Anna	Luke 2:22, 36-40
The First Human, Almost	Gen. 2:1-17	Woman at the Well	John 4:1-42
The Human Race Completed	Gen. 2:18-25	Jesus' Women Associates	Luke 8:1-3; 23:55–24:11;
Broken Fellowship	Gen. 3:1-13		John 20:1-2, 11-18
Facing the Consequences	Gen. 3:14-24	Lydia	Acts 16:11-15, 40
		Priscilla	Acts 18:1-3, 18, 24-26; Rom. 16:3-4; 1 Cor. 16:19;
			2 Tim. 4:19
		Paul's Women Associates	Rom. 16:1-16; Phil. 4:2-3;
			Col. 4:15
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Miriam	Exod. 2:1-10; 15:19-21; Num. 12:1-16; 20:1;	The Creation Order Understood	1 Cor. 11:2-16
	Mic. 6:4	Keeping Order in Public Worship	1 Cor. 14:26-36
<b>Deborah</b>	<b>Judg. 4:1-10, 14; 5:1-3</b>	Mutual Submission among Christians	Eph. 5:21-33;
Huldah	2 Kings 22:14-20; 2 Chron. 34:22-28		1 Pet. 3:1-7
Esther	Esther 2:5-11, 16-23; 4:13–5:8; 7:1–8:6; 9:29-32	I Suffer Not a Woman	1 Tim. 2:8-15
Jehosheba	2 Kings 11:1-21; 2 Chron. 22:10-12	The New Testament Understanding of Women	Gal. 3:23-29

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## Deborah—Exposition

### Scripture Focus

Judges 4:1-10, 12-16; 5:1-31

Exposition by Heather Ann Ackley

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### Gender Issues: What is a Woman's Place?

After 20 years of military occupation by the technologically advanced Canaanites, God answered Israel's cry for help through a woman (Deborah). First and foremost, Deborah—whose name means “bee” in Hebrew and is also a play on words with the verb “she spoke”—was a prophet (4:4). As pointed out in the commentary section, she was not just any prophet: she was the very first prophet since Moses, the fulfillment of God's promise in Deuteronomy 18:15. Part of her role was to praise God on behalf of the nation (5:12).

Deborah's role as wife is mentioned only secondarily, and even this is not entirely clear, since the phrase also means “woman of torches,” perhaps a reference to her “fiery” power as a prophet and military commander. Though secondary to her role as prophet, her marriage (if the traditional translation is correct) was part of what made her who she was: “a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth” (4:4<sup>1</sup>).

Thirdly, in this passage Deborah's function was actively “judging Israel” (4:4). In this also she was like Moses, helping people discern God's will in order to resolve conflicts peacefully and faithfully. Normally, a judge was placed in this role after winning a military victory, as in 3:10. Though we know Deborah was successful in battle after becoming a judge, we do not know whether or not she also came to power this way. Finally, Deborah was also called “a mother in Israel” after she successfully led Israel to military victory over

occupying forces (5:7), emphasizing her maternally fierce protection of those in her care against those who did them harm.

Deborah's method for judging Israel was to sit under a palm tree on a hill, where people sought her out for her prophetic judgment (4:5). Thinking through the implications, this means Israelite men and women had to go out of their way, even climbing a hill, just to get to Deborah to ask for her help. In this passage, she was not imposing herself or her authority on or over men and women, but rather her gift of leadership and discernment was sought out by them.

A second aspect of Deborah's method as a judge was her ability and authority to command others on God's behalf. For example, she summoned Barak and outlined a military strategy for him as decreed by God. At this point, she was acting not only as prophet and judge but also as commander-in-chief of the nation's armed forces (a function served in the United States by its president). Since part of a prophet's role in ancient Near Eastern cultures was to sound God's battle call, Deborah was not necessarily unique in this. While she was in battle position with the Israelite troops she and Barak had mustered on Mount Tabor, she again functioned as military commander-in-chief by commanding Barak to lead the troops into battle (4:12, 14). This too was consistent with her role as prophet as practiced in the ancient Near East (for example, Elijah and Elisha), which included declaring and

embodying God's solidarity with the troops and proclaiming God's will for battle strategy.

### Gender Relations: What Is a Woman's Proper Role in Relation to Men?

**B**arak, commissioned by God through Deborah to lead Israel's troops, would not go into battle without her, though he alone is given credit for summoning the 10,000 from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun from the north (4:10). Yet "the chiefs of Issachar [from the south] came with Deborah" into battle (5:15). Deborah told Barak he would not be glorified by his military leadership and service, since ultimately a woman would defeat Sisera's technologically-advanced occupying troops from Canaan (4:9). However, this did not dissuade him from serving God faithfully under Deborah's prophetic military leadership.

Side by side, Deborah and Barak led the 10,000 following them (4:10); Deborah, then, was a military leader and soldier as well. Though a commander of Israel, she offered herself among the people, making herself physically vulnerable by traveling with Israel's soldiers in battle (5:9). Deborah and Barak not only led the troops together but also praised God together in song after winning the battle and Israel's freedom (5:1, 12). In this song of praise, Deborah is celebrated for the economic prosperity of Israel during her years of leadership, as well as for its military success (5:7).

In contrast with Deborah and Barak's mutually-respectful partnership, other women and men in this passage are portrayed in

conflict, beginning with Jael and Sisera. Jael is first introduced as "blessed" (5:24). Like Deborah, she was identified only secondarily as a wife, and that in an ambiguous phrase: rather than being the "wife of Heber the Kenite," "Heber" could be translated "a group," and so she was perhaps instead "a woman of the Kenite group" (5:24). Third, her activity or function in this passage was to lull Sisera into a false sense of security by feeding him, then overpowering and killing him—ultimately in self-defense—by shattering and crushing his skull with a mallet and peg (5:25-27). He lay "between her legs" (Hebrew; not "at her feet," as in most English translations), as in childbirth, "for in delivering Sisera to death, Yael helped deliver Israel to life."<sup>2</sup> In their song of praise, Deborah and Barak imagined Sisera's mother and "her wisest ladies" assuming his delayed return indicated his defeat and plunder of Israel, and that this plunder of Israel's goods would include a "girl or two for every man" (5:28-30). Ironically, it was a woman or two who defeated Sisera and Canaan.<sup>3</sup>

**Deborah is celebrated for the economic prosperity of Israel during her years of leadership, as well as for its military success (5:7).**

### What Does Deborah's Story Say about Women in Ministry?

**D**eborah's leadership and Israel's response to it reinforce that women's leadership and ministry can be biblical, God-ordained, prophetic, consistent with, and continuing the Mosaic tradition. Though Deborah and Jael's marital status is not crystal clear in the original Hebrew, if the English translations are correct, then these passages support women's leadership as compatible with marriage. While

being a wife is important, it is not the first or only way God (or the Bible) identifies a woman.

The relationship between Barak and Deborah may be the most significant contribution this biblical passage makes to the idea of women's ministry, one not seen as clearly elsewhere in the Bible. Barak demonstrates that men in religious leadership need the support of women in religious leadership in order to serve God effectively, not in subservience but as partners and even as guides. Likewise, Deborah's method of serving Israel as judge demonstrates that laypeople also need the guidance of a God-ordained woman in religious leadership. When God has called and gifted such a woman for ministry, God's people should actively seek her out, as the Israelites climbed the hill to seek Deborah, so she could use her God-given gifts for everyone's benefit.

Finally, though Deborah's military leadership may seem strange to some of us

today, it was not surprising to her contemporaries, who expected this from a prophet (and we know from examples such as Anna in Luke 2:36-38 and the women prophets addressed by Paul in 1 Cor. 11:5 that Deborah was not the only woman prophet). Perhaps this cultural and historical difference between our expectations and those of the Israelites may help us see that, as Deborah and Jael demonstrate, women's leadership can be unexpectedly powerful and may take forms we don't normally associate with women, not because of women's limitations but because of our own.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations in the Exposition section are from the NRSV.

<sup>2</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 52.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

## Deborah—Study Guide

Study Guide by Stefanie and Mark Hendrickson  
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### Notes for the Leader

A small group setting or class can use the following questions to guide the discussion of the biblical passage and exposition. Allow participants time to answer for themselves, making room for all group members in the discussion.

### Starting Thoughts

Deborah was not your "typical" Old Testament female. She wore many hats and engaged in many tasks. The list of her roles is lengthy and astonishing—a military leader who is a woman? But in all her roles, typical and not so typical, Deborah followed God while leading the people of God. Just as the people and leaders of her day looked to her, Deborah is an example to us today. God

often works through the unexpected, atypical to accomplish His will in the world.

this supported by this passage? Why or why not?

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What was Deborah's role as a judge in the Old Testament? How is this similar or different to what a judge is today?
2. What various roles did Deborah play?
3. Which of these roles are typically filled by women and which are typically filled by men? Why do you think it is difficult to change these "typical" roles?
4. How does Deborah challenge your understand of men and women? How men and women relate?
5. Does this passage support the typical roles mentioned above? Why or why not?
6. What would it mean for a female to be the first prophet since Moses and the leader of 10,000 troops?
7. What does it mean that the commander of an entire army would not go into battle without Deborah? What does this say about Deborah's leadership? About the respect of the community for her call from God to be a prophet?
8. What do you think caused Barak to insist on Deborah going with him? What did her role as prophet have to do with this?
9. In our culture, the temptation exists to assign certain roles to particular genders. Is this supported by this passage? Why or why not?
10. In what ways does our culture hinder us from hearing God's Word and God's call on our lives?
11. In what ways do we as Christians practice conflict resolution? Do we need leaders like Deborah, faithful and obedient to God, even if God calls a woman to lead the way?
12. Have you had a leader in your life who has guided you closer to God? What qualities mattered most in that person?
13. Do those qualities line up with God's use of Deborah, a female prophet, to guide His people? Why or why not?

## Deborah—Commentary

Commentary by Charles White  
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*The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud died. <sup>2</sup>So the LORD sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoiim. <sup>3</sup>Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD for help; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly for twenty years. (Judges 4:1-3)<sup>1</sup>*

Moses, the one who led Israel out of slavery in Egypt, was dead. Moses' successor, Joshua, the one who led Israel into the Promised Land, was dead. At least 146 years had passed since these strong men headed the nation, and they were sorely missed. God's people were not a united country, but a collection of scattered tribes, tied only by kinship and their allegiance to the Lord. Because they were at least four generations away from the time they served the Lord alone, the people easily fell under the influence of those pagan peoples, who had not been driven from the land. They intermarried with them and even served their gods.

As Judges 4 opens, the Israelites were subject to pagan domination. Because they had not served the Lord exclusively, He had given Jabin, head of a small Canaanite "empire," power over them. Jabin controlled God's people through his general, Sisera, who commanded an army with 900 iron chariots.

Not only was Israel disorganized and weak, they also had lost the arms race with the Canaanites. Israel was still living in the Bronze Age, using the kind of weapons developed a

thousand years previous. The Canaanites, on the other hand, had discovered how to make iron weapons. Their swords and spears could pierce the armor of the Israelites, while the Israelites' weapons shattered on the shields of their enemies. In addition, the Canaanites had learned to harness horses and to use chariots on the battlefield. The Israelites on foot had as much chance against the ironclad chariots of the Canaanites as the Polish cavalry had against the Nazi tanks in the early days of World War II.

Faced with this overwhelming military force, Israel surrendered. Since all resistance was futile, they did what the Canaanites told them to, and so were "oppressed . . . cruelly" (v. 3) for 20 years. Probably this means each year at harvest time the Canaanites helped themselves to the food the Israelites had grown and to the animals they had raised, and the best and brightest Israelite children were kidnapped to become wives and servants of their foreign masters. Finally, God's people came to their senses and "[cried] out to the Lord for help" (v. 3). God heard them and turned to a woman named Deborah to begin His plan to save them.

*At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. <sup>5</sup>She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment. <sup>6</sup>She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh*

in Naphtali, and said to him, “The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you, ‘Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. <sup>7</sup>I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.’” <sup>8</sup>Barak said to her, “If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” <sup>9</sup>And she said, “I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.” Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. <sup>10</sup>Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and ten thousand warriors went up behind him; and Deborah went up with him. (4:4-10)

Deborah was “a prophetess” (v. 4). She was the first person called by this title since Miriam, Aaron, and Moses, almost two centuries previously. During Moses’ life (Deut. 18:15) God had promised Israel that after they entered the Promised Land, when they needed to hear from Him, He would raise up another prophet like Moses. Deborah is the first recorded fulfillment of that promise. Incidentally, Deborah’s role as prophetess shows that in Hebrew as well as in Greek, the word usually translated “brother” should not always be understood to refer only to men. God said He would raise a prophet up from the “brothers,” but then fulfilled His promise by raising up a sister!

As a prophet like Moses, Deborah spoke the word of God. Her main role seems to have been as a judge, to explain God’s will in settling disputes between people. Moses

himself spent a lot of time fulfilling this role (Exod. 18:13-26). Although the Israelites were exploited by the Canaanites, it seems their lives were not totally controlled by their oppressors. Evidently the foreigners did not care about disputes between Israelites, so they allowed leaders like Deborah to keep the peace.

We think the text says Deborah was the wife of a man named Lappidoth, but it is possible the Hebrew means she was a “fiery woman.” She was so well known as one who spoke for God that people came to her from all over as she sat under her palm, an unusual tree for that part of the country. One day something very unusual happened. Instead of sitting passively, listening to people’s problems and then taking them to the Lord, Deborah took action. Evidently God responded to the cries of His people and wanted to convey orders to a man named Barak through His prophetess,

**God said He would raise a prophet up from the “brothers,” but then fulfilled His promise by raising up a sister!**

Deborah. She sent word to Barak, who lived 80 miles away, and told him to come

hear orders from the Lord. The Lord wanted him to muster troops from two northern tribes, for battle with Sisera near the Wadi Kishon, a (usually) small stream that flows through the Jezreel Valley to the Mediterranean. God promised Barak would be successful for, as the Lord said, “I will give him into your hand” (v. 7).

Barak trusted God but needed encouragement, so he said he would only obey if Deborah went with him. She agreed, but said Barak would not get the glory, because “the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman” (v. 9). This plan suited Barak fine, and they both set out for the north to muster the troops.

**W**hen Sisera was told that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, <sup>13</sup>Sisera called out all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the troops who were with him, from Harosheth-ha-goim to the Wadi Kishon. <sup>14</sup>Then Deborah said to Barak, “Up! For this is the day on which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. The LORD is indeed going out before you.” So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand warriors following him. <sup>15</sup>And the LORD threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic before Barak; Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot, <sup>16</sup>while Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-ha-goim. All the army of Sisera fell by the sword; no one was left. (4:12-16)

When Sisera heard 10,000 Israelites were massing against him, he set out with his armored vehicles to put down this foolish rebellion. Barak outnumbered him five to one, but 900 iron chariots, each manned by a crew of two, should have made short work of the foot soldiers. Once again Deborah took the lead, telling Barak it was time to attack. Barak led his troops down the mountain into the river valley, making a grave military mistake by deserting his cover and attacking on the enemy’s ground. However, the Lord kept His promise and threw “Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic” (v. 15). They dismounted from their chariots and began to flee, allowing the superior numbers of the Israelites to cut them down.

**T**hen Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang on that day, saying: <sup>2</sup>“When locks are long in Israel, when the people offer themselves willingly—bless the LORD! <sup>3</sup>Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes; to the LORD I will sing, I will make melody to the

LORD, the God of Israel. LORD, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled, and the heavens poured, the clouds indeed poured water. <sup>5</sup>The mountains quaked before the LORD, the One of Sinai, before the LORD, the God of Israel. <sup>6</sup>In the days of Shamgar son of Anath, in the days of Jael, caravans ceased and travelers kept to the byways. <sup>7</sup>The peasantry prospered in Israel, they grew fat on plunder, because you arose, Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel. <sup>8</sup>When new gods were chosen, then war was in the gates. Was shield or spear to be seen among forty thousand in Israel? <sup>9</sup>My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel who offered themselves willingly among the people. Bless the LORD. <sup>10</sup>Tell of it, you who ride on white donkeys, you who sit on rich carpets, and you who walk by the way. <sup>11</sup>To the sound of musicians at the watering places, there they repeat the triumphs of the LORD, the triumphs of his peasantry in Israel. Then down to the gates marched the people of the LORD. <sup>12</sup>Awake, awake, Deborah! Awake, awake, utter a song! Arise, Barak, lead away your captives, O son of Abinoam. <sup>13</sup>Then down marched the remnant of the noble; the people of the LORD marched down for him against the mighty. <sup>14</sup>From Ephraim they set out into the valley, following you, Benjamin, with your kin; from Machir marched down the commanders, and from Zebulun those who bear the marshal’s staff; <sup>15</sup>the chiefs of Issachar came with Deborah, and Issachar faithful to Barak; into the valley they rushed out at his heels. Among the clans of Reuben there were great searchings of heart. <sup>16</sup>Why did you tarry among the sheepfolds, to hear the piping for the flocks? Among the clans of Reuben there were great searchings of heart. <sup>17</sup>Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan; and Dan, why did he abide with the ships? Asher sat still at the coast of the sea, settling down by his landings. <sup>18</sup>Zebulun is a people that scorned

death; Naphtali too, on the heights of the field. <sup>19</sup>The kings came, they fought; then fought the kings of Canaan, at Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo; they got no spoils of silver. <sup>20</sup>The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. <sup>21</sup>The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon. March on, my soul, with might! <sup>22</sup>Then loud beat the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his steeds. <sup>23</sup>Curse Meroz, says the angel of the LORD, curse bitterly its inhabitants, because they did not come to the help of the LORD, to the help of the LORD against the mighty. <sup>24</sup>Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed. <sup>25</sup>He asked water and she gave him milk, she brought him curds in a lordly bowl. <sup>26</sup>She put her hand to the tent peg and her right hand to the workmen's mallet; she struck Sisera a blow, she crushed his head, she shattered and pierced his temple. <sup>27</sup>He sank, he fell, he lay still at her feet; at her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell dead. <sup>28</sup>Out of the window she peered, the mother of Sisera gazed through the lattice: 'Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots?' <sup>29</sup>Her wisest ladies make answer, indeed, she answers the question herself: <sup>30</sup>'Are they not finding and dividing the spoil?—A girl or two for every man; spoil of dyed stuffs for Sisera, spoil of dyed stuffs embroidered, two pieces of dyed work embroidered for my neck as spoil?' <sup>31</sup>So perish all your enemies, O LORD! But may your friends be like the sun as it rises in its might." And the land had rest forty years. (5:1-31)

Deborah and Barak recounted the Lord's mighty deed in song. The Bible does not say whether Deborah and Barak made it up on the spot or whether it is a literary convention, expressing what they could have said. Like the songs of Moses and Miriam after the Exodus,

or the words of Mary in Luke 1, it retells the story, expressing wonder, gratitude, and praise to God for His wonderful actions. The words and style of this poem mark it as one of the oldest parts of the Bible, written perhaps 400 years before chapter 4.

The song begins by describing how "locks are long in Israel" (5:2), showing the Israelite soldiers had let their hair grow. They had taken the Nazirite vow and were completely dedicated to the Lord (Num. 6:5). God himself came to fight for them, visible as a thunderstorm moving from the south (Seir and Edom). Just as Mt. Sinai quaked in the presence of the Lord (Exod. 19:18), so the mountains near the battlefield quaked as God approached. In addition to the rocking of the earth, the sky responded to the presence of God by pouring rain. This fact fills out our understanding of how the Lord panicked the charioteers (4:15). With a cloudburst flooding the wadi, some of the chariots were washed away (5:21), and others, apparently, bogged down in the soft ground. Where once they had the advantage of mobility, now they were sitting ducks. Not wanting to stay around for the superior numbers of the Israelites to kill them, Sisera's troops abandoned their armor and tried to escape on foot.

The middle section of the poem makes it clear while Barak mustered the northern tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, Deborah brought an army made up of various tribes from the south. Those who responded are honored (Ephraim, Benjamin, and Issachar), but those who shirked are scorned (Reuben, Dan, and Asher). Finally the poem ends by imagining how Sisera's mother waited for his return, not knowing her



son had met a shameful end, killed by the hand of a woman.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations in the Commentary section are from the NRSV.

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## Wynkoop Center Bible Studies on Women in Ministry

UNIT 1: The Creation Mandate	UNIT 3: New Testament Women in Public Leadership
The Crown of Creation The First Human, Almost The Human Race Completed Broken Fellowship Facing the Consequences	Gen. 1:26-31 Gen. 2:1-17 Gen. 2:18-25 Gen. 3:1-13 Gen. 3:14-24
UNIT 2: Old Testament Women in Public Leadership	UNIT 4: Difficult Passages in the New Testament
Miriam Deborah Huldah Esther Jehosheba	Exod. 2:1-10; 15:19-21; Num. 12:1-16; 20:1; Mic. 6:4 Judg. 4:1-10, 14; 5:1-3 2 Kings 22:14-20; 2 Chron. 34:22-28 Esther 2:5-11, 16-23; 4:13—5:8; 7:1—8:6; 9:29-32 2 Kings 11:1-21; 2 Chron. 22:10-12
	Anna Woman at the Well Jesus' Women Associates Lydia Priscilla Paul's Women Associates
	Luke 2:22, 36-40 John 4:1-42 Luke 8:1-3; 23:55—24:11; John 20:1-2, 11-18 Acts 16:11-15, 40 Acts 18:1-3, 18, 24-26; Rom. 16:3-4; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19 Rom. 16:1-16; Phil. 4:2-3; Col. 4:15
	The Creation Order Understood Keeping Order in Public Worship Mutual Submission among Christians I Suffer Not a Woman The New Testament Understanding of Women
	1 Cor. 11:2-16 1 Cor. 14:26-36 Eph. 5:21-33; 1 Pet. 3:1-7 1 Tim. 2:8-15 Gal. 3:23-29

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## Huldah—Exposition

### Scripture Focus

2 Kings 22:14-20; 2 Chronicles 34:22-28

Exposition by Mark Bilby

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### Huldah: the Mother of Judaism

To call anyone “the Mother of Judaism” may sound presumptuous. What about the matriarchs Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel? What about Miriam or Ruth? Indeed, all of these figures played vital roles in Israel’s history. So why call Huldah, who is only mentioned by name in two passages, 2 Kings 22:14-20 and its close parallel in 2 Chronicles 34:22-28, the “Mother of Judaism”?

These two passages stand at a turning point in the story of Josiah, and also the story of Israel and Judaism. Judaism does have its roots in the people of Israel who lived in the time from the Patriarchs to the Monarchs. But the core identity of the enduring, historical religion of Judaism as a “people of the book,” committed to strict monotheism, began to take shape around the time of Josiah (c. 640-609 B.C.), further developing during the Babylonian Exile (587/86-537 B.C.) and the Second Temple Period (515 B.C.-A.D. 70).

King Josiah’s famous reforms helped shape this emerging core identity of Judaism. A fascinating story tells how these reforms were sparked, a story that includes a certain, special woman. As Scripture tells us, Josiah set in motion a project to repair the Temple. As funds from within the Temple were gathered, a long-neglected scroll was suddenly found, identified immediately by the priest Hilkiah as “the Book of the Law,” probably a significant portion of the book of Deuteronomy. Upon hearing this book read, Josiah tore his clothes in a heartfelt, traditional gesture of mourning

and repentance. Then he immediately asked his top officials to inquire of the Lord about this book, that is, to seek prophetic counsel. That counsel came in the person of the prophetess, Huldah.

### Mother of Reform and Renewal

The passage from 2 Chronicles, unlike the passage from 2 Kings, describes how Josiah’s religious reforms already were underway when this “Book of the Law” was found. Even so, this “Book” played a key role as the source material for reform in both texts. Josiah heard it read, understood its implications of judgment upon Judah, and had this confirmed in a direct word from God through the prophetess Huldah. Then he gathered everyone in the nation, “both small and great,” read this book to them, and led them in renewing their shared covenant with God. Immediately following this, the king set in motion a comprehensive plan to rid the nation of every kind of idolatry and foreign worship, and recovered the long-lost practice of keeping Passover.

Even at 18 years old, Josiah arose as the last great *father* of reform and renewal before the Babylonian Exile. At the heart of his program stood a certain book, and along with that book a certain woman, the last great *mother* of reform and renewal of this period. Her direct word from the Lord, her divine interpretation and sanction, became the catalyst that led to an almost explosive reform and renewal in Judah. Its rippling effects would be felt during and

after the Exile, shaping the very core of what Judaism would become.

### Mother of the Bible

Prophets prior to Huldah had delivered oracles and messages from the Lord, some of which eventually became the prophetic books in our Bible. But as Claudia Camp notes, "Huldah's story is notable in the biblical tradition in that her prophetic words of judgment are centered on a written document: she authorizes what will become the core of Scripture for Judaism and Christianity."<sup>1</sup>

Consulted by the highest officials in the nation, Huldah read and interpreted "the Book of the Law," and thus confirmed the authority of the book.<sup>2</sup> While brief, this was a defining moment in Israelite history. Before our eyes, *Scripture* (what is written) is suddenly being read *as Scripture* (sacred, authoritative text), first by King Josiah, then by Huldah the prophetess, then in a public gathering of the entire nation. Starting out in a flurry, this phenomenon of reading Scripture as Scripture started to swell during the Exile, and became a torrent after the Exile, sweeping over the nation guided by the scribe Ezra (who mirrored Josiah's public reading of the Torah and covenant renewal on the other side of the Exile) and among the newly forming synagogue communities of the Jewish Diaspora. Thus, in the story of Huldah, and as part of the story of Josiah, we see coming into existence *the practice of Scripture*.

Alongside this *practice of Scripture* we also see the beginnings of the settled *content of*

*Scripture*, the beginnings of the Bible as we know it today. Certainly, God had been speaking in and through the people of Israel for centuries, and this took written form in various times and situations. Yet the finding of this "Book of the Law" in the late seventh century B.C. is one of the earliest mentions in Israel's history of a book actually being read, recognized, and validated as sacred Scripture.

Biblical scholars over the last 50 years have given increased attention to the process whereby the Bible as we know it was brought together, the formation of the *biblical canon*, or *collection of authoritatively sacred writings*. Some

estimates place the first stage of the formation of the Jewish biblical canon, namely the collection and recognition of the

Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), as concluding around the year 400 B.C. About 200 years earlier, in the account of Josiah and Huldah, we may be witnessing the effective beginning of this process,<sup>3</sup> not only for the Pentateuch, but also for the formation of the entire Bible. This process, concluding around the first century A.D. for the Hebrew Bible, and around the fourth century A.D. for the New Testament, gave us the Bible as we know it today.

At the birth of this process stand Josiah as father and Huldah as mother. In a certain way, Huldah's role is like that of Mary. Mary is the mother of the very Word of God, the Word made flesh, the Word made human. Huldah is the mother of the written Word of God, the Word made legible, the Word interpreted. Mary received the Word in her own womb;

**Huldah is the mother of the written word of God, the word made legible, the word interpreted. Mary received the Word in her own womb; Huldah in the safe haven of her prophetic ministry.**

Huldah in the safe haven of her prophetic ministry. Both received this Word attentively, confirmed this Word faithfully, and sent this Word out lovingly into broader society and history to live forever. Two unsuspecting women became expectant mothers of providence, one the Mother of God and the other the Mother of the Bible.

### Huldah and the Use of the Bible

**H**uldah is recognized in the Bible as a key spiritual leader who played a key role at a key moment in Israel's history. She was a "prophetess," a direct recipient and vessel of the prophetic Word of God, and one whose gender the biblical account sees no need of justifying or even explaining.<sup>4</sup> Not only that, she even can be considered a mother to the Jewish and Christian Bibles.

It is astonishing that the Bible is so often used to constrict and suppress the authority and leadership of women, since the Bible not only speaks about women who exercised such authority and leadership, but also came into being in part through women to whom God gave such authority and leadership. Indeed, we dishonor the Bible when we denigrate its mothers, who are our own mothers in the faith. We dishonor it and them when we employ a hermeneutic of suppression, which can only be sustained by looking narrowly at certain passages without attention either to their historical context, or to the whole of the Bible, or to the very process by which the Bible as we know it came into existence, or to the differences between ancient and contemporary cultures. Let us not sit dry and dead in a shallow conservatism. Rather, let us sink our roots deep in Scripture through interpretation

attentive to both ancient and contemporary contexts, for to be contextually faithful is to give honor to Scripture. So let us honor our mothers in the faith, past and present, for in doing this, we honor God's Word.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Claudia Camp, "Huldah," *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*, ed. Carol Meyers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Nelson is certainly correct in his observation: "[the] king's question is not about the authenticity of the book, which everyone takes for granted (the reader included under the guidance of the narrator). He wants to know about his fate and the fate of the nation." From *First and Second Kings*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1987), 256. However, he does not recognize that the very act of interpreting the text, both by Josiah and Huldah, implicitly lends authority and identity to it. In the process of canonization, it is primarily the community's practice of reading texts as Scripture that confirms and re-confirms texts as Scripture. That is, canonically speaking, Scripture is simultaneously and interdependently *community practice* and *content*. To say it conversely, and like a preacher, if churches neglect reading and taking seriously certain portions of the Bible, those portions are not really part of their Bible.

<sup>3</sup> Claudia Camp, "1 and 2 Kings," *Women's Bible Commentary*, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 115.

<sup>4</sup> Nelson, 256.

## Huldah—Study Guide

Study Guide by Stefanie and Mark Hendrickson  
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### Notes for the Leader

A small group setting or class can use the following questions to guide the discussion of the biblical passage and exposition. Allow participants time to answer for themselves, making room for all group members in the discussion.

### Starting Thoughts

When faced with a difficult choice, we may wonder if one person can make a difference in the world. A troublesome situation can seem so much bigger than one person's life and decisions. If we were able to ask the people of Israel whether one person can make a difference, they would likely answer, "Yes!"

Faced with sin, idolatry and selfishness, the young King Josiah led the nation of Israel in a movement back to the One True God. In the midst of this religious reform, the "Book of the Law" was found. The king began looking for someone to interpret the word of the Lord. Huldah, a prophet, served the Lord by interpreting the Scriptures and leading the nation in religious reform. One person can change the world!

### Discussion Questions

- How did the reforms of Josiah change the spiritual course of Israel (2 Chron. 34:29-33)?
- Who has had influence in your spiritual life? Who had influence in Josiah's spiritual life? What are the similarities and/or differences between the two?
- How did Huldah embody the role of a prophet? How did that affect an entire group of people?
- Does Huldah's gender play a role in this narrative? Would the message have changed if she had been male? Why or why not?
- What might have happened if Josiah rejected the message because the prophet was a woman? Would it have affected us today? Why or why not?
- The text does not indicate the prophet's gender was a significant issue. What would it mean for God's people to accept men and women in ministry unconditionally? What would it mean for you personally?
- What would it mean for our daughters and sons, sisters and brothers to accept their God-called roles as if gender doesn't matter?

## Huldah—Commentary

Commentary by Junia Pokrifka-Joe  
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Imagine the President of the United States sent the top governmental and religious leaders in the country to get advice from a very important person. The first surprise is that the person they consult is a woman. The next surprise is that the woman's advice was the catalyst that brought about a national revival of Christianity that shaped the United States for years to come. If this really happened, we would certainly want to find out more about this awesome woman. The Old Testament tells of a remarkable woman who played a role very similar to our imaginary woman. The woman's name was Huldah, and God used her to speak a prophetic word that brought dramatic transformation to the whole nation of Israel.

The story of Huldah is part of the story of King Josiah (640-609 B.C.). We can read accounts of how the lives of Josiah and Huldah intersect in two very similar passages: one in 2 Kings 22:14-20 and one in 2 Chronicles 34:22-28. The background of these accounts is that King Josiah had commanded repairs to be done on the temple (2 Kings 22:3-7). As the king's men were working, the "Book of the Law" was found, and then read to the king (22:8-10). As King Josiah heard the covenant curses in the book, he was greatly distressed and asked his most important religious and political leaders to seek God's guidance (22:13). It is possible Josiah wanted to make sure this book was really God's Word. And if it was God's Word, he likely wanted to know more about how God wanted him to interpret and

apply it to the nation in his day. He probably wondered if there was anything he and the people could do to avoid facing God's just anger against them for how they had woefully failed to obey God's law. He needed his best leaders to find a person they could really trust to hear and speak the message of God in this desperate situation. The person they chose to consult was Huldah the prophet (22:14).

(The following verse-by-verse discussion is based primarily on 2 Kings 22:14-20. When quoting this passage, differences in the parallel account in 2 Chronicles are noted in brackets.)

*H*ilkiah the priest, Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan, and Asahiah went to the prophet Huldah, the wife of Shallum, the son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, the keeper of the wardrobe—she lived in Jerusalem, in the college—and they spoke with her [about this book]. (v. 14 [22]<sup>1</sup>)

As a recognized prophet of God, Huldah drew the five highest-ranking royal dignitaries at a time of national emergency. Huldah's husband was a court official in charge of royal garments. Huldah lived in Jerusalem, in a section of the city that can be translated "the college" (KJV) or "the schoolhouse." In fact, Jewish tradition holds Huldah was a prophet who taught publicly in a school. It also associates "the Gate of Huldah" in the Second Temple (the Temple being rebuilt during the time of Jesus) with Huldah's schoolhouse.

As her living quarters and the gate dedicated to her would indicate, Huldah probably was highly esteemed not only as a prophet, but also as an interpreter and teacher of the law. This might explain why the king's delegates sought her out, even above her prophetic contemporaries Jeremiah and Zephaniah, who also ministered during the reign of Josiah (Jer. 1:2; Zeph. 1:1). The king's royal delegates included the highest-ranking religious leaders and scholars in the nation: Hilkiah the high priest and Shaphan the scribe (2 Kings 22:3ff.). No apologies are made for consulting a woman prophet to seek God's direction and help. She was not discriminated against for her sex, but sought out as a reliable and authoritative spokeswoman of God.

Huldah's example illustrates that it was normal for women to study, teach, and proclaim the Word of God and hold positions of authority in ancient Israel. Typically, both mothers and fathers were responsible for studying and teaching the Law to their children and their households (Deut. 6:6-9; 11:18-21; cf. Prov. 31:1, 26; Song 8:2). Thus children (young or old) were commanded to honor and obey their mothers (Prov. 1:8; 6:20). Some women were even responsible for the composition of biblical texts, such as the Song of Moses and Miriam (Exod. 15:1-21), the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5), the Song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1-11), the oracle of the mother of King Lemuel (Prov. 31:1-9), and perhaps even the Song of Songs. Israel received these women's words as the very Word of God. Huldah was a spiritual mother and leader, and her words also became part of the inspired Scriptures.

**The "Gate of Huldah" in the Second Temple was built to celebrate this enormously influential woman of God.**

*And she said to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Tell the man who sent you to me. (v. 15 [23])"*

Huldah used the usual prophetic speech formula, "Thus says the LORD," showing definite authority, plainly declaring what she had heard from the LORD. By referring to King Josiah merely as "the man," she indicated he—like the rest of Judah—was only a human being under the superior rule and judgment of God, the divine King (similar to Elisha's treatment of Naaman in 2 Kings 5). As a spokeswoman of the divine King, Huldah actually exercised prophetic authority over the king of Judah.

*Thus says the LORD: Look, I will bring evil on this place and on its people, according to all the words of the book the king of Judah has read [all the curses that have been read in the presence of the king of Judah]. (v. 16 [24])"*

The book is variously identified as "the Book of the Covenant" (2 Kings 23:2), "the Book of the Law" (2 Kings 22:8, 11), and "the Book of the Law of the LORD that had been given through Moses" (2 Chron. 34:14). Shaphan the scribe read all the curses written

in it (2 Kings 22:10). While some believe the book found was Deuteronomy, it could

well have been the entire Torah or Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible, attributed to Moses). In any case, Huldah validated the authority of the book and Josiah entirely submitted himself to this book's authority and claims to obedience. Therefore, in a time before the canon (the authoritative list of books) in the Old Testament was yet settled, the actions of



Huldah and Josiah played an important role in the process of the formation of the Bible.

*Because they have forsaken me and burned offerings to other gods and made me angry with all the works of their hands, my anger burns [will be poured out] against this place and will not be quenched. (v. 17 [25])*

Divine wrath burned hot against Judah's monstrous sins and would not be turned away. According to the covenant blessings and curses of the Torah (e.g., Deut. 28), God would bring judgment against Judah for turning away from the LORD and worshipping other gods.

*Tell the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, Thus says the LORD the God of Israel, concerning the words you heard: (v. 18 [26])*

The prophet Huldah "inquired" of the LORD "on behalf of" (2 Chron. 34:21) Josiah and the remnants of Israel and Judah. The word "inquire" points out Huldah was seeking direction from the LORD so the king and nation could do what was right.

The expression "on behalf of" may indicate she was interceding for divine compassion and mercy. The prophet Huldah received from the LORD a divine response. While the King's humility and the prophet's intercession were unable completely to appease God's wrath, they received temporary peace for their time.

*Because your heart was soft and you humbled yourself before the LORD [God] when you heard what I spoke [his words] against this place and its people that they become desolate and accursed, and*

*because you tore your clothes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, says the LORD. (v. 19 [27])*

Tearing one's robes and weeping was the usual way of showing one's sorrow, repentance, and remorse. Huldah acknowledged these actions of Josiah's (described earlier in 22:11) as the demonstration of a genuine, God-pleasing humility. Yahweh heard Josiah's heartfelt weeping, so Yahweh responded.

*Therefore, I will gather you to your fathers, and you will be buried in peace, and your eyes will not see all the evil I will bring on this place [and its people]." (v. 20abc [28abc])*

Huldah's dual message of judgment and mercy, vengeance and compassion are consistent with the very character of the LORD whose attributes include both grace and justice (Exod. 34:6-7). God is a jealous God who would not acquit the idolaters. God would hold the sinful nation accountable for its apostasy of many centuries. But God is also

**King Josiah accepted Huldah's authority over him as his spiritual leader and God's spokeswoman. Her sex did not exclude her from a position of authority, as prophetic ministry was equally open to both women and men.**

patient. In view of Josiah's humility and Huldah's prophetic intercession, God would delay the inevitable judgment upon Judah.

National well-being is closely tied to personal well-being. Josiah would be rewarded personally; the LORD promised a peaceful end to his life. The terrible judgment on Jerusalem would not be carried out during Josiah's lifetime. "You will be buried in peace" probably indicates he would not suffer a violent death.

Some hold the view that the promise of a peaceful death went unfulfilled since Josiah died from a fatal wound sustained in battle at Megiddo (2 Kings 23:29), raising the question of whether Huldah was a true prophet. One plausible explanation is the “peace” promised was fulfilled in God’s postponement of the destruction of Jerusalem, which occurred two decades after the death of Josiah. In other words, “your eyes will not see all the disaster” explains “you will be buried in peace.”

Perhaps a better explanation can be found in the Chronicler’s account of Josiah’s death. The Chronicler attributes Josiah’s violent and perhaps premature death to his sin. Against the word of God given through Pharaoh Neco, Josiah disguised himself to engage Neco in battle and was fatally wounded at Megiddo (2 Chron. 35:21-22). The promise of peaceful death assumed Josiah’s obedience until the day of his death. Since Josiah rebelled against God’s word (perhaps not recognizing it as God’s word delivered by a pagan king) he forfeited the promise. In this case, it is best to interpret Huldah’s prophetic promise as being conditional on human obedience, as are many Old Testament prophetic promises. The Chronicler’s account thus stands to confirm Huldah’s accuracy in prophecy and to judge Josiah’s lack of discernment on one occasion.

**A**nd they delivered the word to the king. (v. 20d [28d])

The prophet’s message of divine wrath and mercy was delivered to the king, who submitted himself to it. The fulfillment of the divine promise to delay judgment was dependent on a faithful response by the

recipient of the promise. The question is, would Josiah continue to be humble and faithful before the LORD, and lead the whole nation to serve the LORD alone? The answer the text gives is, “Yes.”

According to the Chronicler, Josiah began his reform before the Torah was found and before Huldah delivered her message (2 Chron. 34:4-7). After the Torah was found, Josiah renewed the covenant with the LORD and launched a more comprehensive reform (2 Kings 23:1-25). A half-baked reform would not have done. Only whole-hearted devotion to the LORD is acceptable. Huldah’s authoritative words of divine judgment and hope inspired Josiah’s right response to the LORD: fear, together with gratitude and faithfulness to the LORD. Except for the last few hours of his life, Josiah and all of Judah remained faithful, sealing the prophetic message of peace during his lifetime (2 Chron. 34:33). As one of Judah’s key spiritual mothers, Huldah played a crucial role in all this.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations in the Commentary section are the author’s own translation from the original languages.

### For Further Reading

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## Wynkoop Center Bible Studies on Women in Ministry

UNIT 1: The Creation Mandate		UNIT 3: New Testament Women in Public Leadership	
The Crown of Creation	Gen. 1:26-31	Anna	Luke 2:22, 36-40
The First Human, Almost	Gen. 2:1-17	Woman at the Well	John 4:1-42
The Human Race Completed	Gen. 2:18-25	Jesus' Women Associates	Luke 8:1-3; 23:55–24:11;
Broken Fellowship	Gen. 3:1-13		John 20:1-2, 11-18
Facing the Consequences	Gen. 3:14-24	Lydia	Acts 16:11-15, 40
		Priscilla	Acts 18:1-3, 18, 24-26; Rom. 16:3-4; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19
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<b>Esther</b>	<b>Esther 2:5-11, 16-23; 4:13–5:8; 7:1–8:6; 9:29-32</b>	I Suffer Not a Woman	1 Tim. 2:8-15
Jehosheba	2 Kings 11:1-21; 2 Chron. 22:10-12	The New Testament Understanding of Women	Gal. 3:23-29

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## Esther—Exposition

### Scripture Focus

Esther 2:5-11, 16-23; 4:13–5:8; 7:1–8:6; 9:29-32

### Exposition by Roberta Mosier-Peterson

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The story of Esther embodies all the drama and suspense found in novels, on television, and in the movies. She concealed her true identity as a Jew. It felt like a covert operation. She was sent into great danger, assuming a false identity, at the same time following a strict set of expectations. She was young and very attractive. She began as an orphan but became queen. Intrigue, mystery, and suspense culminated as this young woman accepted, though reluctantly, an undercover mission. She risked her own life to save the lives of her people. This is the stuff of a smash hit!

At the beginning of the story, the reader probably does not expect much of this young orphan named Esther. Mordecai raised her because her parents died. Being an orphan, a Jew, and female put her three steps behind, and her powerlessness was obvious. In 2:8b: “Esther also was taken into the king’s palace and put in the custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women.”<sup>1</sup> Even if it seems like an honor, and perhaps it was, it was not her decision. She was treated more as an object than a subject. She agreed to Mordecai’s wish and concealed her Jewishness.

Esther was compliant and obedient, but she took initiative in making herself pleasing to the king. She rose above all the others and was selected to be queen. From such humble beginnings, Esther excelled in the palace. She blossomed from a hidden, orphaned Jew to an adored royal queen.

Esther demonstrated the rare ability to operate successfully within an oppressive system. She had not created the rules. She was expected to be obedient and pleasing. It is to her credit that she was able to blossom. She accepted the system and didn’t allow herself pity-parties or hysterical rants, any of which would be understandable reactions from our point of view. In fact, there are occasions when some women feel they have no other way to be heard than to resort to such things. Some may say she shouldn’t have put up with it, but Esther excelled in the system available to her.

As we reflect on this, we might come to see that Esther is a friend of women and all others who find themselves in oppressive systems. It is not always possible to fight for our rights; there are times when it is not wise or even possible to challenge the system. In spite of this, Esther shows us that working within such systems takes courage. In the process of making the best of it, we often find we are actually making a difference.

Esther’s system told her that even as an adored queen it was risky, even deadly, for her to enter the king’s chamber unbidden. Her undercover mission to save her people required careful planning. To save her people, she had to be remarkably savvy and wise.

The story of Esther has invited criticism. Some critics argue it should not be part of Scripture. They point out an absence of God, whose name does not even show up. Direct references to God cannot be found. However,

as is often the counter to such criticism, God's handiwork is obvious throughout this story. In the Commentary section, Laura Moore cogently points out that "Esther" can mean "hiding." The main character was hiding and undertaking a covert mission. The unseen co-star of the story is God. Though not mentioned explicitly, God is everywhere in the story.

Mordecai demanded that Esther accept her mission. "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (4:14). Reverberating through this plea is faith. The object of Mordecai's faith is God. Faith is often portrayed in Scripture as a reaching, a hoping and a groping for God. Sometimes God seems to be in hiding, but is really using unexpected means and unexpected instruments. Such is the case right here in

Esther. Not even Mordecai would state definitively that Esther was God's chosen vessel. To do so would have been both presumptuous and prideful.

The planning began with gathering people to pray. Mordecai was now complying with Esther's request. She now had an opportunity to act in a decisive way to save her people. She was no longer powerless. Esther was now blossoming in a new way: she sensed a new purpose in life. It could be she had discovered her calling.

Many women sense God might be calling, but they quickly dismiss it as self-aggrandizement. They would, and perhaps most do, struggle to accept that God would use them in His service. Women in our churches today need many mentors—both men and

women—who will take a chance with them. They need some of those voices like Mordecai's that simply ask the question, "Who knows?"

Esther never would have chosen this for herself. It was surely the riskiest undercover assignment of its time. She would not have put herself and her people on the line. This assignment was not something formed from her own ambition. She was an unexpected heroine.

Similarly, women often feel as though they have stumbled into the ministry. God is using them in amazing ways, and in hindsight it is obvious the work was divinely inspired and executed. A genuine call does not begin with any human ambition. It is accepted only with humility. Women sensing a call

**I wanted to tell them this was not my own ambition. I would have done anything to get out of it. However, like Esther, I knew I really didn't have a choice because God's hand was upon me and I couldn't say no.**

understand what they are embarking upon is risky. Like Esther, many women accept their call reluctantly.

I remember the moments when I first spoke of my calling. There were mixed reviews. A few of my dearest friends rejected the news, saying I was hearing the words of Satan. Others looked at me and smiled as if to say, "You must think you are something special." I wanted to tell them this was not my own ambition. I would have done anything to get out of it. However, like Esther, I knew I really didn't have a choice because God's hand was upon me and I couldn't say no.

Esther's careful planning and her wise maneuvering paid off. She proved courageous and her mission was successful. Her savvy places Esther as a heroine for the Jewish

people. In sending out His disciples, Jesus encouraged this sort of approach: “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16). The mission of the church is risky and mandates an Esther kind of courage and wisdom. Her story can bring encouragement to all who are putting their

lives at God’s disposal. If God can use a young, Jewish orphan to save a whole people, then “who knows?” God may be able to use the likes of us.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations in the Exposition section are from the NRSV.

## Esther—Study Guide

Study Guide by Stefanie and Mark Hendrickson  
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### Notes for the Leader

A small group setting or class can use the following questions to guide the discussion of the biblical passage and exposition. Allow participants time to answer for themselves, making room for all group members in the discussion.

### Starting Thoughts

Esther was the beauty queen whose obedience to God saved her family, her community, and her nation. Through the encouragement and guidance of Mordecai, Esther stepped out in faith “for such as time as this” to follow God through oppression and danger. Again, we see God using both men and women to keep His promise to Israel, further His kingdom, and redeem His people.

### Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever felt oppressed or powerless? Describe that experience.
2. What experiences have you had when making the right choice was unpopular?
3. How did your relationship with God affect your decision and the decision-making process?
4. What is the cost of obedience to God in the face of rejection and oppression?
5. How did Esther respond to such oppression? How do you think you would respond to such oppression?
6. What guided Esther to do the right thing?
7. What guides you to do the right thing? Why is this your guide? How has it helped you in making past decisions? What tempts you to do the wrong thing? Why? How has it hindered you in making past decisions?
8. What effect did Esther’s obedience have?
9. God promises to be faithful, yet Esther and her people were faced with complete destruction. Through the faithfulness of

Esther, they were saved from this destruction. How does this resonate with God's promises to Abraham and the people of Israel? Does that promise still apply today?

10. What was Mordecai's role? Do we still need faithful encouragers today? What does that role mean to members of Christian communities and congregations?
11. In the face of oppression, what would it take for us to respond in faithful obedience to God, instead of reacting in anger and bitterness? How do Esther's actions guide us in our walk through life's difficulties?

## Esther—Commentary

Commentary by Laura Moore  
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**E**xcess, concealment, reversal; a buffoon king, two exiled courtiers acting out an ancient ethnic feud, and a young Jewish maid caught in the middle who finds her voice as queen—these are the characteristics of the book of Esther. It is a reflection on the risks of living in diaspora, and how to survive in the midst of risk. It is also a reflection on survival when God’s face is hidden.

### Chapter 2

**N**ow there lived a Jew in the Fortress of Susa, a Benjaminite by the name of Mordecai son of Jair, son of Shimei son of Kish. <sup>6</sup>[Kish] had been taken into exile from Jerusalem along with the exiles that were exiled with Jehoiachin king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken into exile. (vv. 5-6<sup>1</sup>)

Since the Babylonians initially deported the elite classes from Jerusalem, this introduction suggests Mordecai was descended from this group. Essential to understanding the animosity between Haman and Mordecai, both courtiers of Ahasuerus and both exiles, is their lineage (cf. Exod. 17:8-16; Num. 24:20; 1 Sam. 15 for this background). This animosity spilled over into attempted genocide. Ahasuerus is the Hebrew name for Xerxes, who ruled 486-468 B.C., placing Mordecai and Esther as descendants of those Jews who chose not to return to Jerusalem after the exile.

<sup>7</sup>And Mordecai had been raising Hadassah (known also as Esther), his uncle’s daughter, for she had no

father or mother. Now the maiden was beautiful and pleasing to look at. And upon the death of her father and mother, Mordecai had taken her to himself as a daughter. (v. 7)

Esther is Hadassah’s Persian name meaning “star;” however, Talmudic tradition has linked “Esther” with a Hebrew verb which means “I am hiding” or “I will hide,” suggesting a reference both to God’s declaration of hiddenness in Deuteronomy 31:18 and his absence in Esther [Talmud Hullin 139b), and to Esther’s hiding her Jewishness (v. 10) [Talmud Meggillah 13a].

The phrase “pleasing to look at” recalls the recommendation by the king’s advisors (vv. 2-4) that maidens *pleasing to look at* be sought for the king, that every maiden *pleasing to look at* be brought to the palace, and that the girl who is *pleasing in the eyes of the king*, be made queen. It also connects her to Vashti, the only other character described as *pleasing to look at*; in contrast, Vashti refused to be “looked at.”

<sup>8</sup>And when the king’s word and law were announced and many maidens were gathered into the Fortress of Susa and placed into the charge of Hegai, Esther too was taken into the palace and placed into the charge of Hegai, Keeper of the Women. <sup>9</sup>And the maiden pleased him and gained his favor, so that he was quick to give her cosmetics and her portions of food and to give her the seven most suitable maids from the palace, and he assigned her and her maids to a better position in the harem. <sup>10</sup>Now Esther had not revealed who her



people and kindred were, for Mordecai had ordered her not to reveal it. <sup>11</sup>And each and every day Mordecai would walk about in front of the harem courtyard to learn about Esther's welfare and what would become of her. (vv. 8-11)

The "king's word and law" were for the sole purpose of finding a new queen. The only qualifications were youth and beauty. The young women, including Esther, were not only objects evaluated by the male gaze, but also objects transferred between males—from their fathers' houses to the king's house. Even literarily, they are objects, only acted upon and never the subjects of the verbs.

Yet, in v. 9, Esther gained the favor of the Keeper of the Women, literally, *lifted up loyalty* or *favor*. How she was able to accomplish this is unknown, but it shows her agency.

<sup>16</sup>And Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus in his royal quarters, in the tenth month (the month of Tebeth) in the seventh year of his rule. <sup>17</sup>And the king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she gained his favor and kindness more than all the other virgins, and he placed the royal crown on her head and set her to reign in place of Vashti.

<sup>18</sup>Then the king gave a great feast—the feast of Esther—for all his princes and servants, and he declared a remission of taxes to the provinces, and he gave out gifts with royal bounty. <sup>19</sup>When the virgins were assembled a second time Mordecai was sitting in the King's Gate, <sup>20</sup>but Esther still did not reveal her kindred and her people, just as Mordecai

had commanded her, for Esther obeyed the word of Mordecai just as when she was his ward. (vv. 16-20)

We are not told why Mordecai ordered Esther not to reveal her Jewish identity, but it implies risk involved in being identified with a subjugated people. His instructions also imply there was nothing to single Esther out visually from the other maidens as Jewish. Nor does it appear Esther followed any of the Torah

restrictions involving dietary or other laws which would make her distinct (in contrast to Daniel).

Again Esther "lifted up loyalty" or "favor" from the king, just as she did from the Keeper of the Women. Again we are not told how this was accomplished, but

it implies agency on her part. As a woman at risk, perhaps she recognized the importance of gaining a position of authority. Note that after she became queen, Mordecai still instructed her to remain silent about her identity. Apparently, even such a high position as queen was no guarantee of safety. Note too, we are not told she "loved" the king—only that the king loved her above the others.

<sup>21</sup>In those days, when Mordecai was sitting in the King's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the King's Eunuchs from the Threshold Guards, became angry at the king and sought to strike out at King Ahasuerus. <sup>22</sup>But the matter became known to Mordecai, and he informed Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name. <sup>23</sup>The matter was investigated and found to be true, and the two [eunuchs] were hanged on a gallows. And

**The book of Esther is slapstick, exaggeration, concealment, reversal. It is a reflection on survival in exile when God's face is hidden and the fate of the Jews rests on the wit and wisdom of a Persian queen who just happened to be Jewish. Read in Temple and Synagogue on Purim, the book celebrates both the origination of the holiday and the overthrow of the Jews' enemies.**

*this was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the king's presence. (vv. 22-23)*

This episode served to prove Esther's (and by extension Mordecai's) loyalty to the king and enhance her position and authority with the king and in the court. We then may wonder why Haman was promoted and not Mordecai (3:1). The king's failure to reward Mordecai sets up the comic reversal of chapter 6.

#### Chapter 4

**T**hen Mordecai said to bring Esther this reply: *"Do not imagine that you alone of all the Jews will escape by being in the King's palace. <sup>14</sup>For if you are silent at this time, escape and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another source, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows if it was not just for a time like this that you reached royal station?" <sup>15</sup>And Esther said to bring Mordecai this reply: <sup>16</sup>"Go, gather all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night and day, and I too, with my maids, will fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, contrary to law, and if I perish, I perish." <sup>17</sup>And Mordecai went and did all that Esther had commanded him. (vv. 13-17)*

Esther was caught in a dangerous situation. Mordecai had requested that she go to the king because of Haman's decree of death for all the Jews. She reminded him that to enter the king's presence unbidden was also punishable by death and she had not been requested by the king for 30 days (v. 11). Mordecai then suggested even her position as queen did not guarantee safety from Haman's decree. Esther immediately took action and commanded a fast—Mordecai now did all Esther commanded. As a ward of Mordecai, Esther was dependent on him for her survival; now,

in a reversal, Mordecai and all the other Jews in Persia were dependent on Esther for their survival.

This was a crucial moment for Esther. She had been co-opted into a game between men—Haman, Mordecai, the king. Until this moment she had played by the rules set out for women—look pleasing, be pleasing—but now she must respond by taking action outside the rules of the game; action which would transgress the law. She must play carefully and shrewdly, but she was resolute: *If I perish, I perish.*

#### Chapter 5

**O**n the third day, Esther put on royal garments and stood in the inner courtyard of the palace, in front of the king's quarters, while the king was sitting on his royal throne in the royal quarters opposite the door of the building. <sup>2</sup>As soon as the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she gained favor in his eyes, and the king extended to Esther the gold scepter he was holding, and Esther approached and touched the end of the scepter. (vv. 1-2)

Esther's subversion of the law against entering the king's presence unbidden, as well as her intended subversion of Haman's edict, began by playing her intended role—a queen pleasing to look at—the king *saw*; she gained favor *in his eyes*.

<sup>3</sup>The king said to her, *"What troubles you, Queen Esther, and what is your request? Be it as great as half the kingdom, it shall be granted you."* <sup>4</sup>And Esther said, *"Should it so please the king, let the king and Haman come today to the feast which I have prepared for him."* <sup>5</sup>And the king said, *"Bring Haman quickly to do what Esther has said."* So the

king and Haman came to the feast Esther had prepared. <sup>6</sup>At the wine course the king said to Esther: "What is your wish? It shall be granted you! And what is your request? Be it as great as half the kingdom, it shall be fulfilled!" <sup>7</sup>And Esther replied: "My wish and my request... <sup>8</sup>If I have found favor in the king's eyes, and should it please the king to grant my wish and to fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come to the feast I shall prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said." (vv. 3-8)

Notice the king recognized Esther's favored position by calling her "Queen" Esther. Note, too, his willingness to relinquish up to half his kingdom!

Since Esther had not been called to the king's bedchamber for 30 days, she had to move carefully to re-establish connections with him. The twin banquets served this purpose. Esther had "found favor in the eyes of the king" and had "pleased" the king from the beginning, and now, his response *depended* on pleasing him—with her beauty, her deference, her hospitality, and her mystery.

### Chapter 7

**S**o the king and Haman came to feast with Queen Esther. <sup>2</sup>On the second day too, during the wine course, the king said to Esther: "What is your wish, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you! And what is your request? Be it as great as half the kingdom, it shall be fulfilled!" <sup>3</sup>Queen Esther replied: "If I have found favor in your eyes, O king, and should it so please the king: as my wish, may I

be granted my life; and as my request—my people. <sup>4</sup>For we are sold, I and my people, to be slaughtered, slain, and destroyed. But had we just been sold to be slaves and maidservants, I would have kept silence, for our slavery would be nothing compared with the loss [in money and loyal subjects through our death] to the king." (vv. 1-4)

To reveal her identity as a Jew marked for death, along with her people, and exposed and exploited an untenable situation—she could not be both Persian royalty and marked for death by Persian decree. As a disclosure hidden from the king and Haman both, its revelation involved great risk, and there was no guarantee the outcome would be in her favor. It was important that her request not implicate the king in the edict against the Jews, and must for the moment, not implicate Haman, the king's favorite. She posed her wish and her request in a way that allied Esther and the king—whoever threatened the queen threatened the king.

**Don't you find it interesting that the great men of the Bible are told by God exactly what they must do and say? That before great risks are taken they are assured of success? That divine presence and sovereignty is necessary in their stories for the salvation of God's people? Yet, in the book of Esther, God is never mentioned or seen. Might we assume Esther's wisdom, inventiveness, and keen intelligence earned her the absolute trust of the Almighty?**

<sup>5</sup>Then King Ahasuerus spoke to Queen Esther and said, "Who is the one and where is he, who had the audacity to do this?" <sup>6</sup>And Esther replied, "An adversary and enemy—this evil Haman here!" And Haman shook in terror before the king and the queen. (vv. 5-6)

Was this question from the king meant to distance himself from Haman and from complicity in the decree? Or had the king still not put it all together? Esther's second disclosure—of Haman as the culprit—

associated Haman with the decree and at the same time disassociated the king—from the decree as well as from Haman.

<sup>7</sup>And the king arose in his wrath from the wine course and went out to the pavilion garden, while Haman stood to beseech Queen Esther for his life, for he saw that the king was bent on his ruin.

<sup>8</sup>When the king returned from the pavilion garden to the hall of the wine feast, Haman had fallen across the couch on which Esther was reclining. And the king said, “What? Would you even ravish the queen right here in my own palace?” At this word from the king’s mouth, Haman blanched. (vv. 7-8)

It is unlikely the king truly believed Haman would dare to assault the queen in the palace, but the suggestion added to Haman’s crimes against the king and gave the king added incentive to dispose of him.

<sup>9</sup>Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs, said to the king, “What’s more, a gallows is standing at Haman’s house—fifty cubits high—which he prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king.” And the king said, “Hang him on it!” <sup>10</sup>So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai, and the king’s wrath subsided. (vv. 9-10)

At the suggestion of a eunuch, Haman was hanged on the gallows prepared for Mordecai—another reversal. Yet while Haman had been defeated, the edict against the Jews was still in effect.

### Chapter 8

**T**hat day King Ahasuerus gave Queen Esther the estate of Haman, persecutor of the Jews, and Mordecai came into the king’s presence, for Esther revealed how he was related to her. <sup>2</sup>And the

king took off his signet ring, which he had taken away from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai, and Esther set Mordecai over Haman’s estate. <sup>3</sup>Then once again Esther spoke to the king. Falling before his feet, she wept and implored him to avert the evil plot of Haman the Agagite and the plan he had devised against the Jews. <sup>4</sup>The king extended the golden scepter to Esther, and Esther arose and stood before the king <sup>5</sup>and said: “Should it so please the king, and if I have found favor with him, and if the idea seem proper to the king, and if I am pleasing to him, let it be written to revoke the letters—the plan of Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote with the intent of destroying the Jews in all the king’s provinces. <sup>6</sup>For how can I bear to see the evil that will befall my people, and how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?” (vv. 1-6)

Esther had to work to save her people. Written edicts from a king (even through intermediaries) cannot be revoked. So additional letters had to be written giving Jews the ability to defend themselves—a last reversal. This was done through Mordecai with the authority of the queen.

### Chapter 9

**A**nd Queen Esther, daughter of Abihayil, wrote a second letter concerning Purim for the purpose of confirming with full authority the letter of Mordecai the Jew. <sup>30</sup>And letters were sent to all the Jews in the 127 provinces of Ahasuerus’ kingdom—words of peace and truth—<sup>31</sup>to confirm the observance of these days of Purim in their set times, just as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther had obligated them to do, and just as they have assumed for themselves and their descendants the obligation for the fasting and the accompanying laments. <sup>32</sup>And the declaration of Esther which

*confirmed these matters concerning Purim was recorded in a document. (vv. 29-32)*

On the authority of Esther's second letter the celebration of Purim was established and recorded.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations in the Commentary section are the author's own translation from the original languages.

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### For Further Reading

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## Wynkoop Center Bible Studies on Women in Ministry

UNIT 1: The Creation Mandate		UNIT 3: New Testament Women in Public Leadership	
The Crown of Creation	Gen. 1:26-31	Anna	Luke 2:22, 36-40
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		Priscilla	Acts 18:1-3, 18, 24-26; Rom. 16:3-4; 1 Cor. 16:19;
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Deborah	Judg. 4:1-10, 14; 5:1-3	Mutual Submission among Christians	Eph. 5:21-33;
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Esther	Esther 2:5-11, 16-23; 4:13–5:8; 7:1–8:6; 9:29-32	I Suffer Not a Woman	1 Tim. 2:8-15
<b>Jehosheba</b>	<b>2 Kings 11:1-21; 2 Chron. 22:10-12</b>	The New Testament Understanding of Women	Gal. 3:23-29

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## Jehosheba—Exposition

### Scripture Focus

**2 Kings 11:1-21; 2 Chronicles 22:10-12**

**Exposition by Jerry Porter**

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**R**ighteous valor and selfish cowardice are not gender, racial, or generational descriptors. By God's grace, a person of any age, gender, or race may be virtuous, noble, and self-sacrificing. Our radical, covenant walk with God makes all the difference in our lives and those around us.

*Now when Athaliah, Ahaziah's mother, saw that her son was dead, she set about to destroy all the royal family. <sup>2</sup>But Jehosheba, King Joram's daughter, Ahaziah's sister, took Joash son of Ahaziah, and stole him away from among the king's children who were about to be killed; she put him and his nurse in a bedroom. Thus she hid him from Athaliah, so that he was not killed; <sup>3</sup>he remained with her for six years, hidden in the house of the LORD, while Athaliah reigned over the land. (2 Kings 11:1-3<sup>1</sup>)*

This is the tale of two women. Athaliah gave herself to power-seeking, heartless bloodshed. Jehosheba daringly gave six years of her life to protect a defenseless, infant king.

Athaliah learned her evil ways from her tyrannical, idolatrous parents, Jezebel and Ahab. In a peacetime political maneuver, Athaliah married Jehoram, eldest son of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah. As Jezebel strengthened the worship of Baal in Israel, Queen Athaliah infected Judah with this fanatical cult. Her husband became king of Judah when he was 32 years old, and immediately murdered his six younger, Yahweh-fearing brothers. No doubt the

bloodshed was instigated by his power-hungry wife.

Eight short years later Jehoram died and his son, Ahaziah, assumed the throne. Athaliah's toxic influence only increased when she became the Queen Mother. Her son unwisely surrounded himself with evil, disloyal counselors. He was murdered after only one year of rule. In this political vacuum, Athaliah usurped the throne and ruled for six years.

Unbridled lust for power brings out the worst in a person. The queen murdered all potential heirs, including her own offspring! God's majestic providence saved the lineage of David in fulfillment of Messianic prophecy. One offspring of David, Athaliah's grandson, Joash, son of Ahaziah, was saved by the courageous intervention of his aunt, Jehosheba.

Athaliah used shrewd, manipulative cunning to wield unchallenged influence and authority over Judah. During her reign a portion of Yahweh's temple was destroyed and used to build a temple to Baal. What a tragic, wasted legacy! She flaunted her destructive power in the worst way. Rather than blessing the nation in her care, she polluted it with Baal worship and infant sacrifice. In unimaginable paranoia, she literally snuffed out the life of her kinfolk! Athaliah's tragic epitaph was simply, "that wicked woman" (2 Chron. 24:7).

The contrast between Athaliah and Jehosheba (Jehoshabeath) is stunning. The epitome of evil had a stepdaughter who was valiantly compassionate! For six years Jehosheba hid her nephew in the house of the

Lord where her husband, Jehoiada, served as high priest and where Athaliah had no access. The child grew up in the chambers adjoining the temple. Jehosheba was King Ahaziah's sister. She probably was not Athaliah's daughter, but rather a daughter of King Joram by a different mother.

Though Athaliah attempted to annihilate every person close to the crown, Joash's life was protected by a courageous woman and her godly husband. God had a plan that would not be thwarted by the most aggressive evil plot. In divine providence evil King Joram had married his daughter to a holy priest. Because of her husband's role in the temple she could hide the young child. Because of her royal lineage she ultimately helped him rise to the throne. The unlikely marriage of this king's daughter to a priest became the silver strand that sustained the promise of God's awaited Messiah.

Jehosheba was the protagonist of this dramatic clandestine search-and-rescue mission, and her husband, Jehoiada, became the spiritual mentor for the child. During Joash's formative years this dear couple infused the fear of God into the heart of the future king. Blessed are the children who have an aunt and uncle who boldly will risk everything to protect and guide their tender lives. Joash, nurtured in the loving care of his kinfolk redeemers, came to honor their sacrifice by embracing their values and teachings.

**This is the tale of two women. Athaliah was given over to self-seeking heartless bloodshed while Jehosheba daringly gave six years of her life to protect a defenseless infant king. Our radical covenant walk with God makes all the difference in our lives.**

*But in the seventh year Jehoiada summoned the captains of the Carites and of the guards . . . He made a covenant with them and put them under oath in the house of the LORD; then he showed them the king's son. <sup>5</sup>He commanded them, "This is what you are to do: one-third of you, those who go off duty on the sabbath and guard the king's house . . . shall guard the palace; <sup>7</sup>and your two divisions . . . shall surround the king, each with weapons in hand; and whoever approaches the ranks is to be killed. Be with the king in his comings and goings." . . . <sup>10</sup>The priest delivered to the captains the spears and shields that had been King David's, which were in the house of the LORD . . . to guard the king on every side. (2 Kings 11:4-11)*

When Joash turned seven, Jehoiada called chief army officers and Levites to the temple and showed them the king's son. He made them take an oath of secrecy and protection of the young king. They were to guard all the gates to the temple. Jehoiada organized these volunteers to start and end their assignment on the Sabbath. He armed them with weapons from King David's temple arsenal. It was King David who had organized the Levites and priests into 24 groups. Each served a week, beginning their assignment on the Sabbath. Jehoiada cleverly and boldly organized this "militant" plan, building loyalty toward Joash in these key players!

*Then he brought out the king's son, put the crown on him, and gave him the covenant;*



*they proclaimed him king, and anointed him; they clapped their hands and shouted, "Long live the king!" (2 Kings 11:12)*

Joash was anointed king in approximately 852 B.C. This golden diadem crown placed on the head of a child was unprecedented in Israel or Judah. The young king held a roll of vellum containing the Book of the Law. The testimony or covenant became his scepter. Finally, he was anointed with oil. The group gathered for the coronation clapped their hands with joy and shouted, "May the king live!"

**W**hen Athaliah heard the noise of the guard and of the people, she went into the house of the LORD to the people; <sup>14</sup>when she looked, there was the king standing by the pillar, according to custom, with the captains and the trumpeters beside the king, and all the people of the land rejoicing and blowing trumpets. Athaliah tore her clothes and cried, "Treason! Treason!" <sup>15</sup>Then the priest Jehoiada commanded the captains who were set over the army, "Bring her out between the ranks, and kill with the sword anyone who follows her." For the priest said, "Let her not be killed in the house of the LORD." <sup>16</sup>So they laid hands on her; she went through the horses' entrance to the king's house, and there she was put to death. (2 Kings 11:13-16)

The counter-revolution was launched and the exuberant celebration captured Queen Athaliah's attention. This traitorous queen screamed, "Treason!" and tore her garments. The true treason had been perpetrated by her seven years before! She was arrested and she and her followers were executed that very day.

**Athaliah used shrewd, manipulative cunning to wield unchallenged influence and authority over Judah. What a tragic, wasted legacy! She flaunted her destructive power in the worst way.**

**J**ehoiada made a covenant between the LORD and the king and people, that they should be the LORD's people; also between the king and the people. <sup>18</sup>Then all the people of the land went to the house of Baal, and tore it down; his altars and his images they broke in pieces, and they killed Mattan, the priest of Baal, before the altars. . . . <sup>19</sup>He took the captains, the Carites, the guards, and all the people of the land; then they brought the king down from the house of the LORD, marching through the gate of the guards to the king's house. He took his seat on the throne of the kings. <sup>20</sup>So all the people of the land rejoiced; and the city was quiet after Athaliah had been killed with the sword at the king's house. (2 Kings 11:17-20)

The high priest, Jehoiada, led the people in a renewing covenantal promise with the Lord God and with their new ruler. King and people alike vowed to be the Lord's people. The people pledged their love, honor, and loyalty to the new king; he in turn was bound to rule according to the laws of the kingdom, caring for their safety and wellbeing. These mutual

agreements created the foundation of a promising new day for the people of Judah! The whole city rejoiced and lived in peace because

Athaliah's tyranny was finally over! The valiant influence of Jehosheba created a completely new future of peace and hope!

### Conclusion

**J**oash reigned for 40 years as the ninth king of Judah, continuing the lineage of David. He had several sons and daughters. His passion to repair the temple was fulfilled on his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. All this was possible because of one

radically courageous aunt who risked everything to do what was right!

This is the tale of two women. One is remembered for cold-blooded, self-seeking malice. Jehosheba, however, is our valiant heroine. May we, in courageous obedience to God, stand for the right regardless of possible consequences. History's moments of radiant hope and grace are always lined with God-

fearing women and men of transparent valor and compassion. Our radical covenant walk with God makes all the difference in our lives and those around us!

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations in the Exposition section are from the NRSV.

## Jehosheba—Study Guide

Study Guide by Stefanie and Mark Hendrickson  
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### Notes for the Leader

A small group setting or class can use the following questions to guide the discussion of the biblical passage and exposition. Allow participants time to answer for themselves, making room for all group members in the discussion.

### Starting Thoughts

Jehosheba and Athaliah were as different as night and day, the sun and the moon, good and evil. Athaliah was bent on destruction; murder and bloodshed were her tools to climb to power. Jehosheba courageously interceded on behalf of her infant nephew, Joash. In the process, she saved a king's life and a nation. Jehosheba risked much to rescue her nephew and spare the people of God from the wicked oppression of the Baal-worshipping, murdering Athaliah.

### Discussion Questions

1. Describe differences in character between Athaliah and Jehosheba.
2. Do you know someone like Jehosheba? How has that person influenced your life?
3. Do you know someone like Athaliah? How has that person influenced your life?
4. What is the root cause of the differences between Athaliah and Jehosheba? Why do the root causes matter so much?
5. What risks was Jehosheba taking in doing the right thing?
6. How did one person's right choice change a nation?
7. What were the long-term benefits of Jehosheba's actions? What would be the

consequences if Jehosheba did not intercede?

you, your family, your church, your community, and your nation?

8. Does God use individuals today to change the lives of His people and others? How?
9. How do God's promises, such as the promised Messiah in the line of David, hinge on God's faithful followers, including women like Jehosheba?
10. Can you think of other examples of women working with God, in the Scriptures, in history, or in the world today?
11. Do Jehosheba's actions differ from your understanding of women's roles in God's work today? Why or why not?
12. What makes us different than the Israelites, who embraced women as leaders? Why? Which of those differences are important? Which are not as important? Why?
13. In what ways can you get involved in God's compassion and redemption in our world, like Jehosheba did for Israel?
14. How does our involvement in God's compassion and redemption fit into God's faithfulness to His promises?
15. Just as there would have been consequences if Jehosheba did not intercede on her nephew's behalf, what consequences do we face if we choose not to get involved in the work to which God calls us? How do those consequences affect

## Jehosheba—Commentary

Commentary by Harold Kingdon  
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“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . . it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.” These opening words to *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens provide an excellent description of “A Tale of Two Women” which unfolds in the scripture passages for this session. One of the women, Athaliah (pronounced A-tha-lie’-yah), was responsible for the darkness and despair that produced the worst of times. But Jehosheba (pronounced Jeh-ho’-shě’-va ), the heroine in this tale, altered the course of history, providing the light and hope that would culminate in the best of times; not only for ancient Judah, but for all time.

Athaliah was the daughter of Ahab, former king of the northern kingdom, Israel, and his pagan wife, Jezebel. The environment in which she grew up is clear: “Ahab . . . did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him. . . . [He] served Baal, and . . . erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria [the capital city of Israel]” (1 Kings 16:30-32, NRSV). Athaliah inherited her parents’ pagan ways. She imported the same idolatrous worship into Jerusalem, the capital city of the southern kingdom of Judah, because there, too, was “the house of Baal . . . [with] its altars and its images . . . [and] Mattan the priest of Baal” (2 Kings 11:18). This was the first crisis caused by Athaliah: idolatry.

Her evil influence in Judah began when she married Joram/Jehoram (not to be confused with a king of Israel with the same name). Joram “reigned eight years in Jerusalem [848-841 B.C.]. He walked in the way of the kings of Israel, as the house of Ahab had done, for [Athaliah] the daughter of Ahab was his wife” (2 Kings 8:17-18, NRSV). When Joram/Jehoram died, their 22-year-old son, Ahaziah—also known by a variation of his name, Jehoahaz (2 Chron. 21:17)—succeeded his father to the throne (2 Kings 8:24-27), only to be assassinated within the year (2 Kings 9:27; 2 Chron. 22:9). But the real power behind his brief reign was Athaliah, “his mother [who] was his counselor in doing wickedly” (2 Chron. 22:3, NRSV). This was not an uncommon role for a queen mother in the ancient Near East.

The second crisis occurred in 841 B.C.: “When Athaliah, the mother of Ahaziah [king of Judah], saw that her son was dead, she acted immediately to put to death every single heir to the throne of Judah” (2 Kings 11:1; 2 Chron. 22:10). She seized the throne for herself, and “for six years . . . Athaliah ruled as queen over the land” (2 Kings 11:3; 2 Chron. 22:12). It is possible some of the heirs whom Athaliah slaughtered were her own children and grandchildren. The elimination of all potential rivals to a throne was quite common as, for example, Jehu just had done in his coup for the throne in Israel (2 Kings 10:11).

But this was no ordinary, royal housecleaning. The reputation of God and the reliability of His word were at stake. The Redeemer was to come from the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10) and in particular, from the descendants of King David (2 Sam. 7:16; Psalms 89:1-4; Isa. 11:1-2). All 19 kings who ruled during Judah's 345-year history (931 to 586 B.C.) descended from David. Athaliah, the only queen to rule either Israel or Judah, did not. She was a usurper who not only would have replaced the true worship of the Lord with the forbidden, false worship of Baal, but also would have ended the line of David.

The combination of Hebrew terms in the name "Athaliah" means "exalted is the Lord," or "great is the Lord." Why she was given such a significant name by her godless parents is a mystery. Nor did she come close to reflecting the meaning of her name in the life she lived.

But, God's sovereign greatness triumphed in spite of her.

Just as the disastrous "winter of despair" was brought on by the selfish actions of a power-hungry woman (Athaliah), so "the spring of hope" would emerge by the selfless actions of a courageous woman (Jehosheba). The "season of Light" would be fanned into flame, and the Lord who "promised to give a lamp to [David] and to his descendants forever" (2 Kings 8:19, NRSV), would indeed be exalted.

"Jehosheba [was] a daughter of [the deceased Judean] King Joram and a sister of

[the slain King] Ahaziah" (2 Kings 11:2). It is doubtful, however, her mother was Athaliah. The silence of Scripture on this point suggests her mother was another, unnamed wife of Joram/Jehoram (meaning "whom the Lord has exalted"). This would make her the half-sister—same father, different mother—of Ahaziah (meaning "the Lord has taken hold"). The Hebrew language does not make such distinctions; in the same way "father" may mean ancestor, and "son" may mean descendant.

In 2 Chronicles 22:11, Jehosheba is identified as "Jehoshabeath, daughter of the king."<sup>1</sup> There is no discrepancy. Like Athaliah, this name also combines a shortened form of "Yahweh" [meaning "Lord"] with another Hebrew word, "sheba" (pronounced shē'-va), meaning "seven." A verb form of the term means "to seven oneself," hence "swear" or

"bind oneself by seven things." Therefore, "Jehosheba" means "the Lord is an oath by which one swears or binds oneself." The Hebrew alphabet contains no vowels. By removing the vowels it will be seen that the consonants are the same

in both spellings, except that "Jehoshabeath" adds "-th," a feminine ending.

The scripture passages in 2 Kings 11 and 2 Chronicles 22 do not state whether female relatives—wives, sisters, daughters, and granddaughters—of kings Joram and Ahaziah were included in Athaliah's ruthless slaughter. If they were, how did Jehosheba escape that fate? The answer may be found in the added

**The Bible contains many examples of women from modest backgrounds who were used by God: Miriam, Rahab, Ruth, Anna, Dorcas, and Mary the mother of Jesus, to name a few. In this account of the preservation of the infant king, a woman who was a wealthy princess and the wife of a powerful high priest shows godly women in high society have unique potential for service to God.**

identification given by the Chronicler: “Jehoshabeath [was] the . . . wife of Jehoiada the priest” (2 Chron. 22:11). Perhaps deep down the otherwise callous Athaliah knew better than to touch the wife of the influential, well-respected, godly priest Jehoiada (pronounced Je-hoy’-a-da, and combining the name “Lord” with the verb “to know”). Jehosheba is the only princess in the royal line whom the Bible says became the wife of a high priest.

**A**thaliah truly thought she had succeeded in destroying all the royal descendants of David. “But Jehosheba . . . scooped up Joash [her infant nephew and Athaliah’s grandson] son of Ahaziah and stole/kidnapped him, along with his [wet-]nurse, from among the sons of the king who were about to be murdered. And they concealed him in a bedroom [away from] the face/presence of Athaliah, and he was not put to death” (2 Kings 11:2; see also 2 Chron. 22:11).

The Hebrew verb describing Jehosheba’s brave deed is used in Deuteronomy 24:7 to warn: “If anyone kidnaps a fellow Israelite . . . the kidnapper must die” (NLT). In the eighth commandment it is translated, “You shall not steal” (Exod. 20:15, NRSV). Both of these examples describe secret activities, requiring stealth and careful planning. Robbers do not announce their intentions ahead of time. Such was the nature of Jehosheba’s bold rescue of the baby Joash. She stole, or kidnapped him, right out from under Athaliah’s searching eye.

**Jehosheba stands out as a courageous woman who was so devoted to the Lord and His divine plan, that she was willing to place her own life in grave danger. She would not stand by and do nothing while evil prevailed.**

Jehosheba’s decisive action required courage and cunning. She placed herself, her husband Jehoiada, Joash, and his wet-nurse in grave danger. Priests and their families were not always immune from the sword, as evidenced by King Saul’s command to kill 85 priests, along with “men and women, children and infants” and even the animals of “Nob, the city of the priests” (1 Sam. 22:18-19, NRSV). Their crime? The priests had helped David in his flight from Saul (1 Sam. 21:6, 8-9).

The bedroom (“room of the beds”) in which Jehosheba hid Joash and his nurse may not have been one used regularly, but more of a storeroom for unused bedroom furniture; this was a common practice of the wealthy in that culture. Joash/Jehoash means “let the Lord give” or “the Lord gave.” His mother was Zibiah of Beersheba (2 Chron. 24:1). The scripture does not say whether Zibiah joined the group in hiding.

Having been “kidnapped” by Jehosheba, Joash “hid himself with her [and his nurse] in the house of the Lord [the temple] six years, while Athaliah reigned over the land” (2 Kings 11:3; see also 2 Chron. 22:12). Probably the home of Jehoiada the priest and his wife Jehosheba was adjacent to the temple. It is unlikely Joash was kept cooped up in one room for six years. There was so much activity in and around the priest’s house and the temple that he could have played with other children his age without being detected.

Furthermore, even though the palace was close to the temple (2 Kings 11:15-16), Athaliah would have been more likely to worship at the

house of Baal (2 Kings 11:18) than at the house of the Lord. She was not in the temple on the Sabbath when the guards changed shifts (2 Kings 11:9). Only when Jehoiada “brought out [Joash, surrounded by guards with weapons] . . . and they made him king, clapped their hands and said, ‘Let the king live’” (2 Kings 11:11-12), did Athaliah barge into the temple courtyard. “She looked and [was shocked] to behold the king standing by the pillar [at the entrance to the temple building proper] . . . and all the people of the land [assembled in the courtyard] rejoicing” (2 Kings 11:13-14).

**B**ecause of Jehosheba, Athaliah’s two catastrophes were thwarted. “All the people of the land went into the house of Baal and tore it down; they smashed completely its altars and images and they killed Mattan the priest of Baal” (2 Kings 11:1). And with the coronation of Joash (2 Kings 11:11-12, 21), the only surviving heir to the throne of David and the first boy-king, David’s line was restored.

The Chronicles were likely composed in the fifth century B.C. by Ezra the priest and scribe. No kings ruled then, and the community of people who lived some 400 years after Jehosheba and 400 years before the birth of the Messiah worried that perhaps God’s commitment to David had been swallowed up in the Babylonian captivity. One of the purposes of Chronicles—and the reason for including this “Tale of Two Women”—was to reassure them that God’s promises always hold firm.

Our scripture passages in Kings and Chronicles attribute to Jehosheba’s husband, Jehoiada, the elaborate scheme that brought

out of concealment Joash (2 Kings 11:4-12), a young lad seven years old (2 Kings 22:21). But no doubt Jehosheba was a co-conspirator in making it happen. And surely Jehosheba’s influence continued when, as king, “Joash did what was pleasing in the Lord’s sight because Jehoiada the priest instructed him” (2 Kings 12:2, NLT).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise marked, all Scripture quotations in the Commentary section are the author’s own translation from the original languages.

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