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GOD REMEMBERED RACHEL

Women's stories in the
Old Testament and why they matter

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*For
Jon, Danny and Ellie,
with love*

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Introduction

‘I’m not doing the first reading,’ announced the choir member. This is disconcerting to hear when you are helping out in a strange church while they are without a Vicar. ‘It’s sexist,’ she continued, ‘why should I?’ My friend in the choir was not particularly trying to be difficult. She had read the story of Leah and Rachel and was honestly baffled by a world entirely alien from her own. These two ideas became part of the furniture of my study: *was* the Old Testament sexist and why *should* we read it?

This book is an attempt to look at the stories about women in the Old Testament and ask how stories about women can become part of our life journey in faith. If, as the Church has always believed, the Bible is the word of God, how can we as women use it to deepen our walk with God? The Old Testament was largely written by men in a very patriarchal society. Do these stories still matter for us?

Much of the Old Testament is cast as story. It speaks of people’s lives and experiences of God. Many good approaches exist to explore how to appropriate biblical teaching for the life of the Church today. They seek an honest engagement with the Bible in a way that avoids the fundamentalist idea that it is simply a question of lifting practices off the page. A particularly good practical example of how to do this kind of engagement is Duvall and Hays’ *Grasping God’s Word*.¹ This book does not seek to do quite the same thing. Instead it explores stories and asks how simply reading and understanding those stories can speak into our lives and experiences; what we can learn about God and people from the narratives of people long ago. It also thinks about departure points for reflecting on how these stories can connect with ours and inform our lives.

Introduction

The method I have used might be described as watching authors at work. Authors make choices: what to include; what to leave out. They bring certain characters, certain events to the foreground for the reader to notice; choose certain words that have a resonance for readers; arrange events. They pay considerable attention to one thing a character does while barely mentioning another, and they do this in a way designed to convey a message. Looking at these aspects of authors' work is called narratology, and is a useful way to understand what they are trying to say. Sometimes authors explicitly say how they think the reader should interpret a story; sometimes they leave us to think things over. When they do not say explicitly that this is – or is not – how life ought to be, readers may still make inferences from the narrative choices an author has made. This book explores the stories in this way. It also engages with the work of feminist scholars looking at the texts. Many Christians become uneasy when they are told that a reading is 'feminist', and instantly assume this will mean hostile, not Christian and anti-men. In fact there are a range of feminist readings and beliefs. Globally the feminist readings I have engaged with here come from scholars of Christian faith, Jewish faith and no faith, and could simply be defined as ones that look at the stories and ask: 'What about the women?'

Sometimes this will be a difficult read, as I have included stories where women's lives end in loss or disaster. I have included them nevertheless because loss and disaster are part of the experience of women – and men – both then and now.

The stories in their time

There are two separate but related ideas we need to be aware of when considering the Old Testament authors and their view of women. The first is that the Old Testament was written over centuries in societies that were patriarchal; that is, when all

visible authority structures belonged to men. There are some notable exceptions in particular times of crisis but by and large this was the shape of society. In a society of this nature women can – although they need not necessarily – find themselves significantly disadvantaged. Choices are limited, public power is reduced – Ruth in Chapter 2 is an example of this – and the view of men who live in such a society about women may be very negative or stereotyped. In this type of society the needs and desires of women will be subordinated to such ideals as, for example, the continuing of the father’s name, the maintenance of a clear authority structure with the father of the household at the top, ensuring that established public authority structures are not threatened, the controlling of female sexuality by the male head of the household and so on. One of the questions this book will be asking about all this is: ‘Does the Old Testament collude with patriarchal abuses, does it critique them or does it not really comment?’ We will need to observe the difference between places where the Old Testament is prescriptive (says how life *should be*) and where it is only descriptive (says how life *is*). An example of the latter will be explored in Chapter 4, which deals with the Levite’s concubine.

How men see women

A related idea to patriarchy is the rather clumsily named androcentricity, which means talking or writing about things from a man’s point of view. It has become very familiar now to talk about how all history is his-story, and this is as true of the Bible as any other book written primarily by men. The Old Testament speaks far more about men than it does about women. The women spoken of are often used as unpleasant metaphors (faithless wife, temptress) or described mainly by their sexual function (wife, mother). So the second question we need to ask of the Old Testament is this: ‘Are the writers of the Old Testament capable of portraying women fairly?’ By this I mean: ‘Do

the writers try to portray the women as real people or merely as stereotypes?’

Often in such a patriarchal society it is argued that women will be portrayed in very stereotypical ways. This could be for one of two reasons. The first is that the male authors believe in the stereotypes. For example, Athalya Brenner argues that the stories of women in Genesis reflect the author’s view that women cannot get on together.² The second reason may be that the male authors have an agenda in promoting the stereotypes: their ideology seeks to make women behave in a particular way and so portrays them as acting in that way. So, for example, pictures of submissive women may be portrayed as the norm because the author is seeking to make submission the norm. Equally, women can be portrayed as a source of danger and a threat to individual men – for example the ‘temptress’ figure of Proverbs 7, who functions as a model of how women are not supposed to act. It may be that men in a patriarchal society are either not capable of drawing women fairly or choose not to for their own agenda. However, we cannot simply assume that either of these things is true.

It is true that the authors of the Old Testament as we have it were largely men³ and that they lived in a largely patriarchal society. But that does not necessarily mean they were incapable of sympathizing with or valuing women. A modern equivalent might be the observation that although the UK newspaper *The Guardian* was reporting stories throughout the era of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, nobody would ever have thought of it as promoting a Thatcherite agenda! The intention of this book is to look at how the stories are constructed and see how the women are written about. If the women appear to be fully rounded characters we might say that the author is not portraying them in stereotypes. An example of this kind of discussion can be found in Chapter 1, which deals with Leah and Rachel. If they make choices that do not seem to serve the ends of patriarchal structures, we may say that their portrayal

is not androcentric. We will see this kind of discussion with the book of Ruth.

As a part of this comes the question of 'F' voice.⁴ This is a way of describing texts that may give a woman's viewpoint on the world. In its beginning the idea of 'F' voice was based on possible female authorship that survived or was glimpsable behind male editing. Later the idea was expanded to consider any text that seemed to give a more 'female' point of view, perhaps evidenced by aspects of women's lives in which men would be less involved. Or a text might be considered 'F' voice if it foregrounds women: where women are the main actors. Thus the idea of 'F' voice overlaps with the idea of whether or not a male author can portray a woman as more than a stereotype.

The story and the reader

With much of the Old Testament it is simply not possible to know who actually wrote it (the 'empirical author') or for whom it was actually written (the 'empirical reader'). The best we can do is construct from its pages an 'implied author' (what we can imagine this writer to be like) and an implied reader (the kind of person at whom the writing seems aimed). This is important because the expectations of the implied reader and ours may be different because we come from different worldviews. There are things the implied reader can understand that we may not, particularly at the level of language. There are things we find shocking that the implied reader might not, or perhaps would. What this book is looking to do is explore and identify the intention of the implied author, but also be aware of possible differing reactions between us as 'empirical reader' and the implied reader.

Feminist scholars sometimes use the term 'retrievable'. This means that if a story or a text can be stripped of an androcentric agenda, it can still have something positive to say to women.

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So we will examine stories that really do seem to be androcentric and ask whether they are in any way retrievable. An example of this can be found in Chapter 7, which deals with the story of Deborah.

Finally, a word of warning. In any book of this kind the writer's beliefs – the ones she or he is aware of and those not yet fully examined – will colour how that writer reads the text. I have tried to examine closely the narrative strategies used by the biblical authors to build the story, but no one can do this neutrally. A writer can identify the strategies the Old Testament authors use, but how the writer then interprets those authors' intentions in using those strategies will not be entirely objective. It will come from the writer's own life experiences and beliefs. It is the nature of story that it appeals to the people we are: it may create an effect in me that it does not in you, and vice versa. I come to the Old Testament with views about it that you may or may not share. Often in biblical studies scholars talk about the 'lenses' through which we all read, and this term is a helpful one. As you read you will encounter what my lenses have shown me. I have explored these stories in the belief that they do have something to say to women that can be God's word to us. I want to look the difficult texts in the eye but I am intrinsically a loyalist – someone who believes in the Bible as the word of God – as a matter of faith, and a feminist as a matter of conviction. You should bear this in mind as you read. My hope is not that you are persuaded by my readings in their entirety but rather that the readings in this book stimulate you to your own reflections on how these stories still matter.

The Bible text used for quotations is taken from NRSV. Words have multiple shades of meaning and sometimes I have commented on a word where a slight nuance in translation has been identified by biblical scholars and has been helpful to the reading. Where this has been done I have used a phrase such as 'can also be understood as' to make the point clear. Obviously,

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where a word or words are emphasized in a scriptural quote, that emphasis is mine.

Where biblical characters have had name changes during their stories (such as Sarai and Abram), I have generally used the name in that stage of the story. So I have used 'Sarai' up until Genesis 17.15 and 'Sarah' after that.

Part 1
WOMEN

