Tough-Cookie Biblical Women [1]

December 22, 2014 Writing and Faith [2]
Nothing but the Toth [3]

TW Column by Emily Toth

Why Eve Preferred the Serpent and Other Tales

Among secular humanists of my ilk, the idea that the Bible has a boatload of great stories is a shocker.

The *Bible?* Sheesh! Oy!

Yes, it's a patriarchal screed. And yes, the Old Testament (aka the Hebrew Bible) is full of the oppression of women. But lurking in corners are many strange, unexpected stories in which clever women do things that have inspired me as a novelist and nonfiction writer—though not particularly as a human being, I will confess.

Biblical women are usually silent and often nameless. Their most common profession is hooker. The midwives in the book of Exodus are almost “the only working women in the whole Bible…who aren’t prostitutes,” David Plotz comments in his 2009 *Good Book: The Bizarre, Hilarious, Disturbing, Marvelous, and Inspiring Things I Learned When I Read Every Single Word of the Bible,* a wise and witty reading of the Old Testament by an ordinary writer—not a scholar, not a rabbi. One of us.

Plotz also cheers the appearance of “a living breathing woman!” when he finds Miriam, Moses’ sister. She’s a prophet who leads the chorus of rejoicing when the Hebrews cross the parted Red Sea. Later (in the book of Numbers), like an annoying older sister, she badgers Moses because she doesn’t like his wife. Maybe this is a first in Western literature?

If you read an accessible translation (I like the New International Version and quote from it below), you’ll find all kinds of universals and gems. Eve is always described as the source of all evil, but she hadn’t even been created when Adam was told not to eat the forbidden fruit. Eve thinks the fruit is pleasing to the eye, but mostly she eats it because the serpent—a much better conversationalist than Adam—tells her it will give her wisdom. What sage woman could resist?

But Yahweh (“The Lord”) finds out and berates Adam, who whines, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it” (Genesis 3:12). Indeed, “the conduct of Adam was to the last degree dastardly,” wrote Elizabeth Cady Stanton in her commentary for the 1898 *Woman’s Bible,* the book that almost got her drummed out of the suffrage movement.

Eve, Adam, and the snake is a core story about Who Has Faith in Whom—a theme underlying practically everything we write. Nowadays, some of our best novels, like Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl*, have unreliable narrators. Who Ya Gonna Trust? The serpent, Eve decided, and I’m not sure that was a bad decision.

Many novelists have used these stories. Most, I suspect, come at them from a religious angle, eager to claim that good outcomes show the result of faith.

I have faith in faith, but my faith is strongest when it comes to women, the ones in the Old Testament who sing, lead, and fight back against harassment. In the book of Judges, for instance, Jael puts a tent peg through the forehead of an arrogant general.

These biblical women use what they have, including their knowledge of men’s fears and taboos. Later in the book of Genesis, when Rachel has run away with her father’s idols, he finds her in a tent, where she's hidden them under a saddle. She sits on the saddle, telling her father she can't rise to greet him because “I’m having my period” (Genesis 31:35).

In the wild and violent Old Testament, the love of women for their children is a saving grace—but they’re up against an overwhelmingly powerful male world.

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The tangled story of Sodom (Genesis 18–19) can test your faith in Yahweh's leadership. At the start, he's decided to destroy the city because of its unspecified wickedness. Lot, he thinks, is the only good man in town. But Abraham, Yahweh's human buddy, argues with him and tries to make deals: What if there are fifty good men in Sodom? (Women don't count.) What if there are forty? Or five? Should you throw out everyone, virtuous or wicked, on general principle?

And so Yahweh sends two male angels who stay at Lot's house. (I note a peculiarity: Lot, Abraham's nephew, seems to be the first person in the Old Testament to have a house as opposed to a tent. So, he builds his house in Sodom. Location, location, location.)

For the angels, Lot cooks up a good meal. But an unruly crowd of townsmen shows up, wanting him to send the angels outside "so we can have sex with them." (Some translations say "rape them.")

Lot shudders at the violation of hospitality to the visiting angels. He makes a counter-offer. "No, my friends. Don't do this wicked thing," he tells the rowdy townsmen. "Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them."

The townsmen don't like this deal. A brawl ensues.

I doubt if I have to give any gloss on this story. I'm glad it's not factual history, although one wonders why it was preserved in a holy book. That could lead to questions of faith: Why do chosen people do bad things—and preserve the records?

It gets worse. Yahweh sends down a rain of fire to incinerate the town of Sodom. As my Jewish mother would say, *Genug ist genug already.* The Lot family (they have no other names) gets early enough warning to flee, but the sons-in-law (the fiancés of the virgin daughters) don't want to go. Lot's wife does flee, but turns back to look at her home—as any woman would—and gets turned into a pillar of salt.

The only people left in the vicinity are now Lot and the two daughters, who all take refuge in a cave. At this point, I like to name names (my own inventions), based on the gifts in another story much later in the Bible. I call the late mom Goldie; I call the daughters Frankie (short for Frankincense) and Myrt (a nickname for Myrrh).

Frankie and Myrt now take the initiative, realizing that their fate depends on being fruitful and multiplying. Women in the Old Testament, as a group, know their job description very clearly. Their dad is the man, the only man, so Frankie and Myrt get Lot drunk, rape him, and get themselves pregnant.

Resourceful? Horrendous? Another story that could test your faith or inspire your storytelling powers.

Their descendants are the Moabites, one of whom is Ruth. But in between are many books. One is the book of Joshua, in which two Hebrew spies are sheltered in Jericho by Rahab, a woman who's variously shown as an innkeeper and a madam—and who apparently has the biggest house in town. Because she saved the spies, her family is not slaughtered—so she's a successful matriarch, a protective mom, and a tycoon in the one profession that's always profitable for women.

A generation later, Ruth, a "Moabitess," marries the son of Naomi, who is Hebrew. Both women are soon widowed. Naomi can't support them, and advises Ruth to "go back to your people." Whereupon Ruth makes the most moving, loving speech in all the Old Testament, best rendered in the King James Version (Ruth 1:16-17):

> 'Intreat me not to leave thee, *or* to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people *shall be* my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, *if ought* but death part thee and me.'

That's the first time "till death do us part" appears in the Bible, and Ruth's speech, made to her mother-in-law, is the one most quoted in wedding ceremonies. Not many people, I suspect, know it's a woman-loving-woman speech.

After that, Ruth and Naomi work together to find food and get a husband for Ruth, a necessity in a patriarchal society. The man they find is a bit older, wealthy, loving, and kind. Boaz is an exceptionally thoughtful man who also makes a special point of giving food to Naomi, his mother-in-law. Ruth and Boaz are the ancestors of King David—which makes them, generations later, the ancestors of Joseph, who married Mary of Nazareth.

Jesus, in short, is descended from Lot and his daughters Frankie and Myrt in the cave after Sodom. He's also

descended from Ruth, the foreigner, and her husband Boaz.

The book of Ruth is the one biblical story that reads to me as if it were written by a woman. It's not about armies, vengeance, and smiting, and it doesn't mention Yahweh. It's about nourishment and love and faith in the goodness of others. It passes the Alison Bechdel test: two or more named women who talk to each other about something other than the men in their lives.

It also rounds out the story of another good woman. We should not forget Rahab, the Jericho madam with the heart of gold who saved her family by hiding the Hebrew spies. Later, Rahab married a man named Salmon, and she had a son—a man who's exceptional for his loving kindness and care for women.

Boaz is that son.

And so, secretly, evident only to readers like me who poke around in genealogies, we find in the patriarchal Bible what we always knew: There is no great man without a great mom.

Publishing Information

- *Good Book: The Bizarre, Hilarious, Disturbing, Marvelous, and Inspiring Things I Learned When I Read Every Single Word of the Bible* by David Plotz (HarperCollins, 2009).
- The Woman's Bible *[5]*by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 1898.
- New International Version of the Holy Bible (NIV). [6]
- Authorized Version of the King James Bible (KJV). [7]
- "The Rule" (origin of the Bechdel test [8]) in *Dykes to Watch Out for* by Alison Bechdel,1985.

Art Information

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- "Ruth's Wise Choice [11]" by Providence Lithograph Company; public domain.

Emily Toth is a contributing writer at *Talking Writing*. Her column "Nothing but the Toth" appears regularly in TW. She also writes "Ms. Mentor," the online academic advice column for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Emily notes that in writing this column she's indebted to the Bible Skeptics Group of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Baton Rouge.

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