ephthah’s daughter, Manoah’s wife, King Lemuel’s mother—the Old Testament is full of women whose names are withheld. They are typically identified only by their relationship to a man. I’ve often found myself irritated when reading an Old Testament narrative that features an unnamed woman. Why did the Old Testament authors leave out the names of these women? Weren’t these women important enough to be named? Is the Bible minimizing the significance of its female characters? Does the Old Testament promote a society in which the service of women is diminished or ignored? To answer these questions, I needed to step out of my world and into the world of the Old Testament’s unnamed women.

In my society, individualism is prized, and our identities are represented by the names—usually three or four names—that uniquely identify us. We even carry around various cards that contain our unique identifying information. Our identity is as an individual, and our unique names represent each one of us. When we want to honor or credit someone for an achievement, we display their name publicly on plaques, in headlines, or in bylines. By letting the world see their names, we give them praise—but always as independent individuals.

But the culture of the Old Testament was not individualistic. As in many non-Western societies today, identity was embedded in the extended family and clan. All people, but especially women, were dependent on their extended family for mutual support, protection, and often, their very survival. The family, which was represented by its patriarch, was the identity that mattered. Individuals did not strive for personal
Several nameless Old Testament women were far from passive and are protagonists of Old Testament narratives. These women took initiative and acted independently and bravely. While they are nameless, they are not without an identity. Today we know them by their stories—stories that have a lasting significance more meaningful than a name:

The prominent woman of Shunem (2 Kings 4:8) and the wise women of Abel Beth Maacah (2 Sam. 20:16) and Tekoa (2 Sam. 14:2) were influential and respected leaders in their communities. A “wise woman” probably functioned as a living repository of wisdom, knowledge, and oral lore.

Manoah’s wife (Judges 13) was approached by God directly, not through her husband, with instructions about her son, Samson.

The story of Jephthah’s daughter (Judges 11) reveals that young women could have admirable dignity, piety, and strength of character.

The account of Micah’s mother (Judges 17) demonstrates that at least some women had control of their wealth in Old Testament times. And, while the worship of Micah and his mother was compromised, it is evident that women influenced worship within the home.

From the mentions of an unnamed servant girl who was given a dangerous assignment in espionage (2 Sam. 17:17); an unnamed woman who dropped a millstone on and fatally wounded Abimelek, the evil king of Shechem (Judges 9:53–54; 2 Sam. 11:21); and the woman of Bahurim (2 Sam. 17:19–20) we see that women could be brave and risk their lives for others.

The words of King Lemuel’s mother (Prov. 31:1–9) are inspired Scripture. This woman taught God’s wisdom to her royal son, and her words have taught both men and women ever since.

By participating admirably in public discourse, engaging in bold or courageous actions, and having a well-behaved family, a man could gain prestige, or honor, for his family. A woman, on the other hand, was viewed primarily as a potential source of shame.

Even though God’s people lived in a patriarchal, honor-shame culture in which women had limited social freedoms, no Old Testament author asserts that such a society is God’s ideal. God’s dealings with women were not constrained by the culture.

The Genesis account shows that the rule of men over women is a direct result of sin entering the world (Gen. 3:16). Both men and women were made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27; 5:1–2). As God’s image bearers, men and women share the dignity that comes with reflecting divinity. The Bible also says that men and women were created to rule over God’s creation (Gen. 1:26–28). Moreover, there is no suggestion that humans were originally created to rule over other humans.

Despite the standards of patriarchal society, God did not necessarily use fathers or husbands as mediators of his word to women. God sometimes spoke directly to—or sent angelic messengers to speak directly to—women. This was the case when God spoke to Manoah’s wife (Judges 13), Rebekah (Gen. 25), and Hagar (Gen. 16). God even used women such as Deborah...
(Judges 4), Huldah (2 Chron. 34:22–33), and the skilled wailing women (Jer. 9:17–24) to speak to men on his behalf. The Bible never affirms the cultural characterization of women as little more than sources of shame—unintelligent, gullible, sexually wanton, and inferior to men. Instead, many women are described as wise, intelligent, courageous, resourceful, and enterprising. Women functioned as prophets, teachers, advisors, leaders, deliverers, and even as heroines. Considering the culture of the Old Testament, it is remarkable that so many women are mentioned, and that many of these women are named. More than a few women in the Bible—named and unnamed—do not fit the culturally desirable stereotype of the private, passive, quiet woman. Several defied their culture and their authorities, yet there is no hint of censure in the text. God has always chosen women to play significant roles in his story, and he continues to do so today.

Through my Western eyes, the nameless women once seemed unimportant—as if they were not valuable or had been overlooked. But the Old Testament authors realized that God engaged some women as individuals, and that the actions and words of these women were noteworthy and important—important enough to be included in Holy Scripture.

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