

In Spite of the Culture

A Sermon

Beulah Wood

Looking at cultural attitudes, I made a list of married women of the Bible this week and found myself surprised. Do we not all know that in the culture of Bible times, women were not part of decisions and did what they were told? Husbands owned and controlled land, assets, and money, and widows did not inherit if their husband died. Wives could be highly regarded if they were “virtuous.” Did that mean they needed only to avoid doing what was wrong, and never mind if they failed to do what was right?

However, I noticed something odd. Many married women *took responsibility and acted without or ahead of their husband*. In fact, it seems to be a strong counter-cultural and accepted strand of ancient Israelite and Jewish history. It recurs often, and with the apparent blessing of God, both in the OT and the NT. There are over a dozen times when, in spite of the culture, a married woman took responsibility, and was right in doing so.

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Abigail

Let us start with Abigail in 1 Sam 25. Intelligent and beautiful, she was married to Nabal, a man who was wealthy, bad-tempered, and surly. David was a guerrilla chief, leader of a small unofficial army. When David asked for festive food for his men who had guarded Nabal’s extensive flocks, Nabal shouted rudely at David’s men. In response, David began to plan revenge. Soon, a major fight was brewing between Nabal (with about fifty men on his side) and David (whose four hundred men were armed with swords).

Enter Abigail. Advised of the situation by a loyal servant, she *took responsibility* in order to save him and all their staff. She spoke no word to her husband (25:19). In a short time, she amassed from their family stores two hundred loaves of bread, two bottles of wine, five large bags of popcorn, one hundred blocks of pressed raisins, two hundred blocks of pressed figs, and five butchered sheep. With this feast loaded on donkeys, she threw a gunnysack over another donkey for herself and set off down the mountainside. None too late, her train met David’s private army in a steep gully, already marching towards them.

While David ranted, Abigail drew out her considerable powers of negotiation and peace making. She begged David not to attack.

She argued from Nabal’s character, that God was leading her to keep David from murder, and that God was the avenger of the wicked. She succeeded. David calmed down upon hearing her tactful, wise words, her honesty about her husband, her apology, and upon receiving her generous gift of food. She was politically astute too, recognising that David had fought “the LORD’S” battles on behalf of Israel (25:28), and that he would become king of a lasting dynasty. She appealed to David’s conscience. Would he want to live the rest of his life with the staggering soul-burden of killing innocent men?

Abigail was hugely effective, and David saw it. He thanked her for keeping him from sin. The tag on the end of the story is that Nabal, on hearing the news, seems to have a heart attack, fall into a coma, and die by natural means some days later. The fact is that Abigail took responsibility and was shown to be right.

This deserves further exploration. According to the culture, a good woman did not step in front of her husband and countermand his wishes! However, that is exactly what she did. She acted independently to bring the two parties together and put an extremely generous supply of the family’s food resources into the effort, all with no consultation with her husband.

It appears that Prov 16:5 and 7 apply to this situation. “The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished. . . . When the LORD takes pleasure in anyone’s way, he causes their enemies to make peace with them” (NIV). With Abigail, we are invited to admire a married woman who, against the culture, *took responsibility on her own shoulders* when her husband was in the wrong.

Such an action is far from easy. We know enough ourselves to look at thoughts that may have deterred her.

Abigail was caught, as modern wives can also be, between culture and common sense—following her husband or doing what was right before God and wise for the people around her. What would have gone through Abigail’s mind? Perhaps she thought briefly, “Nah! Can’t intervene. Not against my husband. That would be wrong. Our society respects only wives who are demure, quiet, and loyal to their husbands.” Perhaps their servant’s words rang in her ears, “Think it over and see what you can do. Disaster is hanging over [all of us]” (1 Sam 25:17 NIV).

“What if I do nothing? David sends his four hundred armed paramilitaries. Many people die. I have plenty of food in the storerooms that I could take to him. . . . Okay, I’ll do it. If I perish, I perish.” How well she did it! Food for the stomachs of David’s men as well as food for David’s ears. Both delivered with speed and wisdom and grace.

This story was from around 1000 BC, but it was by no means the first nor the last account of an OT married woman who was honoured in Israelite history for taking responsibility independently of a man.

Jochebed, Deborah, and Jael

Jochebed, mother of Moses, was another such woman (Exod 2:1–10; 6:20). Her husband Amram seems to have said little. It was Jochebed who saved Moses's life by hiding him for three months, making the basket of bulrushes, and placing him along the side of the river Nile.

Most of us know the story of Deborah. She was married to Lappidoth (Judg 4:4). Unless he was dead by this time, he appears to take no action in the story. Yet in a time of national peril, Deborah took responsibility as a prophet and a judge for her nation and then took it upon herself to motivate and even escort Barak into battle.

Jael, whose husband was Heber, acted when Heber was not at home (Judg 4–5). All un-premeditated, she invited the enemy leader, Sisera, into the tent, lulled his battle-weary body to sleep, and dexterously pinned him to the ground with hammer and tent-peg. All three women were culturally unconventional.

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Three Mothers

Samson's mother, the wife of Manoah, did not even have to take initiative. She had the initiative thrust upon her by the visiting angel of the LORD, who sought her out even though Manoah was nearby. The angel asked her to carry out God's command to give Samson the role and status of a Nazirite from his birth and asked the wife to be *accountable* and follow through on the instructions (Judg 13:1–25). In fact, when Manoah seemed to believe the angel should come to him, the angel came a second time to her. She was the preferred one!

Tucked away in 2 Kgs 4:8–37 is another mother who took responsibility. We do not know the name of this woman of Shunem, but she suggested to her husband that they give Elisha a room on their roof when he visited their city. It was she who made the decisions when their young son died (probably of sunstroke), with no consultation with her husband. God blessed her initiative and, through Elisha's prayer, raised the boy to life.

OT culture thought of the husband as a mediator between his wife and God. We recall how Isaac served to bring his wife Rebekah's childlessness before God (Gen 25:21). But Hannah cared nothing

for a husband's mediation. In her longing for a son, she pressed on alone in prayer, making a vow independent of Elkanah (1 Sam 1:9–18). God answered her prayer.

This is becoming a repeated narrative—counter-cultural biblical women going ahead with or without their husbands, *and blessed by God* in doing so. It must be okay. The woman in Prov 31, or women if this is a composite, was certainly no pushover for her husband. He would have had to work hard to keep up with her—businesswoman, trader, financially independent landowner, horticulturalist, cottage manufacturer, as well as wife, household manager, and mother. Her life was not defined by her husband.

Elizabeth and Mary

In the NT, God gave Elizabeth the impetus to prophesy prior to Zechariah, and it was she who insisted, against the relatives, that their son would be called John (Luke 1:60).

Mary's position must have been a total conundrum in her own culture. Why did Gabriel go to her to seek her agreement to being the mother of Jesus? Surely in that society such a decision should be made by her father, or by Joseph to whom she was firmly engaged. Yet Mary did not take Gabriel to meet her father or Joseph. She accepted the visit and the position it put her in as if they were for her to decide—which they were. After all, she was the one who would carry out God's commission.

Joanna

Many of the NT women prophets, deacons, and evangelists (Anna, Lydia, Dorcas, Phoebe, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Euodia, Syntyche, and Philip's four daughters) may not fit this sermon's criteria of married women, but here we can look at one who rarely receives focus. Joanna was married to Chuza, the chief financial officer in Herod's court, and perhaps a Nabatean from southeast Palestine. Joanna may have been Jewish. Under Roman law, married women could hold wealth. Joanna perhaps had her own income or assets or shared her husband's, for it is reported that she and other women were supporting Jesus and the disciples from their own means (Luke 8:3). She was probably educated, confident in circles where she met important people, in touch with the political news and hence able to speak with authority. These women were "serving." It is the word used of a benefactress, a deacon. With the same word, "deacons" administered funds and fed the needy (Acts 6:1–2). Joanna, Susanna, and Mary Magdalene would also administer and disperse funds. It was a commission she had accepted, and Chuza did not appear to be involved.

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Claudia Procula

One last example is a surprising woman: Claudia Procula, wife of Pontius Pilate. She tried to get her husband to avoid condemning Jesus to death (Matt 27:19). He did not listen to her, but we who read the story now know that she was right and that he should have taken heed.

Comment

Don't get me wrong. I am not looking to see scores of wives stepping ahead of their husbands and taking decisions. Ephesians 5:21 (NIV) prescribes the attitude for couples and co-workers: "Co-operate." "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Paul kept such a balance when he wrote, "But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife. . . . a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband" (1 Cor 7:33–34 NIV). Some Bible women modelled this when they acted in concert with their husband, yet with their own agency. One thinks of Priscilla teaching with Aquila; Junia with Andronicus, both apostles; and Apphia with Philemon, both house-church leaders in Colossae. There was even a woman acting with her husband who quite plainly should have refused his initiative. Sapphira should never have agreed with Ananias to their duplicity over the price obtained for their land.

Given all this, it is particularly relevant how our cultural preferences diminish our characterisation of biblical women. In the week that I started reading for this sermon, I went to an installation of paintings of biblical women. It was intended to be sympathetic to women, yet had adjectives that made me, alerted to strong and independent women, cringe at the weak descriptions.

Miriam was described as tenacious; Deborah was a judge to whom people came for counsel; Esther was trafficked, brave, clever; Hannah had unwavering trust; Mary Mother of Jesus displayed surrender, obedience, servanthood; Mary Magdalene was a devoted follower; Priscilla, a leader (with a super-flowery hat) looked frivolous.

To be sure, some biblical women, perhaps including the above at times, were waiting, followers, acted upon by others or by history, lacking agency. Nevertheless, we do not do well to deprive biblical women of their more active character traits. In the paintings mentioned above, the descriptors could have said that Miriam was one of three national leaders; Deborah gave orders to the army general; Esther was determined and highly influential. They could have said Hannah took decisions into her own hands; Mary accepted the right to decide for herself; Mary of Magdala was an apostle to the apostles; Priscilla was also a theologically astute Bible teacher.

Making my list was quite a revelation. So many married women took responsibility and acted without or ahead of their husbands, or acted in concert with their husbands but with independent agency. I can only conclude that God affirmed and blessed their counter-cultural initiatives. With such initiatives valued by the biblical writers of ancient Israel and first-century Palestine, surely we should still value them in the twenty-first century. Rather than demand that wives be submissive, let us be ready to teach about spirited, proactive wives!

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