

Why the Bible Began 7

Why the Bible Began 7--The Hero: Redefining Gender Roles

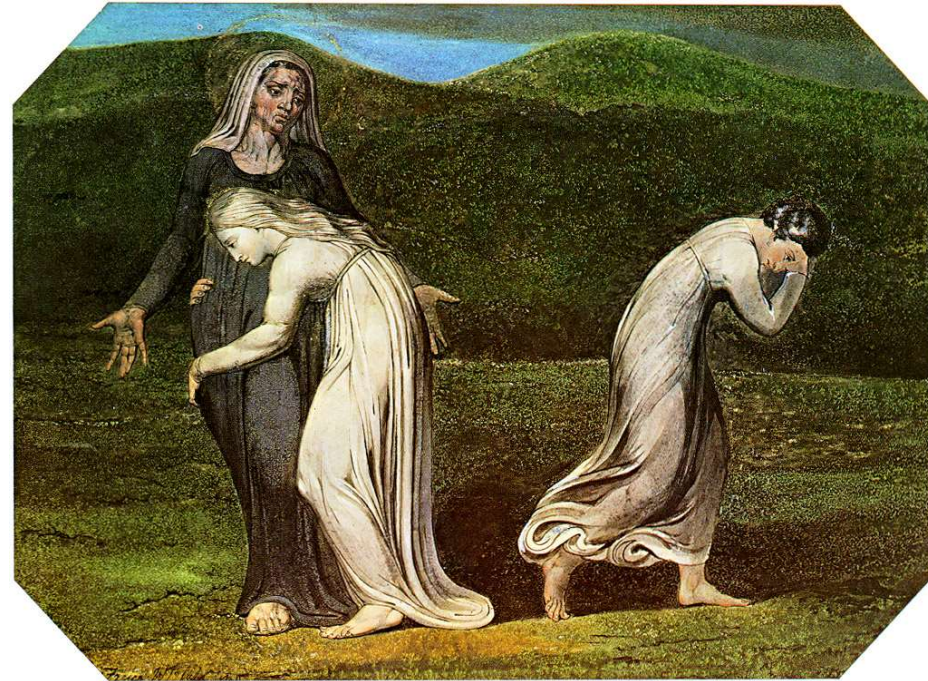
- “[The] post-defeat [586 BCE] national culture still has a place for heroes like David who bring down giants with pluck and confidence. However...the biblical scribes heavily reshaped the warrior legends they inherited. They also did not assign them pride of place at the beginning of the National Narrative, opting instead for tales of domestic life. **Without memory, there is no identity, and as our identities evolve and change, we supplement and sometimes replace old memories with new ones. The same goes for our political identities: new nations need new pasts.** The biblical scribes not only created a ‘prehistory of peoplehood’ for their conquered communities..., but also reinvented their heroes...The biblical scribes, as the Rabbis’ predecessors, were already engaged in this activity of sublimation when they, **in an ambitious act of redaction, constructed new archetypes and set aside memories they deemed deleterious to their new post-destruction identity.**” [368-369]
- “[In the Palace Narrative] The scribes responsible for the final contours of [David’s] life story use four women—
--**Michal [Saul’s daughter, David’s first wife], Abigail [another wife & advisor], Bathsheba [Solomon’s mother], and Abishag [during David’s old age]—to demarcate four phases of his life.** David may have achieved great things, but without women, his fame, and life, would not have endured long. It is women who sing his praises, comparing his feats to those of the king [Saul], and these songs ‘make a name’ for David that becomes known even among the enemy Philistines.” [373-374]
- “...**Why [are there] so many [stories of women]? One answer pertains to the writers and the readers [of the Bible] themselves. Power without recognized authority happens to be the position that they and their communities find themselves in a world under imperial rule.** As such, stories about women reflect their readers’ existential concerns. The way these biblical women maneuver in relation to men is precisely what these communities must do to survive under foreign rule...**Vanquished communities had a lot to learn from women’s ways of being in the world.**” [376-377]

The Other: Tales of War, Outsiders and Allegiance

- “...For a political community, war constitutes the ultimate threat. Floods, droughts, disease, and other natural catastrophes afflict regions, with little regard to political borders; wars target communities, nations and states. For this reason, **peoples commonly construct their identities via memories of military conflicts.** Wars are so decisive for communities because they are moments when all their members are expected to come together and assist each other...The biblical authors were writing from the perspective of the colonized. As they constructed a new identity after being subjugated by imperial powers, they worked not only to delineate the nation’s boundaries, but also to open the gates to others who earnestly wanted to be part of their new political project. **Rahab’s story [as a collaboratrice who joins forces with Joshua’s spies in Canaanite Jericho in the book of Joshua]** stands at the beginning of the account of Canaan’s conquest in the book of Joshua. **In composing her story, the book’s authors were addressing the question of integrating outsiders in the national fold...** [381]
- In the book of Judges,...after Israel vanquishes the Canaanites force, Sisera, the Canaanite commander, manages to escape with his life. He flees to the camp of [a] Kenite clan [that had allied itself with the Canaanites] and there enjoys gracious hospitality from its chieftain’s wife, Jael. **What Sisera does not know is that Jael had repudiated her husband’s political affiliations and remained loyal to Israel.** Thus Sisera gullibly drinks the warm milk she offers him and drifts off to sleep, confident that he is safe from all harm. At the first opportunity, Jael stealthily reaches for a hammer and drives a tent peg into his temple (Judges 4:17-24; 5:24-27)...**When she fights, she wields weapons that mark her ethnic identity: milk, a tent peg, and a hammer—corresponding to the Kenite activities of herding, nomadism, and metalworking.** The tale of Jael’s heroism appears to be a late addition to the battle accounts in Judges...[Such accounts] send a **message to their audience that marginal groups deserve honor, respect and civil rights.** [385-386].

The Book of Ruth

- “The book of Ruth was likely composed at **about the same time as Ezra-Nehemiah (in the late Persian or early Hellenistic period, [approx. late 4th c. BCE]), yet it is set in the days of the judges who govern the nation before the monarchy...The book of Ruth never refers to military conflict.** Instead it tells about a famine and how a Judean family escaped it by migrating to the neighboring country of Moab...**The first scene culminates with the Moabite Ruth saying to her Judean mother-in-law, Naomi: ‘...Wherever you go, I will go...Your people shall be my people. Your god, my god.’ (in Ruth 1:16-18). But her statement is about much more than a deity.** Religious reverence ...did not suffice...**one needed to follow the example of Ruth (and Rehab [see Joshua]) by making a resolute and unswerving commitment to throw her/his/their lot in with the nation...[Ruth] eventually marries another Judean man (Boaz) and gives birth to the ancestor of King David...[This story] demonstrates how personal relationships, built on generosity and loving-kindness (chesed), not only bring about the birth of Judah’s mos celebrated monarch but also, and more importantly, promote the well-being of a people.”** [389-390]
- Picture Source: Wikipedia. Naomi entreating Ruth and Orpah to return to the land of Moab by William Blake, 1795



A Counter view to extreme “nationalism”

- ***“The story of Ruth directly challenges Pentateuchal law.***

According to Deuteronomy, Ammonites and Moabites do not qualify for membership in the nation: ***‘No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the assembly of Yhwh...’*** (Deut. 23:3-8)...The book of Ezra-Nehemiah reveals that some circles in the post-exilic period appealed explicitly to this law...Ruth’s story...emerged at the same time...offers a counter view...[Through her determination] Ruth...becomes a full-fledged member of the community...

Throughout history, projects of nation-making have often been xenophobic, ethnocentric, and intolerant. To thwart these “nationalistic” tendencies, the biblical corpus contains not only powerful stories [like Ruth]...but also laws requiring nothing less than love for non-natives who take up residence in the country: ‘When an immigrant resides with you in your land, you must not oppress him...***You must love him as yourself, for you too were once immigrants in the land of Egypt. I am Yhwh, your God.***’” (Leviticus 19:33-34) [390-392]

The absence of biblical texts that glorify battlefield death

- “We search in vain for a biblical text that glorifies battlefield death, and this astonishing absence speaks volumes about the ethos and concerns of the corpus. ***As biblical authors articulate their philosophy of peoplehood, they repudiated the statist ideology of martial martyrdom and its accompanying death-cult. Closely tied to this decisive disavowal is their denial of a blissful existence beyond the grave.*** The eternal life that they envisioned is to be sought in one’s descendants and daily deeds...***The vision of redemption in the Hebrew Bible (in contrast with the New Testament) is for the here and now.*** Its hope is both terrestrial and collective: the jubilation of wedding parties, the grinding of millstones, children playing in the streets, and all living long lives: ‘...***And the city’s [Jerusalem’s] streets will be filled with boys and girls—all will be playing in her streets.***’ (Zechariah 8: 4-5)... [As the German dramatist ***Berthold Brecht*** wrote during WWI, reversing Horace (‘pro patria mori,’ 65-8 BCE, Roman lyric poet), ‘***Tis sweeter and more beautiful to live for one’s country!***’]” [399-400,404]

“As we saw in...***the late book of Ruth***...about the time of the Judges, yet in contrast [to that book], this [story] portrays neither war nor warriors.

Its main characters are women, and the male protagonist, Boaz, is a ‘Man of Valor/Might’—an ancient title of warrior nobility that refers now to social virtue, not military prowess... When the community blesses Boaz on his marriage with Ruth, they encourage him to act heroically: ‘May you do a mighty deed of valor in Ephrathah and make a name in Bethlehem’ (Ruth 4:11). The mighty deed...refers here to marriage and procreation...Deuteronomy 20:5-7, ‘Has anyone become engaged to a woman but not yet married her? He should go back to his house,’ requires a draft deferral for soldiers who had not yet established a family...The concerns of the nation, and the families that constitute it, take precedence over the state and its drive for expansion and triumph.” [402-403]

Prophetic Literature as Community Instruction

- “In stark contrast to the actual prophecies [like that of the ghost of Samuel to Saul telling him he would lose the battle against the Philistines and his life at Mt. Gilboa] ...the prophetic literature of the Bible is much lengthier. It was written...for the instruction of a community living after defeat. For that reason, **it rarely addresses day-to-day concerns for a ruler’s success, and it often brazenly challenges the conventional means by which states legitimated their authority...’My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.’ This line from Hosea (4:6) conveys a core principle for the biblical authors: the nation’s strength depends upon all its members being educated in its history, laws, lore and wisdom—that is, ‘knowing Yhwh/God.’** A fundamental feature of the biblical agenda is broad participation in public life, and the biblical prophecies address first and foremost not the palace but the people...They used older materials to create something entirely new; sophisticated works of literature, books designed to be read by and to larger communities. These works are thoroughly didactic. **By studying them, communities learn from the sins of past generations and reflect on the foundations of communal life...** If prophetic writings survived the flames that destroyed Jerusalem, it is because scribes

modified, rescripted, and expanded them to address newly emerging communities...And **for two millennia, they have continued to be studied by a wide array of communities and social movements...All could now learn about the will of the nation’s deity by studying the divine knowledge preserved in these sacred writings.** Moreover, this study could serve as a substitute for sacrifice when the temple and altar were no longer standing, as in rabbinic times, or when the authority and qualifications was in doubt, as in the days of Nehemiah...**In the biblical corpus, nationhood is a state of mind—a kingdom of not only collective consciousness but also collective conscience. It exists to the extent that its members honor the holiness of their God, know the narratives of their national past, and then choose to make the divinely revealed, covenantal laws the constitution of their corporate life...Education...should mark off Israel corporately as a people from others...As members of ‘a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,’ all must adhere to a strict code...What gave the new nation its identity in the post-destruction period were **no longer physical borders but rather practice and performance. Action replaced location...**”[412-419]**