

Women, Justice and the Bible
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Preface

Sisters of Mercy are women of the Church who are concerned about justice. We have a distinguished history of working for justice for others. But the Direction Statement of our Institute now asks us to work for justice for women, which is to say, for ourselves. And that does not come easy for us. I have been amazed, in the years since 1991 when the statement about “solidarity with women seeking the fullness of life and equality in Church and society” was first articulated, how often that stand has been softened or even denied. It is hard for us to commit to women—and there are many reasons for that, not the least of which are the traditional understandings of what constitutes “selfishness.”

We need good models of claiming justice for ourselves as well as others. We need stories that teach us how to protect ourselves while we are at work for others. We need stories that remind us of how risky it is to stand in solidarity with women in a world where the power of definition belongs to men. We will find these stories in the Bible, though it takes the arduous work of interpretation to free the nuggets of wisdom that are preserved and passed on through this tradition.

I want to begin by reminding us why it is so important for us as Christians to base our understanding of women and justice on what we can know from Sacred Scripture.

Listen to this paragraph from *Dei Verbum*, the Decree on Revelation of Vatican II:

Sacred theology rests on the written word of God, together with sacred tradition, as its primary and perpetual foundation. By scrutinizing in the light of faith all truth stored up in the mystery of Christ, theology is most powerfully strengthened and constantly rejuvenated by that word. For the sacred Scriptures contain the

word of God and, since they are inspired, really are the word of God; and so the study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of sacred theology.¹

At the same time, we may not like what we find there, especially if our images of working for justice have been formed in the “heroic” mode. There is no female parallel for Moses, who leads his people out of slavery (though we know that Harriet Tubman would do so many millennia later—and be dubbed the Moses of her people.) There is no female equivalent of Jesus, who overturns the tables of the money changers and declares his father’s house a house of prayer. The Bible is reflective of the societies in which it was shaped. The lessons to be learned from women and justice most often take place out of the public eye. But they are nonetheless important for the shaping of our Christian conscience and of our understanding of the justice revealed by God.

I am going to concentrate on the stories of women, not because I think stories of women are for women and of men, for men—but because I think all of the stories are for all of us. An examination of some stories about women and justice might well serve to remind us that heroes owe much to those who raise them and prophetic acts of justice often arise from an imagination shaped in the home and neighborhood.

Old Testament

When Pharaoh, who had already enslaved the Hebrew people and subjected them to lives at hard labor, decided that he would stem the rising tide of the Hebrew population by killing all the male children, it was three women who frustrated his plan where one small boy was concerned. Two were midwives and the third was an Egyptian princess.

¹ Abbott, Walter M., General editor, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York, 1966).

We don't really know whether Puah and Shiprah were Hebrew or Egyptian. If the latter, the names would mean (respectively) "childbearing or joy of parents" and "prolific" or "to procreate," both appropriate names for two midwives. Some scholars tell us we are not to think of them as lone practitioners of this art. Rather, it is likely that they were overseers of more than five hundred midwives who worked throughout ancient Egypt. Puah and Shiprah came to the fore at the time when the Pharaoh ordered all midwives to take life rather than save it. The instructions were to determine the sex of the baby when they saw the Hebrew mothers give birth and to kill all the male babies. Pharaoh did this out of fear that the growing number of Hebrews could pose a threat to his government and to the Egyptian people, especially since he had enslaved them under extremely harsh circumstances.

As Jean Porter notes, "the aim of this plan—population control—was the same combination of extreme ethnocentrism and protection of power that is at the core of ethnic cleansing campaigns down through the ages, even in our contemporary world."² As overseers, Puah and Shiprah were responsible to see that this order was passed on to the midwives under them and to see that it was carried out. But in an all important line, the Bible notes that "the midwives feared God." Now this is very important. It in no way means that the women were afraid of God; that is a false interpretation of the phrase. What it means is that they respected God above all earthly authorities and would not violate God's intentions. And so, as the Jewish feminist scholar, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, writes, "the midwives make an independent moral decision. Fearing God, they refuse to

² Jeanne Porter, *Leading Ladies, Transformative Biblical Images for Women's Leadership* (Philadelphia, 2000), 35.

obey immoral orders and do not murder the boy children”³ , nor do they order others to do so. I cannot stress enough how important this insight is. The capacity to make an independent moral decision is crucial to the work of justice in a world where power is exercised against the weak and the vulnerable. One of the most important elements, then, in the formation of women for the works of justice is the formation of conscience. And this does not mean simply following orders.

But there is another important feature to this story. At the same time that the midwives act to protect life, they find a way to protect themselves and those for whom they are responsible. Frymer-Kensky notes their strategy: “They belittle the Israelite women as “animals” who give birth so quickly that they need no midwives. ... In this way, they demonstrate to Pharaoh that they are not in favor of Hebrews. Not seeing the power of these women to defy him, Pharaoh is all too willing to hear something negative about Hebrews and falls for their trick.”⁴

The biblical text signals that God was pleased with the action of the Puah and Shiphrah, because the story tells us that “because the midwives feared God, God made them houses,” which means that God made them very successful.

What can we learn from this story about women and justice?

- In order to be just, one must fear God above all authorities.
- In order to be just, one must be ready to make an independent moral decision.
- In order to survive the work for justice, one must be canny enough to protect self and others from the punitive power of authority.

³ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible, A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York, 2002), 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

- The just woman can prevent an immoral order from being passed on and acted upon.

Can you think of any contemporary example of women who worked for justice in similar way? (Christine Vladimiroff , Helen Amos, Jeannine Gramick)

The saving of the savior goes on with the story of Moses in the bull rushes.

Undeterred by the failure of the midwives to kill the male babies, Pharaoh orders all the people to throw Israelite boy babies into the Nile. His mistake is to underestimate the daughters.

Moses' mother takes her son, puts him in an ark of reeds tarred with pitch and tar, and places him in the river. But she instructs her daughter, Miriam, to keep watch so she will know what happens to him. Pharaoh's daughter finds the baby, takes pity on him and pulls him from the water, knowing he is a Hebrew baby. At that point, Miriam steps forward and offers to get a nursemaid from among the Hebrew women to suckle the child. When the daughter of Pharaoh accepts, she fetches her mother, who is also the mother of the baby. Pharaoh's daughter says to the mother of Moses, "Take this boy and nurse him for me and I will pay you your wages."

Tikva Frymer-Kensky's commentary is too good to miss on this story.

She writes,

And so Moses is born, and saved to be reborn, by the collaboration of this triad of daughters, who begin the redemption of Israel. The Bible records the name of Moses' mother, Yochebed, and his sister Miriam, and midrash adds the name "Bithya" for the daughter of Pharaoh. But none of them is named in this story, for ... they are archetypal. They are *daughters*, women, the very ones overlooked by both Pharaoh and the tradition that remembered the names of only the men who came to Egypt.

Three subversive daughters have foiled the plans of men and shaped the destiny of the world.”⁵

What can we learn about being subversive daughters in the cause of justice?

- One is never too young to counter injustice.
- Even if one does not have the power to save a situation directly, watching and remaining vigilant can result in an intervention that is salvific.
- Sometimes working for justice means defying one’s own father, one’s own ruler.
- Being capable of being moved to pity is an ingredient of justice.
- Those who don’t count in this world can make a difference if they form an alliance, .even one that is unspoken.
- The labor of women should be compensated.⁶

Can you think of any contemporary examples? (Princess Diana, Mother Theresa, all those who spoke up for the victims of sexual abuse, the recent Nobel prize winner from Iran)

Miriam steps forward again later in Exodus. After the Israelites have crossed the Red Sea and have seen their enemies caught as the waters return to their bed, it is Miriam who leads the liturgical dance and the chorus of song: “ Sing to the Lord for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider, he has hurled into the sea” (Exodus 15:21). What is so important about this action? Jean Porter says that what Miriam did was to remind the people of the spiritual nature of their victory.⁷ She does this through the power of celebration, a power that interprets meaning and attributes authorship. Because of Miriam, the people know who has delivered them. Dare we say because of Miriam, the Passover ritual exists to this day?

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶ I am indebted to Tina Geiger, RSM, who pointed out to me that when Pharaoh’s daughter offered to pay the woman to nurse the child, it may be the first recorded instance of women being paid for what might be considered household labor.

What can we learn from this aspect of the story of Miriam?

- Events become symbolic in the life of a people because a leader rises up to interpret what they mean.
- In the rush of life, it takes a strong leader to stay in the moment long enough to celebrate, ritualize, help the people understand what is transpiring.

Can you think of any contemporary examples? (Maya Angelou, Diann Neu, Miriam Therese Winter)

The second example from the Old Testament is little talked about, except in the context of the Infancy Narratives in Matthew. It is the story of Tamar, daughter-in-law of Judah. According to Genesis 31, Judah chose Tamar to be wife for his son, Er. But Er was wicked in the sight of God and so God killed him. When Er's brother refused to fulfill his duty by a leverite marriage and so produce a male descendant for his brother by Tamar. When Judah refused her his third son, Tamar was left a widow and childless—one of the most vulnerable positions in the society of the Old Testament. In that position, she had no rights and no protector.

Tamar took matters into her own hands. She disguised herself as a roadside prostitute and seduced Judah into having intercourse with her. When Judah promised to send her a kid from his flock, Tamar insisted on a pledge and received from Judah his seal, his staff and his belt. Thus Tamar became pregnant and would have the child that was hers by right. When the pregnancy was discovered, Tamar was accused of being “with child by harlotry.” Judah wanted to have her burned to death for shaming his house. Tamar, who had thought ahead, saved herself by presenting the token she had taken from Judah, a token that Judah recognized and admitted, saying “she is more in the

⁷ Porter, 68.

right than I....” In this manner, Tamar got justice for herself and became the mother of sons.

What can we learn from Tamar’s story?

- In a world where men can deny women our rights with impunity, it is not always possible to play by the Marquise of Queensbury rules.
- Women frequently have to subvert the system to make things right—for ourselves and others.
- When working to subvert the system, we risk severe punishment. It will be necessary to think ahead about ways to protect ourselves—if at all possible-- when we are accused of being outside the law.

It’s a bit more difficult, perhaps, to think of contemporary examples—being unused as we are to taking Tamar as a model. But we should not forget that she is named in the genealogy of Jesus, the one who made himself a friend of prostitutes and tax-collectors.

New Testament

The model I have selected from the New Testament is also a widow. Her story has much teach us about pursuing justice in our time. Luke preserves the tradition:

Then he told them a parable....He said, “There was a judge in a certain town who neither feared God nor respected any human being. And a widow in that town used to come to him and say, ‘Render a just decision for me against my adversary.’ For a long time the judge was unwilling, but eventually he thought, ‘While it is true that I neither fear God nor respect any human being, because this widow keeps bothering me I shall deliver a just decision for her lest she finally come and strike me.’”⁸

⁸ *The New English Bible, with Apocrypha* (New York, 1976).

Now if you know your Bible well, you know that Luke interprets this parable as a lesson about persistent prayer. But contemporary parable studies encourage us to recover the shock of the parable and apply it for ourselves, lest the traditional interpretation blind us to the surprising power in the text.

I have already indicated that widows were considered—along with orphans—as the most vulnerable and powerless members of society. In the biblical code of ethics, widows were to be the subjects of special care on the part of the community. But the widow in Jesus’ parable is far from helpless. She has found her voice and she uses it repeatedly to berate the judge for not giving her her rights.

Barbara Reid comments that, to Jesus’ audience, “the notion of a woman arguing her own case before the judge would have been startling. Adjudication was the domain of men. At the death of her husband, the widow’s nearest male relative would have taken responsibility for her.”⁹ But this widow relied on no man to plead her case. She confronted the judge directly and continued to “bother him” until he relented. It is notable that the judge was not converted. He who neither feared God nor respected any human being did not undergo some great metanoia. No, he delivered a just decision for her in order to get her out of his face. In fact, the Greek text uses a term from the world of boxing to capture what the judge was ultimately afraid of: that she would strike him under the eye!

There are many surprises, then, in this small text. The judge is anything but a good judge, yet he is brought to do justice. The widow is anything but the helpless person that previous biblical texts would lead one to expect. She is awesome in her persistence and in her determination to get justice for herself. She does not mount a

persuasive argument nor cite legal precedents. She just shows up day after day and bugs the life out of him.

Now I do not object to those who would say this is teaching us something about prayer. The whole text clearly drives in that direction. But the parables of Jesus, in their most pristine form, are neither about God nor about the spiritual life. They are about everyday events involving regular people who are trying to solve problems in ordinary life. Before we spiritualize them, we should recognize their pertinence for our own struggles.

Barbara Reid notes that

The widow's story is repeated in that of countless women throughout the ages. She is like the widows and mothers of Argentina, who, for almost twenty years, have continued their weekly march in the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. They have uncovered the fate of about one-third of their nine thousand disappeared husband and sons. Her face is seen in the Jewish "Rose Street Women," who gathered on a Berlin street in 1943 where their husbands had been taken by the Nazis. They cried out repeatedly, "We want our men. Give us back our men!" until they succeeded in blocking their deportation.¹⁰

I'm sure you can bring this closer to home by thinking of examples from our day of persistent women acting for justice. (the Women in Black, the women protesting the School of the Americas, the women in Women's Ordination Conference, Teresa Kane, RSM)

Before I open the floor for further discussion, let me consider what we can learn from this short parable about a towering (though unnamed) woman.

- To work for justice, women must find our voices and learn to raise them in protest.

⁹ Barbara E. Reid, *Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, 1996), 191.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 193

- We need to get over our fear of making a scene. Sometimes it is just that action that will achieve the goal.
- It is naïve to expect that our actions for justice will always result in the conversion of the one who opposes us. There are manifold motivations for actions and getting us out of their faces will do nicely if it results in a step forward for women.

Thank you for your close attention to what I have said. Let's turn now to a free flowing discussion, in which I hope to hear your voices raised in the service of the causes of women that are dear to you.

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