

# Biblical Heroines

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The stereotypical heroine story written by men is almost invariably sexualized, especially in a warrior setting. She is inevitably depicted as physically attractive and uses that attraction as a weapon. The concept of ‘feminine wiles’ appears in the plot with eye-rolling predictability. These tales can devolve into caricature, à la the modern heroines of *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) – where the leading female star directly reported pressure to be sexualized<sup>1</sup> – or *Wonder Woman* (2017/1984), or *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001). Even at the other end of the spectrum from entertainment, the Quran, which self-professes divine authorship, does no better. The Quran alleges that God designs women simply to be a reward for men:

*They will be maidens with gorgeous eyes, reserved [for men] in pavilions. (Surah 55:72)*

This sexualized heroine template is invariably demeaning because the heroine’s core feature is reduced to being the effect she has on men, which essentially communicates that the man was the more important character all along. None of these heroines truly stands alone in the plot line, or is appreciated for her personal qualities. She is notable only because of the effect she has on a man, or because of how she appears to a man, or because she can overcome a man. In all its myriad incarnations this stylization smacks of human male authorship and nothing emanating from the Divine.

The refreshing reality of the Bible’s Leading Ladies is that they are not written this way; not one of their Stories conforms to this tawdry template. They still suffer being demeaned from external sources. Renaissance artists, for example, seize on Biblical heroines for self-indulgent portrayals – Mary Magdalene is often depicted as nude or covered only in long hair.<sup>2</sup> But these

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<sup>1</sup> Jadie Troy-Pryde, “Emilia Clarke was told that refusing to do nude scenes would ‘disappoint’ GOT fans,” Marie Claire UK, 20 Nov 2019

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Witcombe, *The Chapel of the Courtesan and the Quarrel of the Magdalens*, *The Art Bulletin* 2002, 84, 2, p282

distortions come from outside the Biblical text. The Bible itself commits no such objectifications. The Biblical heroine owns her Story and her character; her actions are described in objective terms, not relative ones. Her physical appearance is commonly not mentioned at all.

Sexual manipulation does exist in the Bible, not as a ploy of the heroine but of the wicked. Herodias employs her daughter, traditionally named Salome,<sup>3</sup> to apparently seduce Herod via erotic dance. Herodias wanted to execute murderous vengeance on John the Baptist, who had publicly denounced her for incest (Mt 14:6-12).

The Biblical icon of sexual seduction is the Great Whore of Babylon: a symbol, not an actual woman, who practices metaphorical seduction to deceive the kings of the Earth (Rev 17). But Biblical heroines are not depicted this way. Sexual attraction isn't ungodly at all, but not one Leading Lady crafts a plan using her 'feminine wiles' to achieve anything. They operate on their own terms, dependent only on God, just as the male heroes are.

Consider the evidence:

Deborah leads Israel because she is approved by God as Israel's Judge. No mention whatever is made of her appearance.

Similarly, Jael lures General Sisera to sleep using hospitality – not sexuality – before she summarily executes him. And the tale is told without her age or physique ever needing to be described.

Jephthah's daughter, most likely a teenager, strides forward to protect her father from his self-inflicted disaster of potential vow-breaking, even though it costs her any chance of family, lineage, and associated honour. We are never told what she looks like, nor do we ever need to know. Her recounted features aren't the curves of her flesh or the prominence of her bone structure; they are her level-headed maturity compensating for her father's short-coming, her steely courage, and her depth of godliness in self-sacrifice.

The choreographies of Ruth's midnight machinations with Boaz, designed by her mother-in-law Naomi, are spiritually deep and complex, intelligently weaving former conversations between Ruth and Boaz with metaphors spoken by God Himself. There is no evident spirit of seduction despite the bulk of academics clamouring to the contrary. It is true Ruth is soliciting a marriage proposal, which adds a spirit of romance to the dominant themes of protection,

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<sup>3</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 93 AD, 18, 5, 4

redemption, and resurrection. But Naomi instructed Ruth to wear her best clothes for the nighttime rendezvous (Ruth 3:3), which is more consistent with formality than flirtation.

Bathsheba was in no way to blame for the adultery with King David, even if it was triggered by her rooftop bathing. To the contrary, the narrative clarifies that David chose to remain in Jerusalem when he should have been at the battlefield (2 Sam 11:1), resulting in his rather voyeuristic encounter with Bathsheba, the wife of noble Uriah the Hittite.

Esther is sufficiently beautiful to win an international beauty pageant (for which she is lambasted by some feminist commentators, who view her pageant entry as complicity with patriarchal abuse), but she never uses her beauty to realize an agenda. The contest was born of male origin, *comme necessaire*, and the ‘contestants’ were very likely conscripted, given that the pageant’s nature was seedier than might be supposed: each young lady was required to sleep with the king. Esther was evidently beautiful, but throughout her Story her recourse to strength is drawn from her ethical compass, from family mentoring, and from soliciting God’s blessing by fasting.

Rahab’s bravery in collaborating with the Israelite spies provides the means by which Joshua’s army gains the confidence to strike in faith at Jericho. It is true she is a prostitute, but her prostitution is unconnected to the victory she helps secure. Her prostitution is worthy of mention simply because her house is then a place where the two spies could be housed without raising undue suspicion.

“What about Delilah?” one might retort. Of course, most would place her among the wicked in the first place, given her active role in the destruction of God’s judge Samson, although her true characterization is more complex. But even then, the answer is still no. For one thing, the plan to capture Samson via Delilah was from the (male) Lords of the Philistines. Nor did it involve sexual seduction. Samson’s capture was secured, as planned, through Delilah’s dogged nagging and emotional guilt-tripping for him to reveal his secret source of strength, until it wore him out (Jdg 16:16). Moreover, the chances that Delilah had any choice about participating in the subterfuge are frankly zero. Careful consideration of her Story reveals she is much more manipulated than manipulator, and her tale is a tragic one.

“What about Tamar?” one might press. Tamar waits veiled in disguise by the roadside and deliberately lures Judah into a sexual encounter. It might appear we have finally identified an exception to the rule of Biblical heroines not conquering via their sexuality (and one exception

would not negate the rule in any event). Yet, even here, we have not. Tamar does not possess the seductress' heart: her plan is reactive, not pro-active. Her actions are driven by literally life-threatening desperation, knowing she has no other option to stay alive but to somehow gain a hold over Judah, who is isolating her socially to the point she may not survive. We have full confidence that it is unjust to morally blame Tamar for the enticement, because ultimately even Judah confesses that he's to blame for the debacle, and that Tamar has conducted herself more righteously than he has (Gen 38:26). The Bible absolves Tamar, so we must.

Thus, it's with a sense of satisfaction we conclude that the Bible accounts of heroic women are written with a very different style to tales men write, granting their stories an authenticity most ancient legends don't have. This promises that these women's voices lend insight into genuine human lives of value, not mere fictional folk tales. I would venture to suggest that the fact none of these heroines' tales centre on their appearance or sexuality is evidence these narratives are indeed divulged by God. If they had been invented by men of old they would be subject to the all too familiar peccadillos and predilections of male story-telling, where heroines conquer only via smoldering gazes and heaving bodices. Biblical heroines aren't powerful because of how they appear in the eyes of men, but because they are godly, intelligent, resourceful and courageous.

These are Leading Ladies indeed.