



Leading Ladies

HEARING THE VOICES OF THE BIBLE'S POWERFUL WOMEN

John Pople

“We need to elevate female voices and stories, in journalism, film, photography and more. For too long we’ve been seeing the world primarily through men’s eyes.” (Jen Guyton)¹

So spoke a National Geographic Explorer in 2019. The magazine was celebrating the 100-year anniversary of American women’s suffrage (the right to vote), by releasing an edition in which every literary and photographic contribution was solely from women, focusing on women’s issues. This reignited a spark of interest I had nurtured for some years to make in-depth study of the Bible’s numerous heroines. It was a timely trigger for me to get to work.

When it comes to analyses of the Bible – which qualify in the “and more” section of Ms. Guyton’s comment above – a similar imbalance is in play: many more publications exist from men than women. Of course, the halls of learning were male-dominated in all fields just a century ago, and in the religious arena the imbalance was even more pronounced and longer lasting. Thankfully, the shortfall of female-authored Bible study is finally rapidly diminishing, to our global benefit. That said, to state the obvious: I am a man. Any analysis I produce only adds to the tottering pile of male-lensed work. I can’t present a feminine view; I simply don’t have it to present. So, do my studies on Biblical women have any value?

Hopefully. For one thing, this series addresses a separate, related, shortfall. Not only are there less female-authored Bible studies than male-authored, which I can’t help with, but the Bible’s women themselves are less commonly studied than the men. I may even know why this is, retrospectively, since my own former mindset might be indicative of the problem. I always felt it “wasn’t my place to comment” on the women of the Bible, because it seemed an arrogance for a

¹Jen Guyton, “Women: A Century of Change,” National Geographic 2019, 236, 5, p109

man to attempt to speak on women's behalf or tell their stories. If that reflects a common mindset, then, given that church communities tend to have more male presenters to start with, the result will be a marked shortage in presentations of Bible women's stories, which is what I see. This imbalance does these heroines of old a serious disservice and produces an inappropriate imbalance of spiritually powerful role models for any current Bible community.

I now believe it is beneficial for the stories of Biblical women to be published per se, regardless of author, because publication alone elevates their profiles. The women are enabled to speak for themselves directly through their quoted words and actions in any event, before the expositor offers any analysis. Beyond that, this work may encourage other men who may have also shied away from studying the Bible's women out of a misplaced sense of deference, as I once did, to delve into what is an astonishingly rich vein of study. I have gained enormously from these studies – however clichéd that may sound – and realize how bereft I had been in appreciation of the subtler, yet more powerful, achievements of Biblical heroines; and sharing these under-appreciated discoveries is also an independent reason to publish.

In each case, I hope to challenge the reader to see a link not previously seen, or observe a pattern not previously perceived, which extends the knowledge and appreciation of the complexity and excellence of their achievements. I do not expect everyone to agree with every suggestion I propose; but I do hope to make proposals which have enough scriptural merit to be beneficial to consider.

Ultimately, I hope to show that these Leading Ladies' achievements match in excellence any of those of the leading men of God, if not exceeding them (fully noting that discipleship is not a competition). Specifically, at least four of these Biblical heroines: Deborah, Jael, Ruth and Esther foreshadow an explicit aspect of Messiah's role, pairing the latter three alongside David, Joseph and Moses respectively, who emulated the same Messianic aspect, while the former Leading Lady, Deborah, remains peerless.

But these claims can only be justified by first hearing the Voices of the Leading Ladies themselves.