

UNVEILED

Women of the Old Testament and the choices they made



Reflections by **Clare Hayns** Artwork by **Micah Hayns**



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#ThemToo

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Introduction



This book emerged out of ignorance. A few years ago I was in a shop getting some pictures framed when the shopkeeper, seeing my clerical collar, made the statement that causes church leaders to quake: ‘You’ll know the answer to this, as you’re a vicar.’ The question he asked was, ‘My son’s girlfriend is called Miriam, and I know she’s in the Bible – but who was she?’ It was a good question, but I floundered. I knew she had something to do with Moses, but not much else. Another customer came in, so I took the opportunity to hide behind the frames to google his question!

I came away determined to find out more about Miriam and also all the other women of scripture, and I set myself the challenge of writing about a Bible woman a day for the 40 days of Lent and making that into a blog. When I began I intended

to use New Testament women as well, but I found there were so many fantastic women in the Old Testament that I decided to focus on them instead.

There is an assumption that women are largely ignored in the Hebrew scriptures and that when they *are* written about, they are marginal and rather two-dimensional characters: veiled in mystery, hidden away or on the fringes. This is certainly the case for some of the women, but there are many others who are central to the narrative, complex and used by God in extraordinary ways. Through these women, I found that I was able to understand parts of the Bible that had hitherto seemed shrouded. Although their world was so often controlled by men, many of these women still had choices they could make within the constraints of their patriarchal society. Sometimes these choices had an impact on just themselves and their families, and at other times they brought about the salvation or destruction of an entire community, and even changed the course of history.

Rather than arranging the stories of these women chronologically from Genesis onwards, I decided to group them around themes which emerged, such as motherhood, work, relationships and power. We shouldn't gloss over the more disturbing or tragic stories either, as these remind us that at the heart of the human condition there is suffering and pain and the need for God's redeeming love as revealed most fully through Jesus. With this in mind, I have included a reflection and prayer at

the end of each chapter, which I hope will help put the stories of these women into context.

This book is not intended to be an in-depth theological study; there are many others far more qualified than I am who have done this already. My hope is that by reading the stories and enjoying Micah's beautiful images you will get to know some of these women better and find that, even though they lived centuries ago, their stories are also incredibly current. They are women with relationship struggles, sibling rivalries, financial challenges and fertility issues. They are also women with remarkable gifts, skills, faith and fortitude.

I hope that by unveiling the stories of these remarkable women and the choices they made, we might not only learn more about them but come to know more of God's abundant love for us and for all people. I have learned so much from these women and hope that you enjoy reading about them as much as I have enjoyed writing about them.

Clare

Clare Hayns





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Rebekah: faith and favouritism

And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel, and said to the servant, ‘Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us?’ The servant said, ‘It is my master.’ So she took her veil and covered herself. And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her.

GENESIS 24:64–67a

‘Behold, Rebekah.’

GENESIS 24:51 (RSV)

We first meet Rebekah with a jar on her shoulder as she goes to a well outside the town gates to draw water. She is the first of several women in the Bible whose story entails leaving their home to marry a suitor they've not yet met. It is a story that involves camels, nose rings, a family feud and troublesome twins.

Abraham was by now an elderly patriarch and wanted to find a wife for his son Isaac from his own home country, rather than from Canaan where they now lived. His estate manager, Eliezer, was sent on a quest to Nahor (in modern-day Syria) to find someone suitable from Abraham's clan. He took with him camels laden with bags of jewels as a dowry and went to the place where the women were most likely to be seen, the town well, and there he prayed for guidance.

Rebekah was both beautiful and wealthy, the daughter of Bethuel, Abraham's nephew, and sister of Laban. We are told she had a nurse, Deborah, and several maids.

She arrived at the well before Eliezer had finished praying. When she offered to fetch water for him and his camels, he took this as a sign from the Lord and gave her gifts of a nose ring and two gold arm bracelets. In a further display of generosity, she invited him back to her father's house where, after some negotiation over lavish hospitality and more gifts (jewels, gold and cloth), the family concluded

that the Lord did indeed intend for Rebekah to marry Isaac. Rebekah was asked if she was willing to leave her home to go to a foreign land to marry a stranger, and she gave her consent with a simple answer: 'I will' (Genesis 24:58).

She married Isaac and eventually, after a difficult pregnancy, gave birth to twin boys, Esau and Jacob. Her boys were very different from each other, Esau being a rugged hunter and Jacob a quieter, more reflective type. Family dynamics are rarely straightforward, and often jealousies, feuds and rivalries are formed early on. This family was no exception, and perhaps it began here: 'Isaac loved Esau... but Rebekah loved Jacob' (Genesis 25:28).

The family rift grew when Rebekah disapproved of Esau's choice of wives and then plotted to make sure that Jacob would gain his father's blessing over and above his older twin. This plot led to Jacob receiving his brothers' rightful blessing, and it also precipitated a fraternal feud which lasted many years and meant that Rebekah's favourite son had to flee into exile to her brother Laban.

We don't know if Rebekah lived long enough to see her beloved son again, or if she ever saw his eventual reconciliation with his brother. The last we hear of her is that she was buried alongside Isaac, Abraham and Sarah in the family tomb near the oaks of Mamre.

Reflection

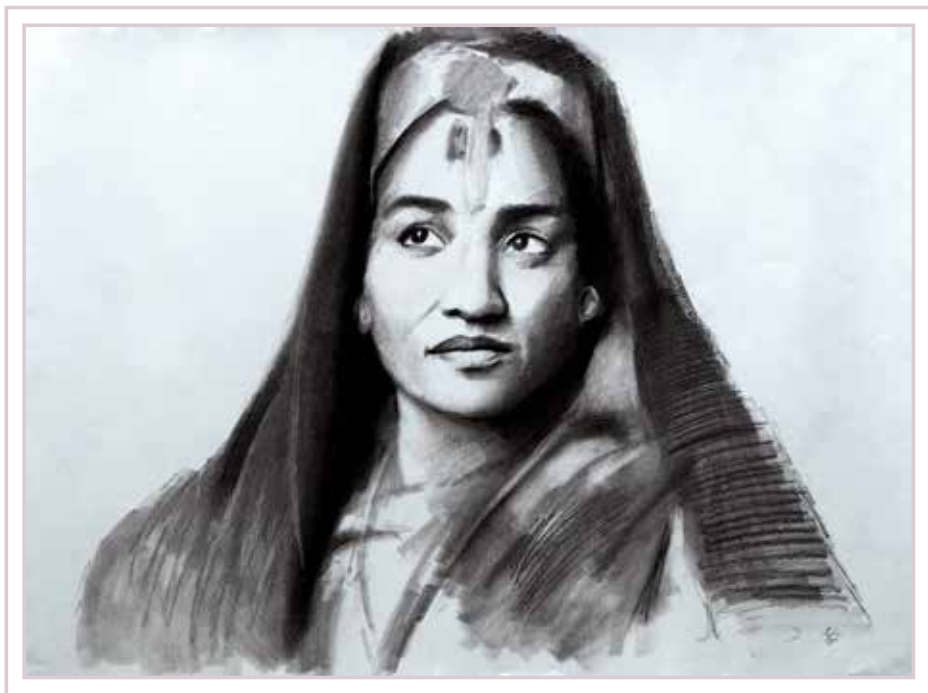
Rebekah was a courageous and bold woman of God, not afraid to take risks, to speak her mind and to use the power she had to secure what she wanted for those she loved. Her actions caused conflict within her family, though, and her sons' rivalry was perhaps partly due to their parents' favouritism. Recent research conducted in the UK found that 30% of people thought their parents had a favourite child and believed this had had a lasting impact on family relations.

Parenting isn't easy, and so let's pray for all those who navigate this tricky path, and who get it wrong at times; and for ourselves that we wouldn't let old wounds fester.

Prayer

God of love, through Jesus Christ you draw us into one great family of disciples: help us to see others as you see them. Forgive us when our actions cause hurt and division, and help us to love those whom we find difficult. Amen







Vashti: #MeToo

On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who attended him, to bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing the royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the officials her beauty; for she was fair to behold. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the eunuchs. At this the king was enraged, and his anger burned within him.

ESTHER 1:10-12

In October 2017 American actress Alyssa Milano posted on Twitter: 'If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote #MeToo as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.' This was in response to allegations relating to renowned film producer Harvey Weinstein,

who in February 2020 was sentenced to 23 years in prison. #MeToo became a global movement in a matter of days, opening up an important conversation about women's experiences, particularly in industries such as film and theatre. The story of Queen Vashti is perhaps one of the earliest accounts of a woman standing up to a powerful man.

Vashti was the queen of Persia, the first wife of King Ahasuerus (Xerxes), and her story is told in the book of Esther during the days of Jewish captivity in Babylon. For the Persian rulers it was a time of peace and prosperity, which meant that there was plenty of time for the king to host banquets and display the glories of his kingdom. Ahasuerus was certainly a dedicated host – one of his parties was said to last nearly six months and was so lavish that there were couches made from gold and silver, drinks were served in golden goblets and the wine was so plentiful that 'each guest was allowed to drink without restriction' (Esther 1:8, NIV).

At that time the men and women of the royal palace lived largely separate lives, and Vashti had her own quarters. She was holding her own banquet for the women of the region when the drunken king, during one of his parties, demanded she be brought to him and displayed to the men, 'wearing the royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the officials her beauty.' Some argue that this meant the king demanded she should wear nothing at all but her crown! It's not clear if

this is the case, but Vashti was clearly distressed by the command. She stood her ground and refused to go.

The king was furious and ‘anger burned within him’. He had wanted to impress his guests with his wife’s beauty, and instead she had humiliated him publicly. He wanted revenge. And so, like Henry VIII, Weinstein and countless other powerful men, he worked out a way to bring her down. He consulted his lawyers and they found a by-law which said he could depose her as queen for disobedience, which he did. This was good news for the nobles, who feared their own wives might hear about the queen’s insubordination and become similarly disdainful of their husbands: ‘There will be no end of contempt and wrath!’ (Esther 1:18).

After Vashti was deposed a letter was sent throughout the whole land to every province, in every local language, with the decree that ‘every man should be master in his own house’ (Esther 1:22). The #MeToo movement was some way off!

Reflection

Women being harassed by drunken men at parties is nothing new, and standing up to a powerful man still comes at considerable cost, as Vashti found out. We don't get to hear why she did this. Some have argued that it was because of modesty (Midrash), others that she was unhappy with her appearance that day (Babylonian Talmud), and others say she was a proto-feminist fighting for her integrity.¹¹

Let us pray for all those who continue to be exploited by the powerful, for all those who have the courage to stand up to power, and for ourselves, that we would use our own power well.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, who came into the world as one of us and experienced what it is to be humiliated and shamed in front of others, grant that those who carry the heavy burden of shame might be released from its power over them; and give us the confidence to speak boldly to rebuke vice and proclaim your love. Amen



Some women of the Hebrew scriptures are well known, but many others are barely remembered. Even when they are, we often don't pause on them long enough to think about what we might learn from them. *Unveiled*, written with frankness and humour and illustrated with striking artwork from a young Oxford-based artist, explores the stories of 40 women in 40 days. Each reflection ends with a short application to everyday life, guidance for further thought and a prayer.



Clare Hayns is College Chaplain at Christ Church, Oxford. She grew up in rural Buckinghamshire, her childhood more Pony Club than church youth group. Pre-ordination she was a social worker specialising in substance misuse. She is married to John, an entertainer, and has three creative sons, the eldest of whom is the illustrator of this book.

Micah Hayns is a contemporary classical painter from Oxford. He takes the classical techniques and tradition of the Old Masters, whom he studied at the Florence Academy of Art, and infuses them with a contemporary aesthetic, inspired by street art, abstract expressionism and collage.

Women in the Bible are often seen as marginal figures, their lives and interests flattened out by more dominant story lines of male characters. In these engaging reflections, Clare and Micah Hayns bring these marvellous women into the foreground. We meet real women, clever and brave, faithful and strong, but also harassed and hungry, and far from perfect. Each deft portrait combines fabulous narration with thoughtful imagery to present a character of multi-dimensional vitality and verve.

Margaret Whipp, spiritual accompanier and pastoral supervisor

