

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY  
**Continuing Education Encore Events**

**Transcript of**  
**“Women in the Old Testament: Then and Now”**

**presented by**  
**Dianne Bergant, C.S.A.**

Thank you very much. I'm very happy to be here. If you were expecting a talk on Mary Magdalene, we'll have to call Colleen back. A little aside: just two weeks [ago] a friend of mine knew I was going to give this talk and presented me with a book, a recently published book, *The Two Marys* which I thought very interesting. And then I saw who the author was. I can't remember her name but she's a psychic who appears frequently on Montel Williams's program. And I didn't do this on purpose. Unfortunately, when I left his house, I forgot the book.

So, I want to talk today about “Women in the Old Testament: Then and Now.” Within the recent past, the topic, women in the Bible, has become quite popular. Many are interested in the topic from an anthropological point of view. From this perspective one might ask, how have women been viewed over the years in different cultural settings? Others claim that their own cultural viewpoint is grounded in their religious beliefs. They might ask, what do our religious texts say about the creation of women? Now they might not ask these questions in these words, but that's their interest. Today I would like to examine the topic from the perspective that might ask, how might various women depicted in the Bible act as models for us? Before I do so, a few preliminary remarks are in order.

First, this presentation will focus on periods of our religious past, Old Testament, and will highlight some of the theology that was basic to those periods. Only then will the part played by women in those periods, or at least in those texts, be discussed. This approach is necessary in order to appreciate the significance of the biblical traditions that will then be examined.

Second, while this approach is historical, the goal is not merely historical reconstruction. We do not want to live like they did. That's been done. Critical examination of the text is the first step in uncovering religious sentiments held by the communities that produced the respective biblical traditions. Events of the past were the loci of revelation for earlier people, not for us. It's very important to remember. They had their moment of revelation. We are not to replicate that. Our moment of revelation is in our time, not in theirs. The testimony of these people, the biblical message that they produced, is what will be revelatory for us. This explains why I'm not primarily interested in what happened but in what our religious ancestors believed the event might have meant.

Third, it's important to acknowledge at the outset that the biblical tradition was produced by a society that was patriarchal, meaning father-headed. Patriarchy does not mean men rule women. Patriarchy means men rule. Not all men get a chance at it. So [it is] a patriarchal society in structure and androcentric or male-centered in its perspective. And androcentric, of course, means it's all told from the man's point of view. Even the beautiful stories about women are all told from a man's point of view. We must never forget that. This is a fact that cannot be denied but must be taken into account in any serious study. I contend that the sociopolitical limitations of the original societies neither invalidate the fundamental religious message of their traditions as certain radical interpreters claim, nor do they require that sociopolitical or religious structures and practices of the past must be replicated in the present or the future as some strict traditionalists argue. Finally, I maintain that the way we understand these societal limitations and deal with them will significantly influence our understanding of the biblical tradition and our attitude toward the religious message it yields. In other

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY  
**Continuing Education Encore Events**

words, I am extremely interested in, “What does it mean today?” In other words, interpretation, not repetition or replication.

Finally, as we examine these passages we might discover that some of the gender bias we have routinely ascribed to the biblical tradition is really a question of interpretation that betrays the male preference for commentators down through the centuries, not necessarily of the biblical authors. A new reading of the texts might uncover a different perspective. Despite such new readings we must remember that the androcentric point of view is a constant. It is always there... very simplistically, one might say, and in those stories where women function as leaders, it may very well be that there was no man to do so. But as soon as there was a man, then the woman lost her position of leadership. We see that in the monarchy. There is a time when there was a queen because there was no male descendant; he was a baby. But when he got to be nine years old, then he could be king and he replaced the woman or displaced the woman. So this androcentric point of view is a constant.

While the narrative might appear to express a gender balance, a male preference is always just beneath the surface. Dealing with this male balance becomes the challenge of contemporary interpretation. So what do you do with it? Do you just ignore it? Do you dismiss the text? Do you replace the words or the images? And I would say no to all of that.

In this presentation, I will first provide a brief overview of sociopolitical reality of a few periods in ancient Israel's history. And the periods will be first of all creation, which is not really a period, but you can't deal with, you know, anything that's anthropological, particularly the issue of women, without somehow dealing with the creation narratives. And then I will take a period of the judges. And then I will go to the monarchy, the beginning monarchy, and then another time in the monarchy. But I will first look at sociopolitical reality of a few periods. I will then examine selected passages in order to discover the role played within them by the women described. Only then will I suggest how these women might act as models for us today.

The first period then, is primeval history, which I say is not really a period. We cannot discuss women in the Old Testament without touching, if only briefly, on the creation narratives, narratives that are foundational for many people's understanding of gender issues. It was mentioned that I taught at Providence College, and one of the courses that I taught was “The Bible in Contemporary Issues.” And one of the issues was gender. Now these are undergrads, and it's amazing what they know about the Bible; wrong, but what they know about the Bible. And I kept saying, you know... they would say that women are, you know, secondary or inferior to men. And... you know I said, where does it say that? Well someplace along the line, as many of us learned. We didn't learn the Bible. We learned someone's interpretation of the Bible. And that's why I say sometimes the biases are not so much in the text, though there are biases in the text, but what we have learned is the interpretation's text.

So the first creation narrative which we find in Genesis one states that both male and female are created in the image of God. Though the Hebrew word *Adam* is masculine form and has traditionally been rendered man, it can also be translated as the collective humankind. Since the five verbs that constitute the commission given by God to the couple are all in plural form—*increase, multiply, fill the earth, subdue, and have dominion*—they're all in plural form; it's clear that both the man and the woman are instructed to be fertile, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. In other words, the man and the woman enjoyed the same status within the created world.

The second creation account, Genesis two, is the one often called on to relegate women to a secondary and inferior position. It's a very imaginative account filled with plays on words. We read it.

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY  
**Continuing Education Encore Events**

The ancients heard it. It's an oral culture, and they heard it. And we miss puns when we read. Part of the reason is because frequently what sounds the same isn't spelled the same. So it's filled with plays on words that are lost in translation. In it, the woman *Isha* is built from the man, *Ish*. Now you can hear it, Isha and Ish. The action characterizes God as an architect rather than the potter depicted in the creation of the man which we find in verse 7 of the same account. So... first of all, these passages are so layered and so rich mythologically that I am embarrassed to simply look at them in a very cursory way because there's so much that one misses. The characterization of God as a potter and the creation of the woman as an architect—now you want to talk about superiority—I leave to you which one needs more education? Contrary to the misunderstanding of many people, the woman's origin from the man, she comes from the man and that's why a lot of people think she's secondary. Her origin from the man no more makes her inferior to him than is the man, *Adam*, inferior to the ground, *adamah*, from which he is formed. Again, there's the play on words. I always say this: so she comes from the man and that makes her inferior? He comes from dirt. Now we can laugh about that, and I always whenever I say that, I say it in a way that people see the humor.

However, you never see the humor when they say that she was created from the man. That makes her secondary. She is derivative. That's their thinking and that's their interpretation which makes her secondary. True, the story later describes a ruptured relationship between the woman and the man in which he dominates her. We see that in Genesis 3:16. But this is not the case at the time of creation. Difference in substance and function does not necessarily mean difference in rank. And the idea of the woman coming from the rib probably comes from an ancient Sumerian myth, where in ancient Sumerian language the woman of the rib and the woman of life was again a pun. But you translate that Sumerian language into Hebrew and you lose the word, the... word play or the play on words. They kept the image but you lose the pun. Now of course, ancient Israel knew what it was. But we don't, and so we see she comes from the rib.

I remember years ago there was, I guess, *Argus*. Now I'm dating myself. There is no more Argus, but they had beautiful posters. We always capture our religion in posters. And it was *God did not...* I'm paraphrasing. *God did not make Eve from his hand because she wasn't intended to do all the work. He did not make her from his foot because he was not supposed to step all over her. He made her from a rib close to her heart because they were supposed to love each other.* And I thought isn't that sweet. It's got nothing to do with that. It has to do with an ancient rib because she is the source of life, the rib and life, the woman of rib, the woman of life. And remember afterwards, at the end of the Genesis two creation narrative, he calls her Eve because she is the mother of life. So you see those connections which again we miss.

Now, how can this first woman be a model for us today? When we hold up a person as a model, we usually look to something that that person has done that might inspire us. The creation narratives offer a slightly different perspective. At issue here is not what the first woman does, but what God does, how God creates her. There is no question of hierarchy in the first creation narrative. Both the woman and the man are created in the image of God and both are given a fivefold commission. In the first creation narrative, again we have to understand that the primary focus of that creation narrative is... really royal theology. "Subdue and have dominion" is royal language. The monarchy subdues and has dominion. So in a very real sense, the man and the woman are characterized as the king and the queen in the world. And the idea of image of God... In the ancient world people made images of their rulers and images of their gods, not idols, images, representations, some kind of symbolism. A symbol that represented the place of the jurisdiction, let us say, of the god, something similar to what a national flag does. A national flag is a symbol of the jurisdiction and the dominion of the nation. So

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY  
**Continuing Education Encore Events**

the image of the god was a... was a representation of where the god ruled supreme. So both the man and the woman represented where God ruled supreme, which really means that's the understanding in the ancient world of what monarchy was. Monarchy represented where God ruled supreme. So both the man and the woman then have this kind of representation.

The second account depicts them as different. They're made differently. They have different... functions; different but not with biased ranking. There's nothing in the text that says that, unless of course you think that coming from the man's rib is less than coming from the ground. And I'm sure nobody does, which means if you want to rank according to the substance of origin, we should turn it upside down. And I'm not suggesting that. I say that to point out the bias of interpretation. So they're different, but there's no biased ranking. These two depictions of gender relationship offer us a kind of model for today. First, the fundamental equality of the woman and the man as depicted in the first account can challenge the way we live with each other. Second, the unique God-given differences that we see in the second account can summon us to engage those differences as they exist today in order to enrich contemporary society. No woman worth her salt wants to be a man, any more than any man wants to be a woman. There is something unique about, limited also, but something unique about our gender differentiation. And that's what this says. I mean, it should serve the good of the community. We can see from this that the cultural limitations that are obvious in the ancient narratives need not impede our appreciation of the underlying religious values found there. The woman in the accounts is a model of both gender equality and unique and enriching gender difference.

The second period, the ancestral period. The biblical stories of our religious ancestors portrayed the movements of a nomadic people who might have been caught up in one of the earliest transigrations of nations. Some of these stories illustrate a tragic but common reality that people in the ancient world were forced to face, namely the precariousness of the group's survival. This fact highlights the essential role of the woman's reproductive potential played in that society. That, by the way, is why women were guarded. Not because they were not to be trusted. Because literally, they carried the family jewels. Because the potential for life was in the woman's body. And also it had to be guarded lest that be violated and taken by someone else. So she was guarded in that way, not because you can't trust women. Probably it's because you couldn't trust other men. While it's impossible to gauge what percentage of pregnancies were brought to term in the ancient world, records indicate that there was a high instance of infant mortality. Add to this the ever-present risk of the mother dying in childbirth, and it's easy to understand why ancient societies put so much importance on multiple pregnancies and birth... and wives, because there had to be an heir. And the heir had to be a son in the ancient society. And there had to be an heir. Otherwise, you lose the property. No property, no stability, no security. And that's why women of childbearing age were pretty much almost always pregnant. Because there was no guarantee that they would bring the pregnancy to term and if they did, there was no guarantee the child would be born alive and if it was, there was no guarantee the child would survive infancy. Without these women, extinction of the group was a real possibility.

This also explains why men having more than one wife was more common than women having more than one husband. Ancestral stories exemplify the custom of having more than one wife. They also underscore the importance given by that society to a woman's ability to conceive and bear children, particularly sons. And again, I'm going to say that the importance of a son has nothing to do with testosterone. It has to do with land. That's very important. It has to do with land and inheritance. This preference for sons stems from the patriarchal custom of male leadership and a patrilineal transference of property. For reasons such as these, the woman's essential worth was gauged by her

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY  
**Continuing Education Encore Events**

fertility. Understood within the context of her society, not ours, the survival of her family, her clan, and her tribe depended upon her productivity.

Today's feminists rightly protest the principle that biology dictates destiny. However, it's too easy to employ contemporary standards to judge the way the ancients understood the roles they played in survival, growth, and enrichment of their society. Their commitment to those roles might well prompt us to reflect on the ways that we ourselves are contributing to the betterment of our society. Again I'm not suggesting we do it their way but understand why they did what they did, why they valued what they valued, and that ought to challenge us. Are we committed to the betterment of society or are we simply living off the benefits it offers?

It's probably incorrect to refer to women like Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel as matriarchs. The word means mother head. And... *matros*... and *arce* means head. And those women were really not the leaders of clans. They were simply the wives of the patriarchs. Though they were important within their own families, they did not normally make major decisions for the clan or the tribe. In fact, they were often treated like pawns in tribal negotiations. For example, women were normally exchanged in marriage. Men were not. Take a look in Genesis 34, a proposal between Simeon and Levi by Hamor. They are making exchanges. *We'll give you our daughters if you give us yours.* So it's not a buying. It's an exchanging. And that, by the way, is a way of expanding the society or the family and also ensuring that there's no war because there's... you know, you are related now through marriage. So that kind of exchange was done.

Women were also dependent on the men of their household for protection and for the other benefits of society. This explains why mothers often manipulated circumstances in the lives of their sons. For eventually those sons were responsible for the care of aging mothers. In a patriarchal society a woman was under the jurisdiction and the protection, first of her... her father, then if the father died, her brother. Or when she married, her husband, and when the husband died, the son. So you get your son and, you know, you jockey him into the best position for your own welfare.

In many of these ancient societies a woman could not rely on the men of her kinship structure to assure her... I'm sorry. In many of these ancient societies a woman who could not rely on the men of her kinship structure to assure her the benefits of the group was often forced to beg or to prostitute herself in order to survive. Now that's the background. Tamar is the heroine of the Levirate. Marriages in ancient Israel were generally endogamous, meaning within the clan or the tribe. They married inside, not outside. Several biblical passages also show that the Israelites observed Levirate marriage. The word comes from the Latin *levir* which means husband's brother. It stipulated that if a man died without leaving an heir, his brother was to take his widow as wife. The first child of that second union was considered the legal heir of the dead man. This practice was economic in nature. It guaranteed that the property of the deceased remained within the family or the clan. So the son then got the inheritance of the dead man. And it also assured the widow that she was still within the kinship structure with all of the benefits that it provided. That, by the way, is behind the story of Ruth as well, that kind of marriage. The story of Tamar, that's the one I want us to look at in Genesis 38.

By the way, this lovely... brochure I guess you could call it, is on the back table talking about many of the women in the Old Testament. Of the four women I'm talking about, three of them are in here. So it gives you again a place where you can go back and look at these stories and also others. So I strongly encourage you to take this.

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY  
**Continuing Education Encore Events**

The story of Tamar in Genesis 38, Judah's daughter-in-law, presumes the practice of Levirate. Judah himself arranged for the marriage between Tamar and his firstborn son. The son dies without an heir and so Tamar is given to the next son who also dies without an heir. Tamar is then directed by Judah to return to her father's household until Judah's youngest son is able to take her as his wife.

Now already the woman's position is very precarious when she is sent home to her father's house. She will not then be given in marriage again. She is already a widow in her father's house and, in a certain sense, there is a shame there. When Tamar realizes that she will probably not be given to that son as wife, she disguises herself, sits at a crossroads, and waits for the unsuspecting Judah to pass by. Thinking that she's a prostitute, he engages her services. When it's time to pay, in lieu of money Tamar asks for his identifiable ring, cord, and staff which he willingly relinquishes. Tamar is soon found to be pregnant. And so, following the law of the time, Judah prepares to have her burnt as punishment for adultery. It's then that Tamar produces Judah's ring, cord, and staff, evidence that she is not guilty of adultery but that she has forced through subterfuge to secure her rights that are guaranteed by the Levirate law. She still is pregnant within the household. Because her father-in-law did not give her the third son, she's pregnant by the father-in-law. Realizing the truth of her words, Judah declares, quote (this is verse 26) "She is more right than I since I did not give her to my son, *Shelah*." Regardless of how it might appear to us, Tamar is not a woman who tricks a man with sex in order to get what she wants. And unfortunately, that's the way she's perceived.

Again, we read these stories of another culture from a particular contemporary point of view. She is a woman who willingly places herself in jeopardy sitting on a road. First of all, a woman that is out in public is automatically loose, as we would understand a loose woman. Alright? So she's in jeopardy there. Who knows what's going to happen to her. Alright? And, you know, who knows when she's pregnant... you know, she pulls out proof but initially she is liable to death. So she places herself in jeopardy in order to overcome whatever obstacles prevent her from achieving what is her right. Furthermore, this right is not merely personal, *I want a baby*. It's not merely personal. It's one that will benefit the entire clan or tribe. Finally, Tamar gives birth to twins one of whom is Perez, the ancestor of David who was the ancestor of Jesus. Tamar's importance cannot be minimized, for of all the ancestors that could have been memorialized in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, Tamar is one of the few women included.

Now, Tamar, a model for today. I am sure you can see the danger of simply repeating the story. This story clearly underlines several cultural limitations. First, a Levirate arrangement is clearly biased against women since they seem to have been handed from one brother to the next. You cannot deny it. Without justifying the practice, we must remember that it was a way of insuring economic stability for both the widow and the family as a whole. The underlying reasons for this practice might challenge us to examine how effectively our own current economic policies provide for those at risk. We can criticize them. And what are we doing in our society?

Second, Tamar is accused of adultery even though her husbands are dead, because her reproductive potential belongs to the family, not to her alone. Third, the narrative does not condemn Judah for engaging a woman he thinks is a prostitute because this practice was commonly accepted for men for quite some time before it was at last condemned. So all of that, you know, points out the limitations of the society. However, the story does condemn Judah not because he denied Tamar... I'm sorry... but, because he denied Tamar what that ancient society guaranteed her, namely the opportunity to continue in her way to the survival of her group. She was caught between two laws. She was prevented by one law, family control of her reproductive potential, from enjoying provisions provided by another law, the Levirate law. And she had no other legal recourse. I think that's very important.



**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY  
**Continuing Education Encore Events**

She was caught between two valid laws, and she took matters into her own hands. She could have simply accepted Judah's disregard of her rights and remained in her father's household like a good girl. Relying on the care of her family of origin would grant her as a... childless widow. and the rest of her life she would live in shame. But of course, you wouldn't see it because she would be in, you know, in the background. Instead, despite the risk and misunderstanding involved, she mustered enough courage and ingenuity to obtain her goal in an unconventional manner. Tamar chose to make her contribution to the family, to the clan, to the tribe. And, thus, she became a model of determination and courage despite the obstacles placed before her.

Third period, the tribal Israel. A position that is rapidly gaining acceptance in Old Testament studies claims that the formation of early Israel came about as an egalitarian reorganization of diverse peoples, not primarily as, you know, a war of oppression or a war of occupation. That's not to say there wasn't any, but primarily as a reorganization, egalitarian reorganization. But remember, that's egalitarian among the men. These people came together in revolt against the oppressive social and religious structures of Canaanite and/or Egyptian political worlds. This new organization was a form of tribal federation.

Out of this struggle emerged a creative religion known as Yahwism that was integral to the new social movement and dependent upon that movement for its expression. This religious movement understood the identity of the people in terms of its relation to God and not to land or to a region or to a city. It's quite unusual. You read stories in the ancient world and divine jurisdiction was really territorial and it was circumscribed by that territory. So if you're living in Egypt, you live under the jurisdiction and are obedient to the gods of Egypt. If you are in Mesopotamia, you are under the jurisdiction of the gods of Mesopotamia. That, by the way, makes... very significant the God of Israel who, when Israel was in Egypt, God functioned in Egypt. Gods are not supposed to do that. However, of course, it's Israel's way of saying our God is not bound by territorial limitations, by boundaries. Our God has universal jurisdiction. And the way Israel says this is by a story showing that God functions universally. But normally that's the way they understood their God. And their God moves before them and leads them into foreign lands.

So this religious movement understood the identity of the people in terms of its relation to God and not to land or to a region or to a city. It believed that its God was not only powerful, but just and merciful as well. That gods are powerful is not new. That gods are just is quite unusual, and merciful. God could... a god... ancient gods could be merciful to some people but not to all. The relationship between religious belief and social consciousness was so intimate that political recapitulation, a return to submission to former overlords and their gods, was considered religious apostasy. To turn back to the gods of the Canaanites may have been politically wise in the minds of some. But it was against Israel's religion because of this intimate relationship between politics and religion. So it is within this worldview that the leaders known as "the judges" took on prominence. The judges were military leaders but they were judges because they executed the judgment of God, normally on the battlefield, sometimes in juridical situations, but normally on the battlefield.

During the period of tribal federation, and this was again before the monarchy where... in Israel the major... population growth centers were cities up in the hills, hill cities, and they agreed, it seems, they agreed *we'll come together at least once a year and celebrate our commonality*. But there was a certain amount of independence and autonomy. But they did promise if the Philistines or any of the Canaanite peoples attacked, we will be there for you.

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY  
**Continuing Education Encore Events**

Now there are two very important stories that show that they were not faithful. One of them is found in 1 Samuel. It's the story of Saul. Saul, you know, comes in from the field behind a yoke of oxen. And the people in the city are moaning and lamenting because another neighboring city had called for help and nobody came. And so the story says that Saul slew the oxen and cut it up into pieces, sending a chunk of this slaughtered animal to the leaders of the major cities with a note, *come or else*. And they came, and that showed that what they needed was strong central government. And that's the beginning of the monarchy.

So we find initially they were not faithful. You find the same thing in the story of Deborah. The story of Deborah is in Judges four; it's in prose, in Judges five it's in poetry. And in poetry there is the lament of all of the cities or clans or tribes that did not come when somebody else needed them. So it tells us that they were not faithful. And what they needed, to quote Benjamin Franklin, "If we don't hang together, we will hang separately." And if we don't come together, we will be picked off one by one by the Canaanites or the Amorites or the city states. And so they realized what they needed was this strong central government. Okay? Now, we don't have strong central government. We are at the end of the period of tribal federation.

During the period of tribal federation the judges were primarily military leaders who rose up at times of crisis. Their function was usually local, attending to the needs of a particular clan or tribe. Their authority dissipated as the crisis subsided. Their purpose within the community should not be seen as a stop-gate message. They were genuine, if only occasional leaders. Several of the tribal narratives state that the judges were raised up by the Lord, or that the Spirit of the Lord came upon them. You get this in the stories of the judges which gives divine legitimation to their leadership. Other commentators claim that these leaders saved the people so they were seen to be saviors. Well... on a military level they were saviors. So they saved the people from extinction. If, as suggested here, that liberation was a religious as well as a sociopolitical experience, then the judges were both religious and sociopolitical leaders. To save Israel does not merely suggest military victory. It was a religious event as well. This is the world of which Deborah was a part. Deborah is a prophetess and a judge.

It's important to note that God's choice of leader did not depend upon societal presuppositions and expectations. God chose whom God chose. Some positions of authority such as priesthood and monarchy were hereditary. However, even there the institution and establishment of these offices was ascribed to God. We read in 1 Samuel 8:7, when the prophet Samuel told God of the people's desire for a king, God responded *grant their request*. So God gives legitimation. And it was God who instructed Moses, as we read in Exodus 28:1, *Aaron together with his sons will be my priests*. So the monarchy and the priesthood, though hereditary, was instituted or established by God, and that gave those functions divine legitimation. Other roles were charismatic, or conferred on individuals directly by God. "The Spirit of the Lord seized them." That means the judges were charismatic leaders.

The Book of Judges, chapters four and five, portrays Deborah as acting as a leader in this latter capacity. She is identified first as a prophetess. Judges 4:4, "At that time Deborah, a prophetess, was judging Israel." She was then described as delivering a message of the Lord to Barak. That's what a prophet does. A prophet is not one who sees into the present... I mean into the future. A prophet is one who sees into the present and knowing what will happen if we are not faithful, has a sense of what will happen in the future. It's a seer who sees into the future, not a prophet. So she sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and she said to him, "The Lord the God of Israel commands you." That's prophetic language. In addition to this role as prophet, she acted as a civil judge. And I quote from Judges 4:5, "She used to sit under the palm of Deborah



**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY  
**Continuing Education Encore Events**

between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites come up to her for judgment." Now again, remember, this is a patriarchal society and androcentric, and you got a woman functioning like this. Thus, Deborah holds positions of respect within the community as a charismatic spokeswoman and a juridical leader known for her wisdom. Despite the fact that it was Barak who received the word of the Lord, he refuses to carry out this command unless Deborah accompanies him. This is a strong warrior. Thus, he enters... she enters the military arena. Barak said to her, *if you will go with me, I will go. But if you will not go with me, I will not go.* And then Deborah got up and went to Kedesh. Deborah clearly plays the role of liberator. This may be why she is called later on in the book, "mother of Israel."

The faith of early Israel insisted time and again that God is not constrained by societal limitations. The prophetic critique is evidence of this conviction. It insists that there is no structure that can circumscribe divine activity. That is very important for us to appreciate. The prophetic critique insists there is no structure, there is no institution, that can circumscribe divine activity. God is not limited by what limits us. God is not limited by what circumscribes us or by what we want to circumscribe because we are limited. In fact, the Israelites' experience of God was precisely liberation from any system that tried to constrain God. However, we must remember that even the strong conviction of the freedom of God was interpreted by them from an androcentric perspective. In other words, there was no structure within which men functioned that could circumscribe divine activity. How then did the biblical author perceive a woman like Deborah, who did not conform to the accepted androcentric norms of the day? The biblical narrative indicates it did not accept it positively. The larger biblical context makes this very clear.

The book of Judges within which the story of Deborah is found, is filled with various stories and directives that developed over at least 200 years. However, the final form of the collection of stories in the book of Judges, the form that has come down to us, betrays a clear pro-monarchy point of view. In four places we read, quote, "In those days there was no king in Israel." We read that in Judges 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25. So there's no king in Israel. Two of those citations add the phrase, "all the people did what was right in their own eyes." Now we think that's wonderful. The biblical author didn't. In fact, the book ends with that phrase. This suggests that from the point of view of the pro-monarchic author, things were out of hand. For example, the Canticle of Deborah reports that several of the early tribes broke their covenant pledge to assist others in times of distress. And Barak, a military leader, had to be persuaded by a woman to fulfill his responsibility. Things were certainly out of hand. According to this ancient perspective, tribal organization had run its course. You know how bad things were? We even got a woman acting like this.

That form of government might have been appropriate, the tribal organization, might have been appropriate when the individual tribes first organized themselves into a federation. However, the united strength of neighboring peoples proved to be more than the federation could handle. Survival demanded the centralization of power and authority, and in the ancient world that meant some form of monarchy. The period of the judges was not looked upon with favor by the pro-monarchic biblical writer. So that means you look at these stories where she seems to be a heroine or a hero. We might see her that way, but the biblical writer does not see her that way in the overall story of the book. Deborah is a model for today.

What the ancient pro-monarchy biblical author would consider chaos, we today might refer to as a period of liminality. The old way of living has collapsed, but a new way has not yet taken shape. According to cultural anthropologists, liminality is characterized by ambiguity, by the dissolution of structures whether personal, political, social, or religious. This often results in confusion and

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY  
**Continuing Education Encore Events**

disorientation. This certainly describes Israel at the time of the judges. Forget about the story of Deborah. Just that whole period. Israel at the time of the judges, when “All the people did what was right in their own eyes.” No leadership. However, the state of liminality need not be viewed as totally negative. It can be a period of transition. In fact, that’s what anthropologists say. It is a period of transition. The old structures are collapsed but the new ones have not yet taken shape. An opportunity for transformation, an occasion for forging a new perspective out of the values of the past, such times of crisis are also times of possibility.

Today we find ourselves in circumstances in society, in politics, and in the Church that in many ways can only be described as dour. We suffer disillusionment, disorientation, sometimes even despair. It seems that “all the people do what is right in their own eyes.” They seem to place little or no value on the basic principles upon which society was established in the first place, principles such as integrity, frugality (there are people who don’t even know what that word means), frugality, cooperation, unselfishness. Many people think that we are lost and will not be able to find our way back. Perhaps that is part of the problem. Perhaps we should see these circumstances as a period of liminality. And to move back out of a period of liminality is to capitulate, to give up. I mean listen, how many times do we want to get back to where we were, forgetting that where we were got us to where we are. So if we look at it as a period of liminality that in no way takes away disorientation, disillusionment, but it sees it as a different... you know, a different way of perceiving. Perhaps we should view this disillusionment and disorientation as an opportunity for transition, for transformation, for forging a new perspective. If we are courageous enough to view our circumstances in this way, we must also be open to those who can offer new and creative ways of accomplishing this transition or transformation. We must be willing to accept anyone who might help us to forge a new perspective, even those who have been, traditionally in some way, been relegated to marginality. Here, Deborah is a model for us. Convinced that God was speaking through her and affirmed by the people who turned to her for her judgment, she ventured out into territory that was foreign to her, and doing so she became a savior of her people.

The fourth period, the time of the monarchy. Though the monarchy in Israel began with Saul, he was more like an all-embracing military leader than an administrator. Monarchy as an institution began with David. It’s widely held that he patterned his administrative organization after Egyptian institutions. This included judges, a chancellor, scribes, priests, and royal prophets. We find that in 2 Samuel 8:15. A standing army replaced the local tribal militia, and that changed the whole thing because a local militia defends their own land. A standing army has no connection to the land. It has a connection to the leader. It’s a very, very different understanding. So the standing army was replaced by local... replaced local tribal militia; heavy taxation followed. As was usually the case in complex administrative structures of the ancient world, the positions were held by men. However, that’s not to say that at times of crisis only men in these positions were consulted. At such times the people turned to whomever they thought had insight into the issue at hand.

The wise woman. The wisdom perspective of ancient Israel has been variously described as a humanistic outlook on life, an ideology for coping with reality, a search for the underlying principles of causality and order for the purpose of conforming to them, and an attempt to organize otherwise chaotic existence. The wisdom tradition is found in Proverbs, Job, Qoheleth or Ecclesiastes, in the Roman Catholic tradition Sirach or Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon. And then there are some wisdom Psalms. Some people also put the Song of Songs as a wisdom tradition or a wisdom story; it really is a *sui generis*. I mean, it’s a category all by itself. But the wisdom tradition is really concerned with learning from the experience of life; it’s very important, and it is universal.

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY  
**Continuing Education Encore Events**

All societies have a wisdom tradition. *A stitch in time saves nine* means the same thing across generations and across societies. And you learn that from experience. The primary source of wisdom is human experience. You know the old adage, *experience is the best teacher*. I think that's incorrect. I think experience is the only teacher. We learn either from our experience or someone else's. All of the "ologies," biology, sociology, theology are all collections of what our race has learned from experience, from experiment. Everything we know, we know from experience, human experience, again ours or someone else's. So the primary source of wisdom is human experience which has been reflected upon and learned from. That's what makes it wisdom. Experience is experience. But, you know, *there's no fool like an old fool* as they say. So experience... you know... to go up a blind alley simply means you went up a blind alley. To go up the same blind alley twice means you have not learned from experience. So to make a mistake does not mean you're not wise. To make the same mistake twice means you're not wise. This tradition insists... this is very important. This tradition, the wisdom tradition, insists that divine revelation is not the only way we come to know God. It claims we also encounter God through human experience, not in addition to human experience much less despite it. It's through human experience that we come to know God.

An instance recorded in 2 Samuel tells how Joab, a military commander in David's court, turns to a wise woman at a time of national emergency. This occurred during Absalom's exile. Absalom attempted to take the throne. Absalom is David's son... and attempted to take the throne from David. And when it didn't work, he exiled himself. So the incident occurred during Absalom's exile imposed by Absalom himself out of fear that his father David would avenge Absalom's murder of David's other sons. No wonder this makes good Hollywood. In this instance and this is 2 Samuel 14:1-17, the woman uses an analogy which she claims describes her own family crisis. She identifies herself as a widow with two sons. Now remember the, you know, the structure, the kinship structure. After one son killed the other, she faces the possibility of losing the second son through the prescribed punishment he must undergo. She comes before the king and states, "Thus they would quench my one remaining ember and leave to my husband neither name nor remnant in the face of the earth." The statement reflects two patriarchal concerns. Remembrance of a man is to be carried into the future, generation after generation by his offspring. And the second, a man's property should remain within the family. Normally, all of this was accomplished by sons.

The woman says nothing about the benefit that she will receive or lose depending upon the sentence of this son. So one son kills the other and then the murderer is to be put to death. She will have no sons; she will have no future; her husband will have no remembrance; and who knows what will happen to the family property. So she goes before the king and this is her plight. David recognizes the woman's plight and by executive command promises, quote, "As the Lord lives, not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground." With this story, which resulted in setting aside the son's sentence, the woman then draws lines of comparison with the situation involving the king's own rebellious son, almost as if after David promises the son will not be put to death, she says, gotcha! And then says... turns it around and uses what he says about her situation. She uses that to speak about the situation he faces with his son. The difference is, with her it was the family. With David, it is the nation. She convinces David that reconciliation with Absalom is imperative for the nation's welfare. The wisdom gleaned from her own life experience enables the king to see that sometimes the exact execution of the law can be unjust, and that circumstances often influence its applicability.

This wise woman not only possesses insight into principles that should be followed in the administration of law in her regard, but she is also able to bring that insight into other situations. Her personal experience helps her to see that good law must take into consideration the vagaries of life.

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY  
**Continuing Education Encore Events**

The wise woman as a model for today. Some people question the value of insight and the decisions that follow from the experience of women. They claim that they are too often based on passing emotion rather than steadfast reason as if emotion is untrustworthy and reason is always reliable. Such perspectives are not only outdated, they're also faulty. Emotion and rationality are universal human characteristics found in both women and men. I was always insulted when anyone thought they were complimenting me when they told me, *you drive like a man*. What an insult. As if women don't know how to drive. They're not based on gender, emotion and rationality. The importance of this biblical story is not found in the specifics of the woman's experience but in the insight that she gained from that experience. She may well have lived a very circumscribed life as most women in that patriarchal society did. And who doesn't? However, she lived that life deeply enough that she was able to apply her insights to the state of affairs of the nation. And doing so, she saved her people. It would be tragic if we turned away from insights of those people who are not part of the establishment, whether that establishment is religious, academic, political, whatever. This wise woman can challenge us to trust the genuine insights we have learned from life and to make them available to others when the opportunity presents itself.

Conclusion. It appears that at various stages of its history, ancient Israel enjoyed both spontaneity and flexibility. It was only at times of great stability that it relied on structures that were more specifically defined. It's interesting. We are more flexible when we're living in, you know, unstable times because we have to be flexible. We have to be spontaneous. These structures were usually borrowed from society at large, and they both developed and limited the community's possibilities. There is no such thing of church structure. It's always borrowed, whether it's borrowed from the empire... and an awful lot of our liturgical structure comes from... you know, it's imperial. When do men dress like that? Identification of the religious movement, which means the worship of the God of Israel, with its structural expression, whether it be the monarchy or the priesthood, was always challenged by prophetic critique.

Now we've [got to] be careful. I mean, women do not... being women does not automatically make us prophetic any more than being a man automatically makes us prophetic. We have to be careful, you know. To... criticize or challenge structure can simply be griping, not necessarily poetic or prophetic critique. So you have to be very careful. I mean, anybody can criticize structure. So the... both the monarchy and the priesthood were always challenged by prophetic critique.

The signs of the times and the religious tradition itself provided the stimulus for that critique which means we got a [to do] both. If we're going to think we can even begin prophetic critique, we've got to really have insight into what's going on in our world and not just, you know, what I want, but what's going on in our world. And we have to know what our tradition's possibilities are. Fidelity to those signs and to that tradition demands that we both engage in authentic critique and in renewal. This does not mean that practices followed during the biblical period should be repeated in contemporary society. It's not the practice that's important but the principle behind it.

The four examples discussed here demonstrate this. The creation accounts underscore the fundamental equality of the sexes and the richness that flows from the differences they manifest. Tamar is an example of audacity and ingenuity in overcoming unjustified obstacles. Deborah responds to the needs of the community, giving direction when and where it is called for. The wise woman relies on the insights she gained from life, using them for the benefit of the nation. Mary Magdalene comes from a long line of courageous and resourceful women who insisted on making their contribution to their community even when circumstances required that they employ unconventional

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY  
**Continuing Education Encore Events**

methods. They show that the needs of the people, not gender-determined roles, decide through whom God works, for the future and well-being of the community.

Thank you.