

# Unlikely Heroes

## WOMEN AS ISRAEL

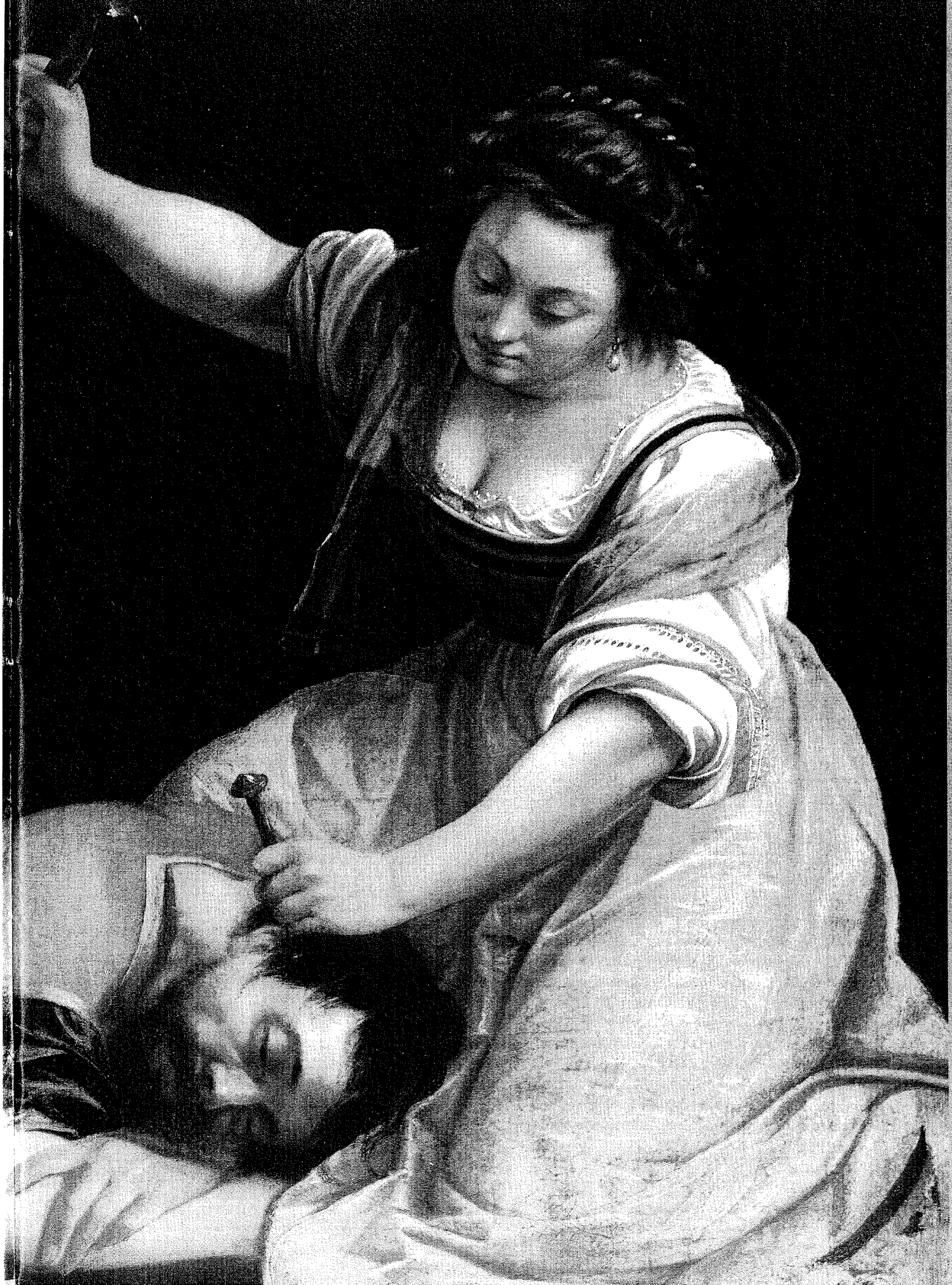
GARY A. RENDSBURG

Open your Bible at random and you will notice something striking: Female characters abound. And it's not simply a lot of women, it's a lot of strong women. These women are the antithesis of what we might expect from a patriarchal society. They are not passive, demure, timid and submissive, but active, bold, fearless and assertive. They are also not what we would expect based on contemporaneous Near Eastern literature, in which women generally do not play leading roles in the narrative.

In the Bible, the pattern begins with the first female character, who is much more active than her male counterpart. In Genesis 3, Eve "said," "saw," "took," "ate" and "gave" (Genesis 3:2-6)—whereas Adam is the subject of only one verb: "he ate" (Genesis 3:6).

This pattern continues until the end of the Hebrew Bible.





**PRECEDING PAGES:** As Sisera sleeps, Yael calmly and quietly hammers a tent peg into his temple, in this 1620 painting by Italian Renaissance artist Artemisia Gentileschi.

Yael's story is recounted in one of the earliest biblical texts: the Song of Deborah in Judges 5 (as well as in the prose account of the same event in Judges 4), in which the Israelites are under the domination of the Canaanite king Jabin of Hazor and his general, Sisera. Deborah and the Israelite general Barak lead the fight against the Canaanites, but it is Yael, a member of the tent-dwelling Kenite people, who has the ultimate triumph. When Sisera flees to her tent for safety, she lulls him to sleep with warm milk and then kills him with a tent peg.

**Why does the biblical author have a nomadic, foreign woman save Israel? Because the unexpected success of the marginal outsider, who one might think was among the weakest of society, best represents the emergence of Israel in Canaan.**

Here we find among the Writings, or *Ketuvim* (the last section of the Hebrew Bible; see chart p. 31), the Book of Ruth (not Boaz), the Book of Esther (not Mordecai), and the exquisite Song of Songs,\* in which a dominant, female voice leads the reader through sensual poetry.

Why are there so many strong women in the Bible? And why is it that so many of these heroines of ancient Israel—Hagar, Rahab, Yael and Ruth are the most prominent examples—are non-Israelite women?

Let us begin with the unlikely heroine of Judges 4-5: Yael, whose story (at least the poetic version related in Judges 5) is considered one of the oldest pieces of Israelite literature preserved in the Bible.\*\* A tent-dwelling Kenite (a desert group recently settled or in the process of settling down in the land of Canaan), Yael protects Israel from its enemy by hammering a tent peg into the head of the Canaanite general Sisera.

The episode follows a pattern that repeats throughout the Book of Judges: The Israelites are emerging in the land of Canaan, having gained a foothold in the central hill country. The experiences of Egypt and the Wilderness are behind them; the monarchy of David and Solomon lies in their future. As long as the Israelites worship only Yahweh, so the Book of Judges suggests, the people will live peacefully in their villages and encampments. But whenever the Israelites stray from this official teaching and begin to worship Canaanite gods and goddesses, God summons up an enemy to oppress them. In Judges 4-5, the enemy is Jabin, king of Hazor, the largest Canaanite city in the region. For 20 years, Jabin and his military might—including 900 chariots under Sisera's command—have been ruthlessly oppressing the Israelites. At last, the Israelites cry out to God for salvation and, in typical biblical fashion, their cry is answered with the appearance of heroic

\*See Robert Alter, "The Song of Songs: An Ode to Intimacy," *BR*, August 2002.

\*\*See Lawrence E. Stager, "The Song of Deborah," *Biblical Archaeology Review*, January/February 1989.

individuals—in this case, the prophetess and judge Deborah and the warrior Barak.

I call Barak a warrior, but the text portrays him more as a wimp. When Deborah bids him to lead the Israelite troops into battle, Barak responds: "If you will go with me, then I will go; and if you will not go with me, then I will not go" (Judges 4:8). Deborah counters: "I indeed will go with you, except that your glory will not be on the way that you go, for by the hand of a woman the Lord will deliver Sisera" (Judges 4:8).

The reader has every reason to believe that the woman referred to in this passage is Deborah; she's the only woman mentioned so far. But such an ending to the story would be flat literarily, and, as we shall see, it would not allow the author his† ultimate intention.

So it turns out that the woman is not Deborah at all, but Yael, whose husband, Heber, has a treaty alliance with Jabin. When the battle begins to turn against Sisera (okay, Barak must not have been a complete wimp, but of course he also had God on his side), Sisera flees on foot to the tent of Yael, expecting to find refuge there. But then the unexpected happens. When Sisera requests water, no doubt to revive himself, Yael gives him milk instead—a soporific, especially if it is the lukewarm milk that tent-dwelling bedouin drink. While Sisera sleeps, Yael grabs a tent peg in one hand and a mallet in the other, and she drives the peg into Sisera's temple. Barak appears within a few minutes in hot pursuit, but Sisera already is dead, killed by the hand of a woman.

Why is glory taken from Barak so that Sisera meets his death by the hand of a woman? And if it has to be a woman, why is it Yael, a non-Israelite tent-dwelling woman, rather than the Israelite heroine Deborah?

It is because Yael best represents the nation of Israel, even though she herself is not Israelite. Israel was a nation on the margins, a nation struggling to get underway, a nation without the natural gifts that descended on the people of Egypt with the Nile, Assyria with the Tigris and Babylonia with the Euphrates. Accordingly, in the Bible, it is the lowly people who represent Israel. Among the lowly are the tent-dwellers, and among the lowliest of the tent-dwellers are the female tent-dwellers, living on the margins of the margins of society.

Deborah, in the end, is just a literary foil. As prophetess and judge, she is simply too powerful to represent Israel.‡ In her place, lowly Yael will be remembered,

†Notwithstanding the remarkable presentation of women throughout the Bible, almost without doubt the authors responsible for the biblical material were men. It is true that in general, ancient Near Eastern literature, including the Bible, is anonymous, and therefore one rightly could argue that "he or she" is called for when referring to the author. But when we possess the names of scribes, as we do from ancient Egypt and ancient Mesopotamia, they are invariably men; with no evidence to the contrary, I assume the same is true of Israel.

‡See Ellis Easterly, "A Case of Mistaken Identity: The Judges in Judges Don't Judge," *BR*, April 1997; and Daniel I. Block, "Why Deborah's Different," *BR*, June 2001.

PHOTO BY JAN BRODSKY/COLLECTION GALERIE DER BILDENDEN KUNST, LITOMERICE, CZECH REPUBLIC



**RAHAB TELLS THE SPIES WHAT TO DO** in this crayon- and-ink drawing by Italian Giovanni Segantini (1858-1899). A Canaanite prostitute living on the edge of Jericho (her house is in the city wall), Rahab takes in the two Israelites Joshua sent to scout out the city and protects them. When the Canaanite king tracks the spies to Rahab's home, she hides them on her roof (the top of the city wall, shown here). She assures the spies that Jericho will surely fall because God has given the land to Israel (Joshua 2:9)—a report the spies bring back to Joshua.

Throughout the episode, Rahab has the upper hand—she is wiser and more resourceful than all the other characters in the story, including the Israelite spies. She also possesses a fine knowledge of Israel's history: She knows that the "Lord dried up the water of the Reed Sea," and she quotes the very song Moses and the Israelites sang beside the sea—a song the spies themselves should have known because they were there. As author Gary Rendsburg points out in the accompanying article, Rahab, like many other foreign women in the Bible, is more Israel than Israel.

in the words of the poet, as "the most blessed of women in tents" (Judges 5:24), a fitting heroine for Israel's national story and its collective destiny.

In the Book of Joshua, too, a lowly foreigner comes to represent Israel: Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute.

In Joshua 2, the Israelites are encamped across the Jordan River, ready to begin their assault on the land of Canaan. Joshua, a capable military man, sends two spies to reconnoiter the city of Jericho. The two spies

set out and lodge in the prostitute's house, but they are immediately discovered by the Canaanite king (Joshua 2:1-2). Only the quick-thinking Rahab can save them. She hides the two spies on her roof and convinces the king's men that the spies have already left the city and returned to their camp.

Having thus gained a minute, Rahab turns to the two Israelite men and proclaims, "I know that the Lord has given you the land, for dread of you has fallen upon us, for all the residents of the land fade before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the waters of the Reed Sea for you when you left Egypt, and what you did to the two Amorite kings across the Jordan, Sihon and Og, how you devastated them" (Joshua 2:9-10). It is a remarkable speech, in that the Canaanite prostitute demonstrates great familiarity with typical Israelite proclamations about Yahweh and about Israel's national history. She even quotes—almost verbatim—that most ancient of poems found in the Torah, the song that Moses and the Israelites sing beside the Sea of Reeds in the Book of Exodus: "All the residents of Canaan fade, dread and fear fall upon them" (Exodus 15:15-16).

Rahab asks that when the Israelites return to conquer Jericho, she and her family be spared. The men swear to this, and then Rahab, who lives within the city wall, lowers the men through a window in her house so that they don't need to pass through the city



**SARAH CONSORTS WITH ABRAHAM** outside Pharaoh's palace in this 1875 painting by Giovanni Muzzioli from the Museo Civico in Modena, Italy. In Genesis 12, Abraham and Sarah flee to Egypt because of a famine in Canaan. Once there, Abraham fears that Sarah is so beautiful, someone will murder him in order to take her. He asks Sarah to pose as his sister. She does, and she is soon taken to live in the palace as Pharaoh's wife. When a series of plagues strike Egypt, Pharaoh realizes that he has been tricked and he summons Abraham for questioning: "Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her as my wife? Now, here is your wife; take her and begone!" (Genesis 12:19). Sarah and Abraham return to Israel via the Negev desert.

The key to interpreting this unsettling episode is to remember that the woman—in this case, Sarah—represents Israel. Her sojourn in Egypt presages the events in Exodus: A famine leads Israel-Sarah to enter Egypt, where Israel-Sarah is taken into captivity; after suffering a series of plagues, Pharaoh casts her out and she travels home through the wilderness.

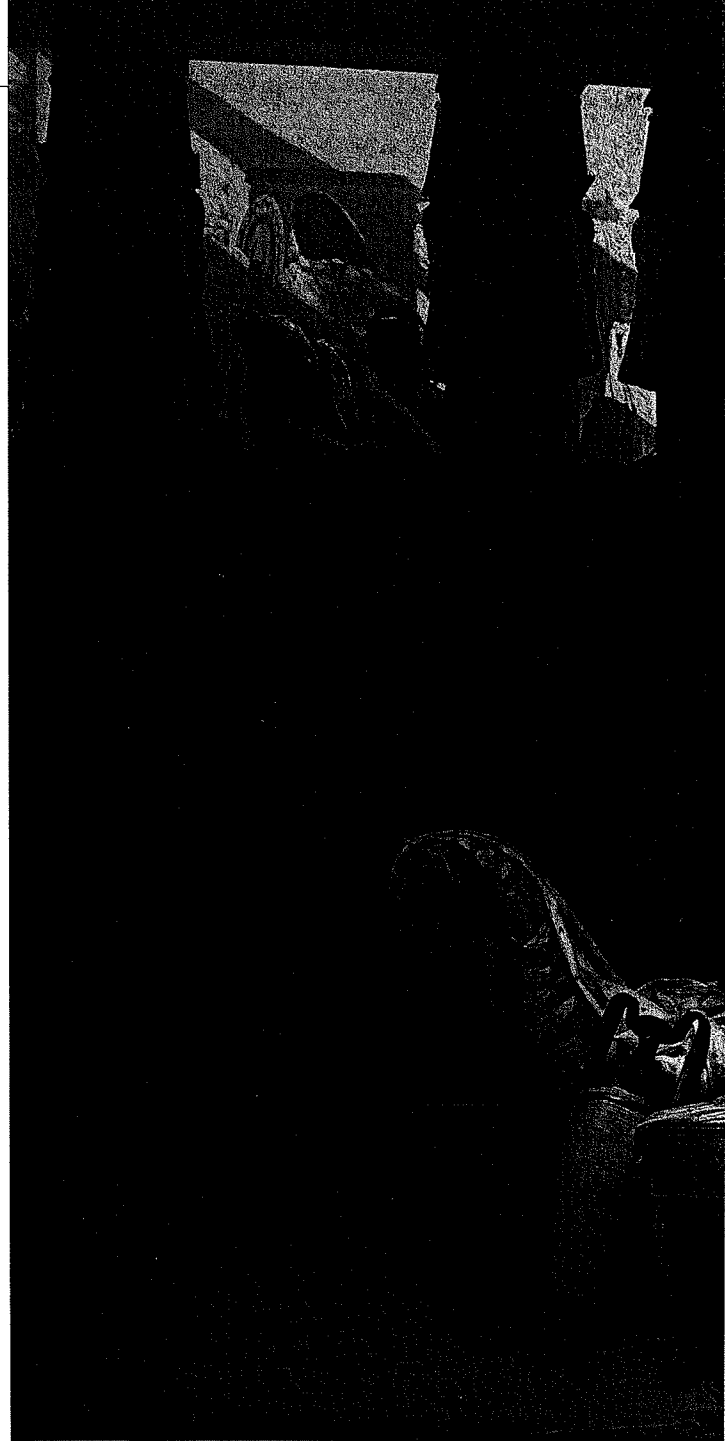
gate. The spies return to Joshua and report to him all that has transpired, adding, "The Lord has given the entire land into our hand, and indeed all the residents of the land fade before us" (Joshua 2:24).

Compared with Rahab, the spies are bunglers. They are found out on day one, they owe their lives to the quicker-witted prostitute, and when they return to Joshua they transmit little or no information of any military value. All they can do is quote Rahab to the effect that the residents of the land melt before the Israelites—a passage that, ironically, they were familiar with because they were part of the group that originally recited (or heard) the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15! Furthermore, so ignoble are the spies we never even learn their names.

The incompetence of the spies only highlights Rahab's capability. Just as the glory that should have been Barak's was transferred to Yael, the glory that should have been the spies' was reassigned to Rahab. Once more the Bible has taken someone from the margins of society and promoted that person to heroic status. Once more, this promotion comes at the cost of male military heroics. Once more, Israel is identified not with the strong and the mighty, but with the weak and the lowly. And there is no one lower than Rahab, the non-Israelite whore.\*

Some seemingly minor details of Rahab's story highlight the apparent lowliness and true grandeur of this Canaanite prostitute. First, her house is located in the city wall (Joshua 2:15), which suggests that Rahab lived not just on the social margins like most prostitutes, but on the very physical margins of the city as well. Second, the text states that Rahab lowered the spies "through the window" (Joshua 2:15). These words appear elsewhere in the Bible but always with women of high social standing, either aristocratic or royal.

\*See Frank Anthony Spina, "Reversal of Fortune," BR, August 2001.



Michal, daughter of King Saul, wife of King David, helps her husband escape from the palace by lowering him "through the window" (1 Samuel 19:12); in another scene she views David "through the window" as he celebrates the arrival of the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6:16). Jezebel, the queen of the northern kingdom of Israel, is looking "through the window" of her palace as the usurper king Jehu arrives to seek her death (2 Kings 9:30).\*\* Lady Wisdom peers "through the window" to view a street scene below (Proverbs 7:6). Even in the story of Yael and Sisera in Judges 5, we read of General Sisera's

\*\*See Janet Howe Gaines, "How Bad Was Jezebel?" BR, October 2000.



THE ART ARCHIVE/MUSEO CIVICO, MODENA, ITALY/DAGLI ORTI (A)

mother, awaiting her son's return from battle, wondering why his chariot delays; she looks for him "through the window" (Judges 5:28). Princess Michal, Queen Jezebel, Lady Wisdom, General Sisera's mother—all these women are aristocratic or royal. Their limited view of the world "through the window" reflects the reality of ancient times, when women of high social rank were not seen outside the palace. By using this phrase with Rahab, the writer suggests that Rahab too is royal and aristocratic. God has taken the lowly woman, the whore, and elevated her to the highest level of society. The same is true of Israel: God has taken the lowly, the people of Israel, and elevated them to be his covenant partner.

Israel saw itself not only as the people of lowest rank, however, but also as the ultimate "other." Israel was a unique people in the ancient world, forging a new religious movement centered around the worship of only one God, a God who could not be depicted as an idol or an image, a God who was not associated with nature. These concepts were revolutionary in the ancient world, and the biblical record makes it clear that Israel understood its unique status among the nations of the world. With a theology such as this, Israel was the ultimate "other," both in reality and in its self-perception. In its literature, accordingly, heroics are attributed not only to the lowly, but to the lowly of the other. That is why Yael the Kenite and Rahab



**AS HAGAR WEEPS** in the wilderness, Ishmael looks to his mother for relief, but she cannot bear to face him: "Let me not look upon the death of the child," she cries in Genesis 21:16. French artist Jean Charles Cazin (1841-1901) captures the bleakest moment in Hagar's sad story. There is no hint yet of the angel who will lead Hagar and Ishmael to a well of fresh water.

Like Sarah before her, Hagar is a metaphor for Israel. Her desperate travails represent Israel's own wilderness experience, where time and again, in the Books of Exodus and Numbers, the Israelites despair for water, which in turn is provided by a compassionate God (see, for example, Exodus 15:22-25).

the Canaanite are used to represent Israel.

Once we realize that these lesser known women can and do represent Israel, we can interpret some of the more familiar events in the cycle of stories concerning Abraham, the first patriarch, and the two women in his life: his primary wife Sarah, and Sarah's maidservant, Hagar, who in time becomes Abraham's second—and secondary—wife.

Twice in the Bible we read of a rather disquieting action by Abraham. In two separate scenes in Genesis (12:10-20 and 20:2-18), Abraham asks his beautiful wife Sarah to pose as his sister, not his wife, so that a foreign king will not slay him in order to have her. The ruse works; Abraham's life is not threatened. But by saving his own neck, he places Sarah in danger—or at least in a very uncomfortable position. Both kings mistake Sarah for a single woman and take her into the royal harem.

Any sensitive reader will sympathize with Sarah: She is the one who is mistreated, the one who has no voice in the story—indeed she never utters a word in either episode. She is the lowly one.

Is Sarah then, like Rahab and Yael, a lowly representative of Israel? A close reading of the first episode, which takes place in the palace of the Pharaoh of Egypt, suggests this is the case.

The episode begins with Abraham (here still called Abram) and Sarah (Sarai) living in Canaan during a famine: "There was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land" (Genesis 12:10). As they arrive in Egypt, Abraham asks Sarah to pass as his sister, with the explanation that she is beautiful, and thus, "they will kill me, and you they will let live" (Genesis 12:12). When Pharaoh's men see how beautiful she is, they praise her to Pharaoh, and "the woman was taken into the palace" (Genesis 12:15). In return, the palace showers Abraham with gifts of sheep, oxen, asses and camels. But things don't go well in the palace: "The Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai" (Genesis 12:17). When Pharaoh realizes the wrong that has been committed, he summons Abraham before him and instructs him to take Sarah and go. Pharaoh chides Abraham: "What is this you have done to me? ... Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her

as my wife? Now, here is your wife; take her and begone!" (Genesis 12:18-20). The story concludes with Abraham and Sarah leaving Egypt, traveling through the Negev and returning to the land of Israel.

A famine followed by descent into Egypt, plagues and an expulsion by Pharaoh and finally freedom to return to Canaan: This is a mini-version of the Exodus story, in which Abraham's and Sarah's descendants, the people of Israel as a whole, migrate to Egypt to escape yet another famine.

In this miniature version of the Exodus account, it is Sarah, not Abraham, who represents the people of Israel. She is the lowly one who is acted upon by the power players surrounding her. She is imprisoned in Egypt and finally set free. The disturbing event in Abraham and Sarah's story makes sense when we recognize the oppressed, lowly woman as representative of Israel, and the episode as a parallel to the Exodus account.

Sarah is a bit of an exception to our rule, because she is not a low-status foreigner like Rahab and Yael, but rather the matriarch of Israel and a woman of some rank. We can explain this difference, however, along the following lines. I would suggest that it is specifically Sarah's role as the *first* of the matriarchs in Genesis that makes her so well suited for symbolizing the Israelites enslaved in Egypt. The slavery and Exodus narrative is the foundation story that defines Israel and that gives Israel its core identity; and thus it is only fitting that Sarah of all individuals should come to represent Israel in so significant a manner, even if she is not the lowly of the lowly *à la* Rahab and Yael.

When Hagar enters the picture, though, we return to the familiar motif of the low-ranking foreign woman. The person who had been the mistreated one, namely Sarah, now becomes the abusive party, as she in turn mistreats Hagar, her servant woman, not once but twice.

We first meet Hagar in Genesis 16. After years of marriage, Sarah still has not become pregnant. To resolve the situation, and following ancient Near Eastern legal custom, Sarah presents her handmaiden Hagar to Abraham to be his second, and secondary, wife. Hagar immediately becomes pregnant, leading to strife between Sarah and Hagar. Sarah complains to Abraham that Hagar no longer views Sarah as her mistress; Abraham reminds Sarah that she is her legal superior and that she can do with Hagar as she wishes. "Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her" (Genesis 16:6).

It's easy to understand why Hagar might choose the wilderness over this hostile domestic environment. But in the desert, an angel of the Lord appears to Hagar and speaks tenderly to her, informing her that God has

*continues on page 52*



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**Unlikely Heroes***continued from page 23*

paid heed to her suffering, that she will have a son, that he will be a noble man,\* and that he in turn will have many descendants. "Go back to your mistress," the angel urges Hagar, "humble yourself under her hand" (Genesis 16:9). She does, and she gives birth to Ishmael.

We don't hear about Hagar again until Genesis 21, when once again she inspires the wrath of Sarah. This episode commences with the birth of Isaac, Sarah and Abraham's son. The strife between Sarah and Hagar is now transferred to the next generation—at least in Sarah's eyes, as she senses that Ishmael is mocking or teasing Isaac.\*\* For Sarah, the situation is untenable. She demands that Abraham remove Hagar and Ishmael from the household. At first Abraham resists, but God replies, "Do not be distressed over the boy or your handmaid; whatever Sarah says to you, listen to her voice; because through Isaac your offspring will be called" (Genesis 21:12). So Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael forth, with the basic supplies of bread and water. Before long, the two travelers run out of water, at which point Hagar cannot stand to even look at her son: "Let me not look upon the death of the child," she wails (Genesis 21:16). Just at this point, however, an angel of God calls to Hagar once more from heaven. And "God opened her eyes, she saw a well of water, and she went and she filled the skin with water, and she gave the boy to drink" (Genesis 21:19).

What later Israelite could read these stories and not see Israel's own experience in the life of Hagar: a woman mistreated, a woman alone in the desert, a woman with no water to feed her child, and yet, God finds this woman in the desert, speaks tenderly to her, and provides water? All of these motifs are to be found in Israel's own desert experience, the long narrative that stretches from Exodus 16 through the end of the Book of Numbers. In the poetic language of the prophet Jeremiah, "the people who escaped the sword found grace in the wilderness" (Jeremiah 31:2): thus Israel, thus Hagar.

In the first set of stories in Genesis that

\*I refer to Genesis 16:12 *pere' 'adam* "a wild ass of a man," usually understood as an insult but in truth to be understood in very positive terms. The wild ass, or onager, is a noble beast, roaming the wilderness, undomesticated, with no human as his master.

\*\*The Hebrew word is the general word for "play," but it has a wide range of meanings, from expressions of joy to sexual overtones as well. See Jonathan Kirsch, "What Did Sarah See?" BR, October 1998.

we looked at, in which Abraham and Sarah are the focus of our attention, it is Sarah who represents Israel. In the second set of stories, in which Sarah and Hagar contend, it is now Hagar who symbolizes Israel. Note, moreover, that whereas God speaks to Hagar twice in extended and endearing terms, throughout the entire Abraham cycle God speaks to Sarah only once, and this is a curt reprimand—"no, but you did lie" (Genesis 18:15; only three words in the Hebrew)—after Sarah denies that she laughed when God informed Abraham that she would bear a child at an advanced age.

Hagar fits nicely with Yael and Rahab as yet another instance of a non-Israelite woman of low social rank serving to represent Israel in one way or another. Yet, there is a distinction between Yael and Rahab, on the one hand, and Hagar, on the other. Yael and Rahab are the prototypes of marginal women rising to the fore as heroines of Israel. Hagar is the prototype of the lowly woman maltreated by her superiors, representative of Israel. Quite possibly the difference between these literary portrayals is the following: Yael and Rahab, both of whom are central to the Joshua-Judges narrative concerning Israel's emergence in the land of Canaan, represent Israel's ability to overcome conflict with external powers. Hagar, a character in the Torah's narrative, by contrast, points to a different concern—lowly Israel as God's covenant partner.

We find another example of a low-ranking woman in the Torah representing Israel oppressed in the story of Judah and Tamar, in Genesis 38.

Tamar's story appears as an interlude in the larger narration of Joseph's journey to Egypt, with the focus here not on Joseph, but rather on his brother Judah. Judah's first-born son, Er, has married a woman named Tamar. We are given no other information about her, only her name. Accordingly, we cannot for certain claim that she is a woman of low rank, but the lack of additional information suggests she probably is.

After they are married, Er does something bad in the eyes of God—we are not told what exactly—and he dies as punishment for his misdeed. According to the ancient custom of levirate marriage, by which the brother of a childless man was required to unite with his sister-in-law in order to produce offspring, which then would be accounted as the son of the deceased (see Deuteronomy 25:5-6), it now is incumbent upon Er's younger brother Onan to impregnate Tamar. Onan, however, knowing that the child of this union would not be his technically, commits *coitus interruptus*—he spills his seed on the ground

(thus our English term "onanism"). For this heinous offense, he too is zapped by God. Now it is the duty of Judah's third son, Shelah, to perform the levirate marriage. But Judah, seeing that Tamar was a bad-luck charm to his sons, withholds Shelah from her, claiming that Shelah is too young and that Tamar should return to her father's house and wait for him to grow up.

Tamar is not a free agent at this point. Legally, she is still bound to the family of Judah, in particular to his son Shelah. She is not free to remarry: Such an act would constitute adultery.

So, as time passes, and Tamar sees that Judah has no intention of having her unite with Shelah, she takes matters into her own hand. She disguises herself as a prostitute, stations herself at a spot where she knows she will encounter Judah, seduces him and makes love to him, without being recognized. Before performing intercourse, however, Tamar exacts Judah's promise of payment of one goat, and takes possession of Judah's staff, seal and cord as a pledge until the goat can be delivered. After the quick encounter, the two go their separate ways. Judah later tries to pay the pledge by having a friend deliver the goat, but the friend is unable to find the prostitute. Of course, Tamar has removed the garb of a prostitute and returned to her normal mode of dress, so she goes unrecognized.

Tamar is pregnant by Judah, however, and three months later, she begins to show. When Judah learns his daughter-in-law is pregnant, he proclaims, "Bring her out, and let her be burnt!" (Genesis 38:24). So Tamar "was brought out, and she sent (word) to her father-in-law, saying, 'by the man to whom these belong I am pregnant,' and she said, 'recognize please, to whom belong this seal, cord, and staff.' And Judah recognized (them), and he said, 'she is right, I am not, because I did not give her to Shelah my son'" (Genesis 38:25-26).

In the story of Hagar, the harmed woman of low social status requires divine intervention and protection. In the story of Tamar, we note something quite different: Here the harmed woman acts on her own to gain the better of a man of power and high social status. But Tamar does not get the better of Judah only; indeed there is much more at stake here. For we must consider this episode within the larger context of Judah's family history reaching back several generations.

Tamar's deception of Judah is actually the third in a series of deceptions. The sequence begins with Jacob deceiving his blind father Isaac in order to procure the blessing that was intended for Esau (Genesis 27). The physical props of this

deception, too, were a goat and clothing: Jacob used the goat skins to cover his smooth arms and neck; he used the goat meat to serve to Isaac as a meal, and he wore Esau's clothing so that he would bear his brother's scent. A generation later, Jacob gets his comeuppance when he in turn is deceived by his sons. Once again the props are a goat and clothing. Jacob's sons sell their brother Joseph as a slave, take his "amazing technicolor" garment, slaughter a goat, dip the garment in the goat blood and then present the bloodied coat to Jacob as evidence of Joseph's death. The ringleader of the brothers is Judah, and thus it is only fitting that in the very next chapter, Genesis 38, it is Judah who is now duped with a goat and clothing—this time, a prostitute's dress.

The difference is that this time, with Tamar, the series of deceptions ends. It will not continue into the next generation because Judah is forced to admit his wrong in the presence of the mistreated Tamar. Thus, Tamar's ability to take matters into her own hands and to think quickly and independently gives her control not only over Judah, but, I would argue, over Jacob a generation earlier as well. The biblical author uses a woman—a low-ranking woman—to teach a theological lesson: The duper will be duped. Tamar serves as God's agent here, exacting punishment on the sinful male dominators and tricksters of the Book of Genesis.

And who is Tamar but Israel, of course: the nation of low status that succeeds not through power and might, which it lacks, but through quick wit and moral rectitude.

Why are there so many women in the Bible? Because these women best represent the various aspects of a greater entity, the people of Israel and their history. Think of Ruth, a foreigner, a widowed and impoverished woman who rises from low station to her position as a woman of virtue and ancestress of David.\* Remember Dina, Jacob's daughter, unloved by her father, without a voice, without emotion, without sympathy (Genesis 34), so subordinate that she is never allowed to speak or to rise in station. Think of Moses' mother, hiding her son in a basket, an action that would lead to the eventual salvation of the people of Israel.\*\* Where was Moses' father in all of this? And think not least of Yael, Rahab, Tamar, Hagar and Sarah, and you will come to understand how they truly are unlikely heroes. BR

\*Adele Berlin, "Ruth: Little Book, Big Theme," BR, August 1996.

\*\*Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Forgotten Heroines of the Exodus," BR, December 1997.