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

presented by
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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 KheWithe and New past , the topic , women in the Bible , 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.

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word s, I am extremely interested in, “W hat does it mean today ?”

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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

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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't let 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 religious ancestors portrayed the movements of a nomadic people who might have been caught up in one of the earliest trans migrations of the ancient world were forced to face , namely the precariousness of the group's survival. This highlights the essential role of the woman's active potential played in that society. That, by that 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.

was guarded in that way, not for men. While it's in the ancient world,

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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 ... matro s... and arche 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.

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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.

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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

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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.”

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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

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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

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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 c

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

Thank you.

