

WOMAN'S INDISPENSABLE ROLE IN SALVATION HISTORY

Pope John Paul II

The Old Testament presents the figures of some extraordinary women who, prompted by God's Spirit, played an active part in Israel's history

The role of certain Old Testament women in the salvation of God's chosen people was the theme of the Holy Father's catechesis at the General Audience Of Wednesday, 27 March. The Pope considered their indispensable role as a prefiguring of Mary's mission in salvation history. Here is a translation of his talk, which was the 15th in the series on the Blessed Virgin and was given in Italian.

1. The Old Testament holds up for our admiration some extraordinary women who, impelled by the Spirit of God, share in the struggles and triumphs of Israel or contribute to its salvation. Their presence in the history of the people is neither marginal nor passive: they appear as true protagonists of salvation history. Here are the most significant examples.

After the crossing of the Red Sea, the sacred text emphasizes the initiative of a woman inspired to make this decisive event a festive celebration: "Then Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and dancing. And Miriam sang to them: 'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea'" (Ex 15:20-21).

This mention of feminine enterprise in the context of a celebration stresses not only the importance of woman's role, but also her particular ability for praising and thanking God.

Positive contribution of women to salvation history

2. The action of the prophetess Deborah, at the time of the Judges, is even more important. After ordering the commander of the army to go and gather his men, she guarantees by her presence the success of Israel's army, predicting that another woman, Jael, will kill their enemy's general.

To celebrate the great victory, Deborah also sings a long canticle praising Jael's action: "Most blessed of women be Jael, ... of tent-dwelling women most blessed" (Jgs 5:24). In the New Testament this praise is echoed in the words Elizabeth addresses to Mary on the day of the Visitation: "Blessed are you among women ..." (Lk 1:42).

The significant role of women in the salvation of their people, highlighted by the figures of Deborah and Jael, is presented again in the story of another prophetess named Huldah, who lived at the time of King Josiah.

Questioned by the priest Hilkiah, she made prophecies announcing that forgiveness would be shown to the king who feared the divine wrath. Huldah thus becomes a messenger of mercy and peace (cf. 2 Kgs 22:14-20).

3. The Books of Judith and Esther, whose purpose is to idealize the positive contribution of woman to the history of the chosen people, present—in a violent cultural context—two women who win victory and salvation for the Israelites.

The Book of Judith, in particular, tells of a fearsome army sent by Nebuchadnezzar to conquer Israel. Led by Holofernes, the enemy army is ready to seize the city of Bethulia, amid the desperation of its inhabitants, who, considering any resistance to be useless, ask their rulers to surrender. But the city's elders, who in the absence of immediate aid declare themselves ready to hand Bethulia over to the enemy, are rebuked by Judith for their lack of faith as she professes her complete trust in the salvation that comes from the Lord.

After a long invocation to God, she who is a symbol of fidelity to the Lord, of humble prayer and of the intention to remain chaste goes to Holofernes, the proud, idolatrous and dissolute enemy general.

Left alone with him and before striking him, Judith prays to Yahweh, saying: "Give me strength this day, O Lord God of Israel!" (Jdt 13:7). Then, taking Holofernes' sword, she cuts off his head.

Here too, as in the case of David and Goliath, the Lord used weakness to triumph over strength. On this occasion, however, it was a woman who brought victory: Judith, without being held back by the cowardice and unbelief of the people's rulers, goes to Holofernes and kills him, earning the gratitude and praise of the High Priest and the elders of Jerusalem. The latter exclaimed to the woman who had defeated the enemy: "You are the exaltation of Jerusalem, you are the great glory of Israel, you are the great pride of our nation! You have done all this single-handed; you have done great good to Israel, and God is well pleased with it. May the Almighty Lord bless you for ever!" (Jdt 15:9-10).

4. The events narrated in the Book of Esther occurred in another very difficult situation for the Jews. In the kingdom of Persia, Haman, the king's superintendent, decrees the extermination of the Jews. To remove the danger, Mardocai, a Jew living in the citadel of Susa, turns to his niece Esther, who lives in the king's palace where she has attained the rank of queen. Contrary to the law in force, she presents herself to the king without being summoned, thus risking the death penalty, and she obtains the revocation of the extermination decree. Haman is executed, Mordocai comes to power and the Jews delivered from menace, thus get the better of their enemies.

Judith and Esther both risk their lives to win the salvation of their people. The two interventions, however, are quite different: Esther does not kill the enemy but, by playing the role of mediator, intercedes for those who are threatened with destruction.

Holy Spirit sketches Mary's role in human salvation

5. This intercessory role is later attributed to another female figure, Abigail, the wife of Nabal, by the First Book of Samuel. Here too, it is due to her intervention that salvation is once again achieved.

She goes to meet David, who has decided to destroy Nabal's family, and asks forgiveness for her husband's sins. Thus she delivers his house from certain destruction (1 Sm 25).

As can be easily noted, the Old Testament tradition frequently emphasizes the decisive action of women in the salvation of Israel, especially in the writings closest to the coming of Christ. In this way the Holy Spirit, through the events connected with Old Testament women, sketches with ever greater precision the characteristics of Mary's mission in the work of salvation for the entire human race.

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