

# WOMEN STORYTELLERS IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

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Something of a paradigm shift has been in the making for a while in biblical studies. A future shape has yet to jell. The old historical-critical analysis has not been generating new life for a long time.<sup>1</sup> Other approaches have not so far struck lasting root. The interaction of developmental (cf. diachronic) reading and interpretational (cf. synchronic) reading is under way, but far from any agreed integration. A resolution of tensions between critical and literary approaches is still on the far horizon. The factors involved in any shift are complex; among them, the often competing needs of faith communities, universities, and so many competent individuals. One element in the total equation is surely scholarly assumptions about the nature of much biblical narrative text.

Assumptions are unavoidable. We live with them all the time. Like automatic routines, they help simplify life and eliminate the overburden of decisions to be faced at every turn. Like routines, assumptions can be dangerous; they can trap us in ruts we do not even realize. Those we are least aware of can be the most dangerous. Assumptions must be reexamined regularly; the outgrown need to be replaced.<sup>2</sup>

This note is about an assumption current in biblical studies that needs reexamination and replacement. The assumption concerns the gender of tellers of stories in ancient Israel. There are three texts that are good evidence for the assumption that storytellers in ancient Israel included women as a matter of course.

<sup>1</sup>Herbert Hahn's comment was made over half a century ago. "The conclusion seems to be unavoidable that the higher criticism has long since passed the age of constructive achievement" (*The Old Testament in Modern Research* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966; original, 1954] 41).

<sup>2</sup>One of the great values of Susan Niditch's recent book, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996) is that it seeks to bring to the surface some of our unconscious assumptions about literature and ancient Israel. Undoubtedly, some will feel that assumptions of little importance have been caricatured. Yet even caricature serves to challenge; and given what we know today of ancient Israel, it is time to reexamine and challenge assumptions.

A recent study building on Niditch's work is Raymond E. Person, Jr., "The Ancient Israelite Scribe as Performer," *JBL* 117 (1998) 601-9.

## STORYTELLERS IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

There are stories in the Bible; it is assumed there were storytellers. We know almost nothing about them. Their belonging to something akin to a medieval guild has been thought probable, but there is a paucity of evidence for it.<sup>3</sup> Until now, most people considered it a safe assumption that storytellers in ancient Israel were normally men. Three little texts in out of the way places suggest that it is not a safe assumption any longer. Eighty-year-old Barzillai lists the pleasures of court life as food, drink, and “the voice of singing men and singing women” (2 Sam 19:35, MT v. 36). Among the royal pleasures, Qohelet lists “singers, both men and women” (Qoh 2:8). According to the Chronicler, King Josiah rated a mention in the laments of “all the singing men and singing women” following his death (2 Chron 35:25). The same pair of words is used in all three texts: שָׂרִים וְשָׂרוֹת. They are not to be confused with the markedly different terms used for the male and female temple singers (מְשַׁרְרֵי וּמְשַׁרְרֹת).

It is an assumption we make that these palace singers were among the storytellers of Israel, whether their stories were told or sung. It is not unlikely. In that case, we have evidence for the existence of Israel’s storytellers and for their being both men and women. Presumably the palace performers were at the top of their profession; presumably then other practitioners existed elsewhere in Israelite society.<sup>4</sup> One clear example in the biblical text would be the “wise woman” hired by Joab in 2 Samuel 14. For the job envisaged, she needs to be unknown to David and a skilled storyteller. In the narrative, when the king intervenes suspecting Joab’s influence, she switches flawlessly into a polished piece of political flattery. A professional storyteller would fit the bill perfectly. There may be several reasons for using a woman in the role, but the parallel is with the king and his son; the part could have been played by a man.

The gender of the storyteller need not impact on the gender bias of the storytelling. Storytellers earned their living by satisfying their patrons. In a male-dominated society, that might not have left much place for reflection on the lot of most women.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Cyrus H. Gordon, *Before the Bible* (London: Collins, 1962) 37-38; see also Gunkel, *Genesis*, 3rd. ed., xxxi. For a survey of wisdom and women across the ancient Near East, see *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, edited by J. G. Gammie and L. G. Perdue (Winona Lake: Eisenbraun’s, 1990).

<sup>4</sup>Note two lines of uncertain meaning in Judg 5:10-11, “Tell of it ... to the sound of musicians at the watering places, there they repeat the triumphs of the LORD.”