

Jeroboam's Wife: The Enduring Contributions of the Old Testament's Least Known Women

Robin Gallaher Branch

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Approaching Old Testament narratives from the canonical perspective, Robin Gallaher Branch retells the stories of seven female characters who appear briefly in the Bible but whose contributions are considered unforgettable because not only did they change the course of history, their brief mention provides significant insight into the major characters with whom they are associated. The Bible mentions the names of three of the women – Miriam, the “pint-sized heroine” (p. 28); Rizpah who started out as “a pawn in the great game of kings” (p. 36) but ended up a silent activist (p. 60); and Athaliah, “daughter of a king, sister of a king, wife of a king, mother of a king” and later a queen in her own right (p. 159). The other four, the Wise Woman of Abel Beth Maacah, the Wife of Jeroboam, the Widow of Zarepath, and the Israelite Slave Girl (in 2 Kings 5) remain anonymous. Notably, some of the anonymous women are also silent e.g. Jeroboam's wife, while the others have speaking roles e.g. the Wise Woman of Abel.

In a readable, racy and riveting style, Branch uncovers the lives of these otherwise obscure women by drawing attention to the historical settings and the other characters in their stories as well as the narrative strategies and tools which the biblical narrator employed to memorialize their lives. One of such tools is persuasion, which is used by Miriam, who is described as an “able communicator” (p. 27) or by the Wise Woman of Abel (pp. 69-70). Another common tool is the use of contrasts e.g., Athaliah's character as a wicked and murderous queen is portrayed in a way that contrasts sharply with that of Jehosheba and Jehoiada who both saved little Joash's life. However, one striking narrative tool that is hard to ignore in all the narratives examined is the use of silence – dominating and often awkward silence – on the part of those characters already textually muzzled, on the part of the narrator who refuses to divulge certain information, or even on the part of God who is sometimes absent in the stories.

In *Jeroboam's Wife*, Branch demonstrates an adept grasp of Scriptures by means of copious intertextual references while at the same time drawing inspiration from extra-biblical sources especially rabbinic commentaries and Aggadah literatures. In nine chapters (excluding the introduction and conclusion), and over fifty pages of endnotes, the author convincingly establishes that “importance is not necessarily measured by the amount of textual space allocated to a character based on his or her social status and gender” (p. 172). She shows that the seven women have been able to hold out their own in spite of the terse mention they have been accorded in the narratives.

That the book is written in excellent language and with much erudition cannot be ignored. However, one is left wondering whether the introduction of some modern

categories in the analyses of the texts can be sustained. For instance, in the case of Jeroboam's wife, the writer argues that there is a strong possibility that Jeroboam was an abusive husband who must have subdued his wife partly through physical violence (pp. 99-102). Does that inference not appear a little far-fetched if it is considered that, there is not a single instance in the Old Testament in which a man physically assaulted his wife? Again, in the chapter on the Widow of Zarephath, there seems to be more to say for Elijah than for the widow while the two chapters and the many more pages on Rizpah would place her as the center focus of the book rather Jeroboam's wife after whom the book is named. Moreover, considering that in line with the biblical narrator, Branch also portrays Athaliah in a negative light, one would wonder what "enduring contributions" Athaliah made that secured her a place with the other six women who are more or less regarded as political saviors of sort.

The author's evangelistic thrust is discernible in the *Questions for Further Reflection* at the end of each chapter, which makes the book suitable not only for the academic but for the lay reader as well. In a situation where there is a clear dearth of literature on many female biblical characters, this refreshing and well-textured book deserves a warm welcome!