

New Light On the Bible's Wickedest Women

Potiphar's Wife, the Cruel Egyptian "Vamp"; Jezebel, the Revengeful Mischief Maker; and Rahab, Who Redeemed a Life of Shame by One Noble Deed



Rahab barring the door to the King of Jericho's messengers while Joshua's two spies ascend to the hiding place she has prepared for them on the roof of her probably disreputable inn

(From the painting by Frederick R. Pickersgill)

ONE of the chief reasons why the Bible is such a remarkable book and continues to be of such enduring helpfulness through generation after generation is the frankness with which it deals with all phases of human life and conduct.

Its exposure of the vices and crimes of the sinner is as merciless as its praise of the virtues and noble deeds of the saints is enthusiastic. Each succeeding age is able to find in the Bible's pages striking counterparts of all its own saints and sinners, as well as of those who are neither the one nor the other—what we call "just plain folks," who have some good qualities and some bad.

The Bible's refusal to hide or gloss over any of our defects or make the human race appear one whit better than it is in fact is particularly evident in the way it deals with women.

Both the Old and the New Testaments are crowded with women saints and women sinners, and there is a still larger number of women in whom good and evil are so inextricably mingled that it is hard to decide whether they are more to be praised than condemned. Every type of womanhood that the present or any other age has ever known is represented in the Bible's faithful pictures of human character.

One of the wickedest of the Bible's women and one of whom neither the Old Testament writers nor Josephus and other historians have found anything good to say is Potiphar's wife. She is the bold, lustful, cruel woman—the type of about everything that is most evil in mind and morals.

She is of particular interest to us of the present day because in lack of character and selfish anxiety to gratify her own desires, no matter what the cost, she was so astonishingly like our modern "vamps." In fact, if this Egyptian beauty lived to-day that is exactly what she would be called—a "vamp."

Every Bible reader is familiar with the account of the infatuation which Potiphar's wife developed for Joseph soon after the young man was brought down to Egypt. The more valiantly he resisted her efforts to make him become her lover the more determined

she seems to have been to add his heart to the large collection she doubtless already had.

Joseph had been made Potiphar's overseer and one day he found himself alone in the house with the designing wife. She renewed her entreaties, and when the young man again refused to yield to them and started to run out of the house she laid hold of him and tried to draw him to her.

In tearing himself away from his temptress Joseph left a piece of his clothing in her hand. Perhaps she had planned to get this incriminating bit of evidence. At any rate her depraved mind saw in it an opportunity for a neat little revenge on the Hebrew who wanted nothing to do with her wickedness.

She worked herself into such a fury as only a woman can show when she is scorned by the man whose love she covets. She told her servants and later her husband how Joseph had tried to force his attentions upon her, and in proof of the desperation with which she had resisted she pointed to the part of his clothing he had left in her hand.

Potiphar believed his wife—just as many modern men believe similar vampish creatures—and he promptly had poor Joseph thrown into prison.

And it came to pass, when his master heard the words of his wife, which she spake unto him, saying, After this manner did thy servant to me; that his wrath was kindled.

And Joseph's master took him, and put him into the prison, a place where the king's prisoners were bound: and he was there in the prison. (Genesis, xxxix, 19-20.)

The reader's conscience has no need to be troubled by the fear that this chapter of Genesis deals unjustly with Potiphar's wife by picturing her as a woman who did not hesitate to use her social and political influence and all her personal wiles to endanger the life of a young man who appealed to her because he was so "comely and well favored."

The historian Josephus tells the same story in great detail and gives just as unpleasant a picture of this unprincipled woman of Old Testament days. Accord-



The prophet Elijah denouncing the wickedness of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel in Naboth's vineyard and predicting that the Queen's flesh will one day be eaten by dogs

(From the painting by T. M. Rooke)

Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him.

Other historians tell us that from the standpoint of political expediency this was a very desirable alliance, for Ethbaal was a powerful monarch. His daughter was a cultured woman and did much for Ahab and his people by encouraging them to build beautiful cities and palaces and cultivate all the arts.

Ahab built temples for his wife's heathen gods, just as King Solomon had done for his heathen wives, but many scholars doubt if he worshipped them him-

A woman of Old Testament days who undoubtedly led one of the wickedest of lives, but whose good deeds, many scholars think, finally outweighed her wickedness, was Rahab.

The Bible calls her by an ugly name. Some authorities think she may not have deserved quite this, but it is certain that she was an innkeeper, and in those days women who kept inns were pretty disreputable persons.

However sordid and shameful Rahab's life may have been, she rose nobly above it when two spies sent out by Joshua to "view the land of Canaan" were staying at her house.

The King of Jericho had heard of Joshua's plan and he sent messengers to find the spies and take them prisoner.

Rahab hid the spies "under stalks of flax, which she had laid in order upon the roof." When the messengers questioned her she lied as skillfully as any movie heroine defending her sweetheart from harm. The men had gone out just after nightfall, she assured the messengers. Which direction they had taken she did not know. If the messengers made haste, she suggested, perhaps they might overtake the men.

When the messengers had gone off on this wild goose chase she helped the spies to get out of the house by sliding down a rope and directed them where to hide in the mountains until it would be safe to resume their journey. Probably she also supplied them with food.

The motive that inspired Rahab's deed was a noble one—devotion to her mother and brothers and sister, whom she loved and wanted to protect, even though she was a social outcast.

Before helping the two spies out of her house she made them swear "by Jehovah" that they would "deal kindly" with her father's house and all in it. The historian Josephus tells us that Rahab's family was saved from harm and that Joshua later presented her with valuable lands as a reward for the service she had rendered in saving the spies from capture.

The police of every great modern city can cite from their experience in the underworld numerous examples of women who, while leading the wickedest of lives, occasionally rise as Rahab did to really virtuous and noble heights.

Rahab stands as the type of the woman whose natural good qualities can never be completely submerged by the depths of vice and crime into which she sinks.

An English clergyman the other day, discussing the wicked women who figure so frequently in the Bible's pages, named Potiphar's wife, Queen Jezebel and Rahab as, in his opinion, the most wicked of all. But probably every other student of the Old and New Testaments would have a different trio to name for this unpleasant distinction.

Probably many would seriously object to condemning Rahab so innervely, no matter how disreputable her inn.



Titian's famous painting of Joseph resisting the wiles of Potiphar's wife

ing to Josephus, she fell in love with Joseph "both on account of the beauty of his body and his dextrous management of affairs."

This historian also says that Potiphar was "chief cook to Pharaoh," and that he had bought and educated Joseph when his brothers sold him into captivity at seventeen years of age. Perhaps Potiphar was the same "chief baker" who is described in the fortieth chapter of Genesis as being thrown into prison later, along with Joseph.

"Failing of her design and desire," says Annie Russell Marble, author of "Women of the Bible," "Potiphar's wife was cruel in her revenge." She brought Joseph to prison, but finally this imprisonment turned out fortunately for him. This, however, does not make the behavior of Potiphar any less reprehensible. She might easily have caused his death if Potiphar had been more savage in his retaliation or more sure that his wife's charges were justified.

Some students of this chapter of Old Testament history have suggested that perhaps Potiphar knew his wife's weakness of character and was on this account more lenient toward Joseph.

In Potiphar's wife the Old Testament gives us a picture of a woman who was weak, worthless, wholly lacking in any praiseworthy qualities. In Jezebel, on the other hand, it shows us a woman whose many shockingly evil qualities were relieved by wonderful keenness of intellect, strength of will and ambitions which might have led her to a noble place in the world's memory if they had been turned in the right direction.

Jezebel is a name that is known to millions who know little or nothing of

the wicked old queen's history. For centuries it has had a place in our language as a term of about the worst reproach one can apply to a woman—a synonym for mischief maker, vampire, hag, siren and fallen woman.

The latest research, however, makes it doubtful whether Jezebel was really as evil in all the different ways the associations we have given her name would lead us to believe. It is a serious question whether her personal life was at all shameful, outside of certain depraved practices into which she doubtless was led through her worship of Baal and other heathen gods.

But still, even giving her a clean bill of health in this respect, she was evil enough in other ways to make her one of the Bible's wickedest women and one whose name we would resent hearing applied to any woman we admired or loved.

Jezebel lived in the ninth century B. C., in the "evil days" that came after the deaths of David and Solomon and when their prosperous kingdom had been divided into the separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

Ahab was the king of Judah and he married Jezebel, daughter of the King of the Sidonians. This match was thought by many of the people of Judah a positively wicked one, as we are told in the sixteenth chapter of the First Book of Kings:

30. And Ahab the son of Omri did that which was evil in the sight of Jehovah, above all that were before him.

31. And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife

self. There is, however, no doubt that Jezebel carried her idolatries to excess. We are told that at her table every day she entertained "four hundred prophets of Baal."

King Ahab coveted a fine vineyard which adjoined his palace and which belonged to a man named Naboth. The latter refused to sell because of his dislike for the King's idolatrous wife.

At this point Jezebel took a hand in the trouble and planned an intrigue which ended in poor Naboth's being stoned to death on the false charge that he had blasphemed God and the King. Then Ahab took possession of the vineyard.

It was in this vineyard where the prophet Elijah, at Jehovah's command, faced Ahab and Jezebel and foretold how years later she would be trampled to death under the feet of horses and her flesh eaten by dogs.

Jezebel hated Elijah because he was a prophet of Jehovah. She did her best to kill him as she killed so many other prophets. Elijah, however, foiled all her plots and finally managed to bring about the killing by the sword of four hundred prophets of Baal.

Much as the world may dislike Jezebel for her cruel, revengeful and mischief-making qualities, it can hardly repress a little admiration for the defiant spirit she showed her enemies right up to the moment of her death. On the day when she was to meet her fate Jezebel, then an old woman, painted her eyes with antimony to make them shine, put on a gay headdress and looked calmly out of the window. When she saw Jehu, the man who was to direct her execution, come riding up she greeted him with a taunt.