

homes, many women were not permitted to express themselves freely in the company of men. Nevertheless, Christ was unmistakably forthright on the treatment all women deserve. One of the more striking features of the episode in which the woman taken in adultery is threatened with stoning is his implicit rebuke of her male accusers. She has not been alone in sinning—yet they condemn her alone.

It follows from Jesus' habitual respect and praise for women that it is they who show their courage by being with him during his agony on the Cross of Calvary when only John out of all the apostles is present, and by facing the possible ridicule of the Roman soldiers when they go early on Easter Sunday morning to anoint his body. Not only the Mother of God, but Mary's sister, the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene, and many other women who have ministered to Him are at the foot of the Cross. And Mary Magdalene is the first person at the empty tomb, the first to meet the Risen Christ, and the first to bear witness to Him with the Apostles.

These women, like their forbears of the Old Testament, by their steadfast devotion to God and his law reveal a deep understanding of an often misunderstood virtue: docility. While this virtue is stressed in many traditional works of unrivalled spiritual beauty, it is rarely connected with courage. Contemporary thinkers without strong religious formation often confuse docile actions with doormat behaviour. Yet this is precisely what they are not.

Docility—which comes from the Latin *docere*, to teach—is openness to teaching and, especially, openness to the teaching of God and of those who most deeply love Him. It is a profoundly *active* virtue, habitually aligned with imagination, flexibility, and firmness of will.

The heroines of the Old and New Testaments show their docility to God through extraordinary heroism. They are

Questions for discussion

1. Which of the Old Testament women featured in this article did you find it easiest to connect with in terms of their relevance to you? Why were you able to connect with these stories?
2. Do you think women today have the strength of character shown by the women in this article? Give some examples.
3. Have you met before the concept of docility - openness to teaching - discussed in this reflection? Are there ideas you could add about the traits that signal docility and those that do not in people of all ages?
4. Do you consider it legitimate to call Our Lady both docile and assertive in the ways defined in this article?

anything but compliant doormats. Embracing the virtuous tradition exemplified by them, docile wives, mothers, daughters, and religious ever since have obeyed God with a spirited regard for his will and a consequent steadfast fidelity that bears no relation to recessiveness, timidity, or goody-goody conformity. Our Lady herself provides for centuries of women an outstanding example of such fidelity, as do her many spiritual heirs. Some obvious cases in point are Catherine of Siena, Joan of Arc, Teresa of Avila, Mary MacKillop, Edith Stein, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Mary is not usually thought of as spirited and assertive in response to God's will, probably because assertiveness is mistakenly regarded as a form of aggression. But she *was*—in an appropriately self-contained, modest, and quiet way. Under conditions that made it very difficult for her to be true to herself and to her divine calling, she maintained an absolute integrity of purpose. When it would have been very much easier to fulfil conventional expectations about the role of women, to make decisions that imposed no grave risks, and to remain silent in order to avoid giving offence, she acted in a way that could have seemed as 'mad' as Christ's was sometimes said to be.

Through behaviour that invited misinterpretation, Our Lady fulfilled God's plan for her. Instead of moving along the usual, respected, marital and maternal path, she embraced virginity. Responding to Herod's threats, she left her home and everything familiar to go to Egypt with Joseph, not knowing what discomforts and trials lay ahead. At Cana it was she who took the initiative and moved her son to begin his public ministry. Calvary she risked mockery and insults and, like the mother in II Maccabees, courageously watched her son die in agony. Throughout her life, indeed, she showed history how the docility of the handmaid of the Lord could only be lived out with steadfast courage.

These qualities of women in an unbroken Biblical line ought for obvious reasons to be emphasised in discussions of the responsibilities faced by people today. In secular contexts such as the media and the worlds of education and politics, reference to them is particularly desirable so that a balance missing from public life can be restored. For the sake of future generations, we need to encourage passages from the Bible that dramatise inspirational forms of heroism in resourceful women as well as men to become, once again, a central educational component of our culture.

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Stained glass window on cover is from St Mary's Cathedral, in Hobart.

STRONG WOMEN

Biblical Models for
Today's World
By Susan Reibel Moore



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Courageous, strong-willed women of the Bible have lives worth pondering as role models for today. Susan Moore takes us into their stories and delves into the true meaning of the virtues displayed by these women.

When William Bennett's *The Book of Virtues* became an international best seller in 1993, many people who wrote about its appeal commented on the number of stories about heroism that it contains. "Young people need heroes," reviewers said again and again, "and the parents who have bought Bennett's book recognise this. They know how hungry their children are for role models that can be imitated—not celebrities in the world of movies or rock music, but ordinary people who rise to occasions in ways that are within their own reach."

As far as I know, no prominent reviewer in the English-speaking world noted that most of Bennett's heroic individuals are male: energetic, quick-witted figures in celebrated myths and legends, intrepid soldiers, authoritative rulers and statesmen. Women and girls feature prominently in the chapters on compassion and friendship. But in the sections on the testing virtues that most people long to possess—fortitude, courage, and perseverance—females get short shrift.

Why is this? Chiefly, I think, because the vast majority of Bennett's selections were written before 1950. They could be acquired through the public domain and published free of charge, without additional copyright hassles.

During the revolution in Children's Literature that took place in the second half of the last century, not only did the volume of fiction produced for beginning, middle school, and older readers increase enormously; but esteemed male and female authors began to give feisty girls as powerful a hearing as fearless boys. A few avowed believers, among them the internationally honoured novelist Katherine Paterson, revealed their own indebtedness to Bible stories by dramatising in more contemporary settings heroic triumphs over apparently insurmountable obstacles and clearly endorsing Judao-Christian values.

In the Old Testament there are of course many instances of inspiring female leadership and strength of character—especially, as the late Fr Colin Barker observed, during crises. Lone women, or women aided only by their sons, manage in ordinary and extraordinary circumstances to surmount forms of adversity that would flatten lesser souls. Their example encourages all of us to face whatever comes—suddenly, day by day, and over the long haul.

In one of the most celebrated narratives, a lone widow named Ruth leaves her parents and her native land of Moab to begin a new life with her mother-in-law, Naomi, a woman who can promise her nothing. Amid alien corn, in the fields of Bethlehem, she works extremely hard and without complaint, expecting no recognition or thanks for her daily sacrifices. Eventually, rewarded by God for her selflessness and her willingness to persevere with ordinary tasks miles from home, she marries a generous relative of Naomi's named Boaz. The fruit of this marriage is Obed, the father of Jesse and the grandfather of King David.

Since the possibilities open to women in Old Testament times were varied—though of course not as varied as they are now—Ruth's story is just one of many that portray exemplary courage and forbearance in single or married

Jewish women of antiquity made choices so liberating and far-reaching in their consequences that their names have been remembered ever since.

women. Indeed, there are narratives in the Bible that dramatise traits of character much more startling than those frequently commended to young women today. In the face of serious dangers and threats to their people, there were Jewish women of antiquity who made choices so liberating and far-reaching in their consequences that their names have been remembered ever since. Their stories certainly deserve to be much better known than they are at present.

JEWISH HEROINES

One of the most memorable Jewish heroines is Judith. A beautiful and pious widow, she responds with extraordinary daring to the threat of the capture of her people by the Assyrians. First she addresses the elders of her tribe, reminding them of the ordeals endured by their most illustrious forbears, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and chastising them for their willingness to surrender their town to enemies. Next she gives herself over to prayer,

beseeking almighty God to grant her the strength to overcome the powerful Assyrian army. After putting on splendid garments that enhance her beauty, she goes out of town with her maid and is immediately taken into custody by the Assyrians.

Following her capture, Judith asks to be brought to Holofernes, the Assyrians' commander, who is so moved by her beauty and wisdom that he falls in love with her. On her fourth day in the Assyrian camp he invites her to a banquet, where he falls asleep after drinking a great quantity of wine. When his attendants have left her alone with him, she prays once more—before taking his sword and cutting off his head. She then leaves the camp with her maid and returns home, where she tells the leaders of the Jewish community what has happened. By this time, the Assyrian army, learning about the plight of their leader, has fled in disarray.

The Jewish leaders all praise God for this deliverance at the hands of a woman. They also commend Judith with fervent admiration, in terms often reserved for the ritual celebrations that traditionally have extolled male prowess: "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!" (Judt 15:9-10)

Of course today women are not expected to cut off people's heads to save their families, tribes, home towns, or countries. For us, Judith's story makes the key point that prayerfulness, self-possession, and fortitude can avert ruin in ways we cannot possibly predict.

In the famous Old Testament story of Esther, the importance of fortitude in the face of severe adversity is dramatised in another way. Like Judith, Esther leads Israel to victory, and she too receives the lavish praise of male leaders. But in one obvious respect her situation is far worse than Judith's: she is an orphan compelled to live in the harem of Ahasuerus, the king who has conquered her people. Since her life is always under threat, she requires rare prudence as well as courage. Even after she has become the king's favourite and is chosen as his queen, she faces arduous trials.

The worst ordeal, a plan hatched by Ahasuerus' chief deputy Haman, threatens the whole Jewish nation,

including Esther herself, with extinction. Since she has hidden her Jewish background on the advice of her adoptive father, Mordecai, at a critical moment she must decide whether to make her ancestry known. Recognizing that the only way to save her people is for her to manifest to the king her Jewish identity and plead with him to spare the Jews, she decides to do this. But to enter into the king's presence without being summoned can mean instant execution.

Having fasted and prayed for three days with her people, of course without disclosing her worst fears, Esther puts on her royal robes and modestly calls upon the king. In response to what he sees, he promises her whatever she desires, even half his kingdom. At a banquet that she has prepared for him and his chief deputy, she reveals Haman's plan to destroy the Jews, including herself, and pleads for them to be spared. The king agrees, has Haman hanged on the gallows prepared for Mordecai, and raises Mordecai to the position of influence occupied by Haman. What brings about this success, in addition to Esther's great courage, is her faith. Her prayers to the Lord God of Israel, reminding him of many earlier promises to her people that he has honoured, are answered in ways that perfectly fulfil the dream of Mordecai that frames her story.

Not just in the Book of Esther, but in every memorable Old Testament narrative, the role of prayer in bringing about rescue from evildoers is crucial. What matters most when apparently helpless individuals are asked to play decisive roles on behalf of their people is the depth of their devotion to God. Even when the critical choice required of a heroic woman appears to involve something very small, as it does for Hannah, the mother of Samuel, the Bible dramatises the importance of speaking out in situations in which it would be far easier to keep the peace and say nothing.

STANDING UP FOR THE TRUTH

Hannah's case is much less dramatic than Esther's. After the priest, Eli, who witnesses her mouth moving soundlessly in the Temple where he spends his waking hours, concludes that she is drunk, she has to decide whether to correct a man in his position—never an easy thing for a pious woman.

Bravely, she does do this, telling him that she has been praying for a son whom she has promised to give to God if her prayers are answered—which, in the end, they are. Samuel heads the line that will eventually include such kings as Saul, David and Solomon. In his youth, he spends essential teaching time with Eli, who holds nothing against his mother.

Better known, more dramatic, but also edifying on the subject of speaking out is the story of the beautiful young girl, Susanna. Two older men have seen her bathing and lust after her, making threatening propositions that she promptly and roundly rejects. In anger and spite they take her before her tribal elders and falsely accuse her of cavorting under a tree with a young man. Potentially, because of their actions, her situation is much more dangerous than Hannah's. If the elders responsible for her well-being believe the men who have spied on her, and as

Sexual purity is a fundamental virtue which must be defended strongly.

a consequence judge her to have been untruthful about her own sexual modesty, she will be put to death.

In the end, a young man named Daniel saves Susanna's life by exposing the lies and hypocrisy of her accusers. But the feature of her story that is uniquely instructive to modernity is not its happy ending: it is its teaching that sexual purity is a fundamental virtue which must be defended strongly. This teaching is a powerful corrective to the widely held secular view that what Susanna has courageously defended is unimportant. In the words of Pope John Paul II in *Veritatis Splendor*, her preference for death over acquiescence in evil bears witness not only to "her faith and trust in God but also to her obedience to the truth and to the absoluteness of the moral order."

Nowhere, however, is fidelity to God in the face of death more powerfully dramatised than in the passage in the Second Book of the Maccabees, Chapter 7, about the Jewish mother whose moral witness results in the death of her seven sons at the hands of a sadistic Greek king. Each young man willingly suffers the torture that follows inexorably from his refusal to eat pigs' flesh. Even after

witnessing the scalping, dismembering and frying of their own brother, and knowing only too well what the result of emulating him is certain to be, the remaining brothers act as if their martyrdom means nothing. Fearlessly, they take as their own the words of the first brother to be killed: "We are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our ancestors."

As heroic as the brothers is their mother, who urges each of her sons not to give in to their tormentors, and who witnesses their deaths before she herself is put to death. As the sacred page records: "The mother was especially admirable and worthy of honourable memory. Though she saw her seven sons perish within a single day, she bore it with good courage because of her hope in the Lord... Filled with a noble spirit, she fired her woman's reasoning with a man's courage..." (II Mac 7:20-21)

What is striking about all these stories is the bravery and independence of strong women, and the effect of these virtues on whole nations. Not one of these Biblical heroines bows to conventional wisdom or the easy solution. Rather, they all display an unshakeable devotion to the way of God venerated by their people for hundreds of years. No matter how tempted they are to relinquish their fidelity to God's law—and in the case of the mother of the seven sons, the temptation is formidable—they do not succumb. Prayerful and courageous obedience to this law fills their lives.

JESUS AND THE WOMEN OF HIS TIME

Not without reason, Jesus himself reveals time and again an understanding of the female capacity for heroism demonstrated by these high-spirited women. That is why the Holy Father has observed more than once that Our Lord's words and teaching express perennial wisdom about the honour, acceptance, and tenderness due to women. Indeed, what John Paul II emphasises repeatedly is that it is *this* form of wisdom that Catholic women need most to understand and put into practice.

It is well known that in Jesus' time, more so than in ours, powerful constraints often prevented women from witnessing to timeless religious truths in the way that Ruth, Judith, Esther, Hannah, Susanna, the mother in the Maccabees, and their noblest companions did. Even in their own