

**THE OLD TESTAMENT  
AS IT CONCERNS WOMEN**

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**MARIE WELLES CLAPP**

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**From Nehushta, Queen-Mother of the Exile,  
to Mary, the Mother of Jesus**

**MARIE WELLES CLAPP**

**Approved by the Committee on Cur-  
riculum of the Board of Education  
of the Methodist Episcopal Church**



**THE METHODIST BOOK CONCERN**

**NEW YORK**

**CINCINNATI**

**CHICAGO**

**CLAPP**  
**THE OLD TESTAMENT AS IT CONCERNS WOMEN**

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Printed in the United States of America

### DEDICATION

To those who have shared with me the mental and spiritual enrichment of intensive Bible study and to others who are particularly interested in the Old Testament and its relation to women, this book is devoutly dedicated.



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## INTRODUCTION

### A COURSE OF STUDY WITH WOMEN AS THE CENTER OF INTEREST

To study the Old Testament with reference to the lives and interests of women may seem incongruous, for the Hebrews belonged to the Semitic branch of the white race, which held tenaciously to the doctrine of the superiority of the male; women were the property of men, dependent upon them for sustenance and protection. Seldom are women honored in the history or literature of the early Hebrews. Consequently, a casual study of the Old Testament does not reveal the contribution made by them to the perpetuation and development of the early Hebrew culture and religion. However, when we consider the biological and sociological importance of women, when we remember that men of thought like Oswald Spengler and Robert Briffault emphasize the primacy of woman and her superiority in the conservation of what is best in humanity, we may gladly turn again to the records of the Old Testament and evaluate anew woman's part among the early Hebrews, whose chief interest was religion.

A consideration of the history and literature of Israel as it concerned women of old suggests the value of such study as it concerns the women of to-day. Again, both through preference and ability, men have dominated in the rôle of biblical students and expositors, as preachers and theologians; comparatively few women have given themselves to intensive Bible study or extensive exegesis. To-day, however, problems raised by scientific study of the Bible and demands that religious education have character-building value, urge intelligent women to a study of the Old Testament that shall be compatible with modern scholarship and related to modern life-problems. "Ignorance of the Bible is its worst enemy." To face squarely the facts that recent research has revealed is a necessary requis-

ite of that fuller knowledge which shall restore faith and conserve the devotional study of the Bible. Along with the usual benefits of honest and effective Bible study may come other delights: the satisfaction of being able to place characters and passages in the right historical background, the joy of being able to trace through the centuries the development of ethical principles and of certain great conceptions such as the nature of God and man, and the problems of suffering and immortality.

For these and numerous other reasons a comprehensive study will be welcome, especially one unique in centering itself in the lives of women. From Eve, the traditional mother of all life, to Mary, the mother of our Lord—this vast sweep of time and wide range of characters is a challenge to the imagination. The history of the Hebrews, beginning with Sarah, the mother of her people (Isaiah 51. 2), to Mary, the mother of Jesus, can be divided, by the events of the formation and destruction of the kingdom, into three fairly equal parts. The first period ends with Hannah, the mother of Samuel, that prophet who anointed the first two kings, Saul and David, in the name of the Lord. Most of the familiar women characters of biblical history are contained in this division: the matriarchs, Miriam, Deborah, Jephthah's daughter, Delilah and Ruth. One notices in this period an emphasis placed upon woman as a mother; the vivid stories of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah give many details regarding the birth of their children; Joseph's wife, Asenath, daughter of an Egyptian priest, is mentioned only as the mother of Joseph's children, Ephraim and Manasseh; Jochebed, the mother of Moses, and Zipporah, his wife, achieve their distinction as they render motherly service. When the tribes were gaining a foothold in Canaan, it was Deborah who "arose as a mother in Israel" and with Barak's help defeated Sisera. Stories which reveal religious practices and beliefs are connected with the mothers of Samson, Micah, and Samuel.

In the second period—the five centuries when the Hebrews had kings—woman seems to have been considered

primarily as a satisfaction to man's lust. The example of King David and his son Solomon in establishing large harems was followed, after the division of the kingdom, by the kings of the north and the south. The two outstanding women of this period are the queens Jezebel and Athaliah, who did all in their power to substitute for the worship of Jehovah the lustful practices connected with the Baal worship of Tyre. Even the eighth-century prophets, those noble pioneers of justice and mercy, had little to say regarding the liberation of women from sex slavery.

This conception of women as the object of man's passion is less noticeable in the third period, which began with the Babylonian Exile and closed with the Christian Era. So little space in the Old Testament is given to the record of those six centuries that only a few of the women who took part in that history are even named; Nehushta was the queen-mother of the Exile, and Noadiah, a prophetess in the time of Nehemiah; the Apocryphal books tell us of Judith and Susanna, Sara and Esther. From secular history we know of two Jewish queens in the first century before Christ, and in the New Testament we learn of the godly women Anna and Elisabeth, who were well advanced in years when Mary gave birth to the baby Jesus. Although these centuries reveal history so meagerly, to them belong the authorship or editorship of almost the entire Old Testament, and embedded in its pages are many facts and reliable conclusions regarding the conditions and characteristics of the women of this period which are brought to light by careful research and by consulting those scholars who have made a special study of this period. The challenge of the difficult, the lure of the unfamiliar supply added incentives for the study of this period of Hebrew history; a better understanding of the authors, a deeper appreciation of the beauty and worth of its literature, will reward those who give special attention to the Old Testament in this last period of its development.

For the benefit of individuals and groups who will undertake this Bible course, each study offers varied

educational opportunities; the lesson presentation gives factual knowledge, historical and literary setting; the "Student Task" suggests some definite task whose accomplishment will stimulate interest and give the thrill of achievement that handwork affords a child; "Additional Notes" supply details of special concern to the feminine temperament, and "Questions for Discussion" provide the application of the lesson to the problems of to-day. No definite plan of worship service is prescribed, but in every study there occur suggestions which may easily lead to a worship experience. A true search for knowledge is in itself devotional.

My spirit has often been illuminated by an idea suggested by some Hebrew symbol, and with gratitude do I acknowledge my debt to many modern prophets who have expounded Hebrew lore. Especially do I rejoice in the privilege of having been in the classes of three great scholars and lovers of the Old Testament: Dr. G. Buchanan Gray, of Mansfield College, Oxford; Dr. Robert W. Rogers, of Drew University; and Dr. Leroy Waterman, of the University of Michigan. Unusual contacts in Palestine with charming Syrian women have vitalized my thoughts regarding the women of the Bible and helped me to visualize biblical scenes. No one can live ten weeks in touch with Palestinian peasant life without sensing the great contrasts between Eastern and Western attitudes and without appreciating many noble character traits of Syrian womanhood.

Early on a Sunday morning in June, 1928, I experienced the exhilaration of a walk along the concrete breakwater at Port Said, Egypt. This mammoth piece of masonry extends three miles out into the Mediterranean Sea and thus keeps the channel of the Suez Canal open for the traffic between India and Europe. An hour's meditation, as I sat facing the west, centered upon the prospects and opportunities for the abundant life for woman. My purpose in going to Palestine had been the same as when I took a year's study at Oxford—a desire to prepare myself so that I might present the Bible more honestly and more

vividly to adult women and so enrich their lives. But, during my residence in Palestine, the romantic enthusiasm which had formerly colored my pictures of the women of the Bible had disappeared. Conditions surrounding the peasant woman's life (which resemble those of the Bible) seemed so cramping to any sort of efficient living, and traditions dominating all life's activities seemed to make a free expression of personality most difficult. The principles of Jesus, his concern for women and children, his valuation of each individual, are principles which suggest freedom for all and are found in an increasing degree dominant in our own land. How glad I was to be facing Westward! But what lay behind me in that ancient, mysterious, sacred East? What lessons for the dynamic Westerner from the circumscribed Eastern woman? Surely, not lessons regarding better health or home conditions, nor about greater efficiency, but lessons about eternal truths and beautiful virtues displayed in handicapped lives.

In like manner may we of this ultra-modern age return to the books of the Old Testament and find therein suggestions of living value. The exact experiences of those women who lived in the six centuries before Christ will never be repeated, but as types of life-problems they are reproduced in every century. What adult woman does not know the loneliness of an exile, the barrenness of life deprived of usual comforts, and the joy of re-establishing a home life injured by enforced absence? How often are domestic hardships and traditional limitations made less irksome by the privileges of worship! Intellectual difficulties, physical dangers, even persecution can be endured by the sustaining hopes of a Saviour and a life eternal. In the study of these post-exilic events in Hebrew history life may be deepened and broadened and we may realize anew that, to an extent at least, we, like the saints and mystics and heroines of the past, may be blessed even as was Mary the mother of Jesus in the heritage of the ages.

In these lessons the American Translation of the Old Testament has been used through the courtesy of the Uni-

versity of Chicago Press. Because of limited space, extended introductions to the several books have been omitted; thus the earnest student will have to consult some recent commentary, such as, for example, *The Abingdon Bible Commentary*, published by The Abingdon Press.

To those who may use this as a textbook for group study, I would suggest the citing of present-day life situations as starting points for the studies. Let the experiences of the women of the past be used as reference material for the discussions of actual life problems. In order to help determine some relationships between life situations in the remote past and the vital present I have added in the Contents a subtitle for each chapter. It would be a mistake, however, for the class to "moralize" on problems not vital to its own membership. Similarly, the "Student Task" suggested may often be supplanted by some definite individual work which is more suitable to the members of the group. But a task, even so simple as counting the number of times a particular word occurs in a given passage, may be beneficial to a woman who has never concentrated her attention on Bible study. "Questions for Discussion" also may be used as suggestions for topics which challenge the interest of the group and are applicable to local situations. To the woman who has the zeal to "elect" this study course as a private student, I would strongly recommend that she proceed slowly, taking the time necessary to perform each "Student Task" and to consider thoughtfully the questions suggested. If this interpretation of Biblical facts from a feminine point of view shall help some preachers to understand better woman's handicaps and possibilities I shall be doubly rewarded for the delight of my research.

My earnest hope is that life may be enriched in this effort to understand the Old Testament as it concerns the women of old and the women of to-day.

MARIE WELLES CLAPP.

## STUDY I

### JEWISH WOMEN EXILED IN BABYLONIA

Bible References: Ezekiel, Leviticus 17-26, 2 Kings 24, 25, Jeremiah 29. 5-7

IF a journey of eight hundred miles were to be made to-day, it could be accomplished in four hours by airplane, in seventeen hours by express train, or in twenty-two hours by motor. Twenty-five centuries ago in 598 B. C. Jewish exiles, weighted by heavy chains, made an eight hundred-mile trip. They followed the fertile crescent that bounded the Arabian desert on their route from Jerusalem to Babylonia; there was little chance for rapid transit even though they were hurried along by the harsh soldiers of King Nebuchadnezzar. For three months Nehushta, the queen-mother, with other women of the royal family and court, plodded along, day after day, through rain and cold, heat and dust, driven as captive slaves from their homeland to an unknown country. Doubtless physical hardship, weariness, privations, and exposure caused many to die. Probably mental agonies and distress of soul made countless others wish they might die. To leave their native land was a hardship, to be separated from friends and loved ones was a misfortune, to be no longer able to worship at their Holy Temple was a calamity, and the greatest agony of all was to consider that God Jehovah had deserted them—his chosen people.

When these Hebrew exiles came to Babylonia, they must have been greatly moved by unusual and wonderful sights: a huge wall that included five hundred million square feet of solid masonry; a reservoir one hundred and forty miles in circumference, one hundred and eighty feet deep and equipped with flood gates for irrigation; two extensive palaces, one of which was defended by a series of walls. Upon a great square was constructed a mammoth rock-garden, built to remind the nature-loving Queen

Ameritis of the hills of her native Media. A series of arches covered with earth reached to a height of eighty-five feet and upon this embankment, trees, flowering bushes, tropical plants and flowers of every kind were planted. These overhanging gardens (one of the Seven Wonders of the World) were kept luxuriantly green by water forced from the Euphrates River. There were colossal golden images and huge seven-storied temples dedicated to various gods. Indications there were of a wealth far surpassing Solomon's and of a civilization (the Sumerian) much older than that of Abraham.

However, strange and wonderful sights do not always bring peace and joy to exiled souls, and the note we hear from these captive Hebrews is one of intense loneliness and sorrow.

“By the rivers of Babylon,  
There we sat down, and wept, indeed,  
When we remembered Zion.  
Upon the poplars, in the midst of her,  
We hung up our harps.  
For there our captors  
Demanded of us songs,  
And our tormentors, mirth;  
‘Sing us some of the songs of Zion.’  
How could we sing the songs of the Lord  
In a foreign land?  
If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,  
May my right hand fail me!  
May my tongue cleave to my palate,  
If I do not remember thee;  
If I set not Jerusalem  
Above my highest joy” (Psalm 137. 1-6).

It was in the performance of commonplace duties that readjustment to changed conditions came. The policy of the Babylonian kings was usually that of kindness and noninterference with national customs. Rations were provided the newcomers until crops could be raised. A letter from the prophet Jeremiah to the exiled colony urges con-

tentment and normal living: "Build houses and live in them, plant vineyards and eat the fruit of them, take wives and beget sons and daughters . . . seek the welfare of the land . . . and pray to the Lord in its behalf" (Jeremiah 29. 3-7). So the women busied themselves as in Judea; getting meals, caring for children, looking after the humble homes, and helping in the gardens. Some may have been forced to work on the huge building projects, and eventually some assisted in the business enterprises which in later years made many of the Jews wealthy and influential.

Another element which helped the Hebrews to adjust themselves to a strange environment was a change in religious practices and a development in their idea of God. Deprived of their customary Temple worship, these exiles expressed their religious devotion in other ways. Special emphasis was placed on observance of the Sabbath, feast and fast days. The rite of circumcision was faithfully administered, more attention was given to reading and explaining the sacred scrolls. Informal home services later developed into synagogue gatherings.

The fall of the Holy City, the captivity of thousands of the best people, absence from the sacred shrine constituted a catastrophe which severely tested faith in Jehovah God. For centuries the teaching had been that the Temple was the Lord's dwelling place. This traditional belief was now challenged, and through the Exile experience came a new revelation of God. In addition to those qualities of God which the eighth-century prophets (Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah) had taught, those qualities of justice and love, of mercy and holiness, there came through the Exilic prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel the assurance that God's power was not confined to Jerusalem; that he would hear the cry of the individual and each one would be judged according to his own deeds; that the responsibility was personal as well as national.

The prophet Jeremiah had been allowed to stay in Jerusalem, but the young priest, Ezekiel, son of the aristocratic family of Buzzi, had been deported and settled with his wife in the little colony at Tel-Abib on the Chebar

Canal (Ezekiel 3. 15). Ezekiel had loved the Temple; he knew every nook and corner of the sacred building; he was fascinated by all the elaborate details of its furnishing and inspired by the intellectual ideals of its priesthood. His career seemed shattered by the cruel Exile. Yet, in God's call to be the pastor-priest of the community he experienced the Divine Presence, and he helped others to retain their faith in God and thereby adjust their lives to changed circumstances.

Two of the captive women who were doubtless affected by Ezekiel's life are mentioned personally. As queen-mother Nehushta was the principal woman exile. For twenty years she had lived in the royal palace at Jerusalem, having married one of the sons of King Josiah. Her father, Elnathan, had tried to prevent her arrogant husband, King Jehoiachim, from burning the prophet's scroll (Jeremiah 36. 25). The years of her captivity may have been brightened by favors from Babylonian monarchs for her son, Jehoiachin, was finally honored by having a chief place among the captive kings and a daily allowance from King Evil-Merodach (2 Kings 25. 27-30).

Another woman exile who claims our attention is the wife of Ezekiel. I like to call her "Delight," for the term the prophet uses in speaking of her is full of affection. The Hebrew phrase means the "desire of one's eyes," a "precious possession," or the modern word "darling." The prophet Ezekiel was decidedly abnormal, "temperamental" we would say, and great praise is due to the woman who, after living with him several years, was still his "Delight." Visions and trances were often the means by which Ezekiel comprehended the Lord's messages. After his divine call he lay in a stupor for a week (Ezekiel 3. 15), again for days and days he lay upon the ground eating only the poorest of food prepared by himself (4. 4-15). Teaching by symbols necessitated unusual conduct; once he disfigured his looks by shaving his head in a most uncouth way (5. 1-17); again, the lesson of the destruction of Jerusalem was preached by carrying out of a hole in a wall the household baggage an exile would carry (12. 2-