Some Jewish Women in Antiquity

Bar-Ilan, Meir

Published by Brown Judaic Studies

Bar-Ilan, Meir.
Some Jewish Women in Antiquity.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/73598

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2530862
CHAPTER 4

Prayers by Women

In Judaism, as in other religions, women as well as men pray to God; in the Jewish tradition from biblical times to the present day, however, women’s prayers have never attained definitive status. This chapter deals with the status of women’s prayers in antiquity, working with a loose definition of what constitutes a prayer. The purpose of the discussion is to address the wealth of information on this subject in the Bible, in apocrypha and in talmudic literature. Following a survey of the prayers, their feminine nature will be analyzed — insofar at such can be said to exist — as well as their role in daily life. It will become clear that a close study of women’s prayers in the social context can illuminate the women’s relationship with God and the relationships in the community of women. The purpose of the textual analysis of women’s prayers is to lead to an historical understanding which may help establish the status of women in antiquity in Judaism.

I. In the Bible

Among the myriad prayers mentioned in the Bible, only a small number were said by women.¹

1. Miriam

It will be recalled that after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea and were rescued from the pursuing Egyptians, Moses sang a hymn of praise to God (Ex. 15), ending in the following words:

Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her in dance with timbrels. And Miriam chanted for them: “Sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously; Horse and driver He has hurled into the sea” (Ex. 15:20-21).

These verses record how women sang after the fashion of men, with Miriam “chanting,” that is, speaking the words aloud, and “all the women” repeating her words after her. The women imitated the actions of the men and chanted praise to God, separately from the men. As Moses led the men in song, so Miriam led the women, though the women surpassed the men in praising God: the men only sang, while the women accompanied their victory dance with drums. This prayer by women is not distinguished by any feminine mark, and does not indicate anything of Miriam’s function as prophetess.

2. Deborah

Besides being a prophetess, Deborah was also a judge and a military leader. Judges 4-5 gives two versions of the victory of the Israelite tribes over King Jabin of Hazor: one in prose, the other in verse. Deborah encouraged Barak, the son of Abinoam, to battle against Sisera, Jabin’s general, and Barak proceeded to defeat the Canaanites. However, it was not he who killed Sisera but Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite. Following the prose account of events, Deborah sings her famous hymn, on which much has been written. We shall now examine the feminine aspects of this hymn.

The hymn opens with the following words: “On that day Deborah and Barak, son of Abinoam, sang”: Deborah is the main agent here, and Barak is secondary. There are two self-reflexive references by Deborah in the hymn: “Till you arose, O Deborah, arose, O mother, in Israel!” and “Awake, awake, O Deborah! Awake, awake, strike up the chant!” We have here a hymn sung by a woman who appreciates her own value and expresses her femininity by specifying her name and her status as “mother” in the chant. The singer-prophetess continues: “Arise, O

---

2 Certain prayers were said in this fashion, cf., for instance: Ps. 88:1: “A song. A psalm of the Korahites. For the leader; on mahalath leannoth. A maskil of Heman the Ezrahite”, and the psalm continues with verse lines comprising two parallel measures. See above, ch. 3.

3 Not only that: when Miriam does finally speak (about the wife of Moses), she is reprimanded and punished by God. See Num. 12:1-15.

4 On the issue of two versions, one prose and one verse, see M. Bar-Ilan, “Ve-samu et shni al benei yisrael (Num. 6:27),” HUCA, 60 (1989), Hebrew section, pp. 19-31.

5 We cannot refer here to the wealth of literature dealing with the Song of Deborah, but it seems that very little attention has hitherto been paid to the feminine nature of the song. See: Y. Ikada, “Shira t Devorah ve-shivtei Israel”, H. Rabin (et al., eds.), Sefer Meir Wallenstein (Jerusalem, 1979), pp. 65-79 (Hebrew); Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5”, Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 58/3 (1990), pp. 389-411.
Barak; take your captives, O son of Abinoam!"; the woman here gives orders to the man (or, at the very least, spurs him on); perhaps otherwise the men would not go to war at all. Deborah also criticizes those tribes that refrained from taking part in the battle (Reuben, the inhabitants of Gilead and others). She shows that divine justice is on her side — the woman's — not the men's. She goes so far as to belittle the strength of the men in war. The battle was in reality fought not by the men but rather: "The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera." In fact, there was no need for men at all, since "The torrent Kishon swept them away," meaning that the forces of nature, directed by God, won the battle, not the men-warriors. The men were at first pawns in the woman's hand; she spurred them on to battle, then as executors of God's will. It is therefore not surprising that the prophetess praises another woman — the cowardly men did not go to war, while Jael killed the enemy. She is the true heroine and as such is deserving of praise. Seen from this perspective, the world revolves around women. The prophetess derides her enemies; no such taunts are evident in her feelings towards the king or his sons, the general or the fallen soldiers. Her gaze is turned rather to a woman or a group of women: "Through the window peered Sisera's mother, behind the lattice she whined... The wisest of her ladies give answer; She, too, replies to herself..." This is a dirge sung by the enemy women, in contrast to the victorious elation of the Israelite women. The hymn shows that war waged by men is no war at all, and the grief (of the fathers of the fallen warriors) is not genuine. As if all this were not enough, the prophetess continues: "They must be dividing the spoil they have found: A damsel or two for each man," i.e. the real spoils of the war are not gold; a woman is the best prize a man can win. In the world-view of the prophetess, judge and singer, men came a definite second.

No other hymn in the Bible accords such emphasis to the role of women in achieving victory or to the grief of the enemy. Even if the name of the singer had not been lost, it would have to be said that a clear feminine perspective comes to the fore in this victory song. Modern literary analysis, however, is misleading: had we possessed only Judges 4-5 out of the entire Bible, and considered it as typically

---

6 See above, ch. 1, on Jael's courage.
8 We cannot subscribe to A. Steinzaltz's definition that "Deborah's song is one of the most bloodthirsty in the entire Bible" (cf. Ps. 137:9), nor Steinzaltz's other statements about Deborah in: A. Steinzaltz, Nashim ba-Mikra3 (Tel-Aviv, 1988), p. 50 (Hebrew).
representative passages of biblical prose and poetry, the later-day scholar would risk drawing quite inaccurate conclusions as to the nature of ancient society. The story gives the impression that women were judges and military leaders in war. The woman instigates the war and the men obey her commands. The prophetess denounces or curses the men who evade battle, and praises the bravery of a woman for achieving the final victory.\(^9\) The women are elated at the victory, and they grieve over the fallen; the men seemingly take no part in these actions.

The victory hymns of Miriam and of Deborah are alike in that both praise the glory of God after the war. However, while Miriam sings with "all the women," Deborah's hymn lacks any social context. It is not clear whether the hymn of praise was recited before men or women or perhaps, like Miriam, Deborah sang for the women while Barak sang for the men.\(^{10}\)

3. Hannah

Two prayers said by Hannah, mother of the prophet Samuel, are included in the Bible. 1 Sam. tells of the pilgrimage made by Elkanah and his two wives, Hannah and Peninah, to sacrifice at the tabernacle in Shiloh. Peninah angered Hannah by referring to her barrenness,\(^{11}\) and Hannah turned to God for solace:

In her wretchedness she prayed to the Lord, weeping all the while. And she made this vow:

O Lord of Hosts, if You will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant and will remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to the Lord for all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head. (I Sam. 1:10-11).

Following this appeal, the next verse reads: "As she kept on praying before the Lord, Eli watched her mouth." The embittered Hannah was wholly absorbed in crying and praying; she addressed God by two

\(^9\) The role of distributing blessings and curses in the name of God was usually reserved for the priests or levites. See, for instance: Deut. 27:9 ff.

\(^{10}\) A meticulous comparison between the opening passages of the song of Moses and of the song of Deborah will show that, just as the people responded to the song sung by Moses, Barak responded to Deborah's song. However, this form of song, by a man and woman singing individually by turns, is not known in antiquity, and was denounced in b. Sotah 48a: "R. Joseph said: when men sing and women join in it is licentiousness; when women sing and men join in it is like fire in tow."

\(^{11}\) Other barren women in the Bible are Sara, Rebekah and Rachel. The mothers of the great men needed God's intervention in order to have children. With the exception of Rebekah, the Bible emphasizes that the woman was sterile, not the man, as the man had children with a different wife.
different titles, emphasizing her point so that he would not forget her. She stressed that she was but a servant of God (features recalling the "Remembrance" (Zikhronot), of later composition and of a communal, not personal nature.) Hannah requested a son, and, as if to persuade God to relent, she promised Him her son after his birth. This prayer can be classed as a well-worded appeal for help from a supplicant with a personal, eminently feminine problem.

Hannah's other prayer appears in 1 Sam. 1: after God granted her wish, she fulfilled her oath to bring her son to the tabernacle. This prayer is couched in the elevated style of other biblical hymns, but a close reading shows that its words and ideas are not essentially those of a barren woman:

I gloat over my enemies... The bows of the mighty are broken, and the faltering are girded with strength... For not by strength shall man prevail. The foes of the Lord shall be shattered... The Lord will judge the ends of the earth. He will give power to His king, and triumph to his anointed one.

These words constitute a hymn of praise to God spoken by one who set out to war in the name of God and returned home safely. The person praying recognizes that the war is waged by God, as in the hymn of Deborah. This hymn also resembles the victory songs of Moses and David, though the present hymn surpasses that by Moses: Moses refers to the temple, whereas the present hymn refers to the king of Israel; the warriors request that God strengthen the leaders, the anointed king and the high priest.

12 On the similarity between the prayer said by Hannah and the Rosh Hashana prayers, see further below. The story of Hannah is the Haftarah portion read on Rosh Hashana. Attention should also be called to the prepositions in Hannah's prayer: to God, before God. See Y. Jakobson, Hazon Hamikra,2 (Tel-Aviv, 1963), pp. 354-356 (Hebrew, in the chapter on mothers in the Bible). If the interpretation that considers the formula "to God" as a sort of plaint is correct, then it is understood why one of the prayers that the rabbis attributed to Hannah bears the mark of a legal accusation. See below.

13 See: R. Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative (Basic Books, Inc., New York, 1981), p. 84. Alter believes "it is just the sort of prayer that a simple, sincere country wife, desperate in her barrennes, would utter." However, this definition is inexact even by Alter's own definition of the characteristics of prayer. See below for additional examples of prayers by "simple" women.

14 The song most resembling Hannah's song is in 2 Sam. 22 (=Ps. 18): "David addressed the words of this song to the Lord after the Lord had saved him from the hands of all his enemies ... O God, the rock wherein I take shelter, my shield ... my fortress and refuge! The Lord thundered forth from heaven... He rescued me from my enemy so strong... For I have not been guilty before my God...With the blameless hero, blamelessly.... Who trained my hands for battle, So that my arms can bend a bow of bronze!... Tower of victory to His king, Who deals graciously with His anointed", etc.
A close reading of the two prayers ascribed to Hannah shows that the two prayers were not by the same person. The second prayer was apparently attributed to Hannah due to the words "the barren woman bears seven," though these words do not in fact justify the attribution of the prayer to Hannah (who until then had given birth only to Samuel, and in any case, it is a literary expression, similar to the one in Ruth 4:15; Jer. 15:9). Attributing prayers to famous characters, whether man or woman, is well attested in biblical literature, the apocrypha and talmudic literature. The historiographical tendency to ascribe a prayer that "might have been said at the time" to a certain figure was not the work of a later redactor, but a guiding principle in ancient literature (see also Is. 38:9-20; Jonah 2:2-10).15

Even if the biblical text is taken at face value and the prayer (recited as part of the Sephardi daily prayers) attributed to Hannah, we are still left with a very small number of biblical prayers by women, a situation rectified in all branches of post-biblical literature.

II. Post-biblical literature

The apocrypha is replete with prayers. In many cases the author gratuitously adds a prayer to the words of a biblical character. However, this is not unique to the apocrypha and occurs throughout post-biblical literature, including rabbinic literature. For this reason, and for our present purpose, the prayers will be analyzed here according to biblical chronology: instead of discussing the date of composition of each prayer individually, it seems that the best course to pursue is to address all post-biblical literature together as a single category, and arrange the prayers according to the chronological appearance of the biblical characters. Hence, Eve's prayer will be cited first, followed by those of other biblical women, and finally the prayers of women from the apocrypha who do not appear in the Bible will be studied.16

---

15 See also: Leila Leah Bronner, From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1994), pp. 87-98 (and see below).

16 See the following studies on prayers in the apocrypha: Sidney S. Tedesche, "Prayers
1. Eve

The Talmud, in b. Abodah Zarah 8a tells of Adam, who, upon seeing the first sunset, said:

"Alas, it is because I have sinned that the world around me is becoming dark... so he sat up all night fasting and weeping and Eve was weeping opposite him." On the first Sabbath, then, Adam and Eve prayed and wept together, asking God for forgiveness for their sin.17 (tr. under the editorship of I. Epstein, London: Soncino, 1988)

Another talmudic version of this story appears in the apocryphal Life of Adam and Eve 32:

Then Eve rose and went out and fell on the ground and said: "I have sinned, O God, I have sinned, O Father of all, I have sinned against the cherubim, I have sinned against your steadfast throne, I have sinned, Lord I have sinned much, I have sinned before you, and all sin in creation has come about through me."18 While Eve was still on her knees praying, behold, the angel of mankind came to her... (in: Charlesworth, II, p. 287)

Eve repents, thus redeeming the tarnished image of the biblical Eve. The later sources, then, are not content with depicting Eve as the mother of all life, or as a woman leading her husband astray. For them, Eve is a pious woman who prays to God and repents of her sins. The important difference between the two talmudic and apocryphal sources is that the Talmud regards Eve's prayer as the counterpart of her husband's prayer; while in the apocrypha she prays independently (though at the request of her husband). Moreover, talmudic literature does not quote a verbatim account of Eve's words as the apocrypha does, along with mention of the angel that was revealed to Eve. At the same time, the two traditions are united in speaking of Eve's weeping and repentance (like the tearful Hannah).

---

17 The variants differ as to the word "fast", and the word does not appear in the MS Abodah Zarah in The Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, facsimile S. Abramson (New York, 1957), p. 14, and see below. At the same time, the parallel tradition says of Adam: "He sat and fasted eight days [in prayer]" and the word "prayer" is missing in the MS. It seems, then, that the scribes merged the two traditions into a single text.

18 On the mention of angels in the prayer of a sinner who weeps while praying, cf. further below, ch. 6, to the prayer of Elazar b. Dardoyah. Notice the proliferation of the words "I sinned", similar to the traditional confession prayer of the sinner: "For the sin that I have sinned before You...".
PRAYERS BY WOMEN

2. Rebekah

It will be recalled that at first Rebekah was barren: "Isaac pleaded with the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord responded to his plea." This is explicated in Midrash Genesis Rabbah 63:5:

Lenokha (for) his wife - this teaches that Isaac prostrated himself in one spot and she in another [opposite him], and he prayed to God: 'Sovereign of the Universe! May all the children which Thou wilt grant me be from this righteous woman.' She too prayed likewise" (tr. under the editorship of H. Freedman and M. Simon, London: Soncino, 1939, p. 558).

The midrash describes Rebekah praying "opposite" her husband, like Eve and Adam. Rebekah's prayer is not quoted verbatim, though it would seem to have followed along the lines of her husband's prayer. This succinct prayer said by a barren woman differs from Hannah's prayer. It is a reminder that Isaac was the only patriarch to take only one wife, and the only one who prayed to God for a personal problem, and was answered. At the same time, it seems that the original midrashic context of this prayer was the suggestion that Isaac and Rebekah separate and marry other spouses, in the hope that they would have children. In that story, Isaac and Rebekah replied that they wanted to continue living as man and wife. Each spoke of the righteousness of the other, hoping it would act in their favor in their efforts to produce offspring.

Another prayer by Rebekah, in Midrash Ha-gadol to Gen. (ed. M. Margaliot, p. 522), reads: "Master of the Universe, May you make right my humiliation and plead my case and show that I am innocent." This prayer by a barren woman belongs to the genre of a complaint lodged against God. The barren woman implores Him to give her a just hearing, in keeping with the ancient belief that barrenness was a punishment. The barren woman is certain that she did not do any wrong, and should not be punished. She asks God for a just hearing, as she is sure she will be found innocent. This is in the same spirit as other prayers, based on the ancient customs dictating the behavior of a defendant in a court of law.¹⁹ The accused, Rebekah, hopes to prove her innocence before God as judge, so that God will then reward her with children, and she will no longer suffer humiliation (such as Peninah inflicted upon Hannah).²⁰


²⁰ The pseudo-Jonathan translation to Gen. 25:22 has it that Rebekah went to Shem's academy "to ask God for mercy".
Here are two prayers by barren women. In neither one is there any hint of a personal or feminine mark, though this is not to say that all barren women necessarily prayed in the same manner.

*Jubilees* 25:1 ff. tells how Rebekah called Jacob and instructed him not to marry a Canaanite woman. Jacob promised to obey. Rebekah then raised her hands to heaven, spreading her fingers\(^{21}\) and prayed:

May the Lord God be blessed, and may His holy name be blessed for ever and ever, He who gave to me Jacob, a pure son and a holy seed; because he is Yours and his seed will belong to You for all times and in all generations forever. O Lord, bless him and place in my mouth a righteous blessing so that I might bless him (Charlesworth, vol. II, p. 105).

The author attributed a prayer of thanksgiving to the matriarch Rebekah at the birth of her son (though he was 63 at the time!), a prayer reminiscent of Hannah's request for a son. The author was not content with presenting the mother's prayer — he includes also her blessing for her son. The later author, then, adds the mother's prayer to the father's blessing of his son that appears in the Bible, as balance and complement to the biblical text.

3. Rachel

Rachel, too, was barren at first. No prayer of hers is mentioned in the Bible, though we read: "Now God remembered Rachel" (Gen. 30:22), employing the same root z-kh-r (to remember) that figured in Hannah's prayer for a son. Indeed, the pseudo-Jonathan translation of Genesis (Gen. 30:6, 8,22 and elsewhere) understands the text as saying that Rachel prayed to God. The barren Rachel, then, prayed for a son, and even though her prayer, unlike Hannah's, does not appear verbatim in the Bible, the post-biblical sources complete the picture by attributing a prayer to her. Sefer Hayashar, a later composition, quotes Rachel's prayer:

Lord God, remember me and give me a child, as my husband will banish me if I do not bear him sons.

Now, Lord God, hear my appeal to you, see my distress and give me sons even as one of the maidservant, so I may be humiliated no longer.\(^{22}\)


\(^{22}\) E. Goldschmidt (ed.), *Sefer Hayashar* (Berlin, 1923), p. 101. On the date of this work,
As in Hannah’s prayer, God is addressed here by two different titles. Additional similarities are the request to be remembered and in the self-portrayal as a simple maidservant. At the same time, Rachel fears that her husband will banish her because she bore no sons, and her fear is her incentive for asking God to consider her plight. This, then, is an eminently feminine prayer.

God does heed this prayer of Rachel’s, as we know, and other prayers were also attributed to her. One tradition has it that Rachel prayed that her sister Leah’s baby would change from a boy to a girl, and thus Dinah was in actual fact born a boy and not a girl (see next section). However, the most important tradition is of Rachel, the compassionate mother, praying for her sons: “Wailing, bitter weeping — Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone” (Jer. 31:15). The barren Rachel who prayed for sons was later transformed into Rachel, the bereaved mother, weeping (like other mothers, that is, praying, over her lost children).23

4. Leah

Leah, Rachel’s sister, also prayed to God: “God heeded Leah” (Gen. 30:17) and this appears as well in the pseudo-Jonathan translation of Gen. 30:17, 21. According to one tradition, Dinah should have been born a boy, but the prayer of one of the matriarchs succeeded in effecting the change. One tradition has Leah responsible for the change of the baby’s sex, another attributes it to Rachel.24 The Bible attributes the naming of the sons to the matriarchs, not the patriarchs, so it is likely that the mother should pray for the desired sex of the child (women usually, it is commonly believed, prefer a son to a daughter). As a rule, only the patriarchs pray in the Bible, not the matriarchs; post-biblical literature, however, rounds out and complements the female biblical characters by including women’s prayers that were answered.


23 On the prayers of the bereaved matriarch Rachel, see Gen. Rabbah 62, 10: “to ask for mercy for them”; the beginning of Lamentations Rabbati 24.
24 Regarding Leah, see: pseudo-Jonathan to Gen. 30:21; b. Berakhot 60a, which calculates the time during pregnancy when one can ask for mercy for the unborn infant. Regarding Rachel: See y. Berakhot 6:5, 14a: “Since Rachel prayed, it [the infant] was made a girl.”
4. Tamar, daughter-in-law of Judah

In the pseudo-Jonathan translation to Gen. 38:25, we read of Tamar’s prayer to God after Judah had pronounced that she be burned at the stake:

She raised her eyes heavenwards and said: Please, God, in your mercy, respond to my distress and open my eyes so that I may find three witnesses (a seal, a cord and a staff, all belonging to Judah) and I will bear you three martyrs (Hannaniah, Mishael and Azariah) who will sanctify your name and enter the burning oven in the Valley of Durah.\(^{25}\)

The underlying reasoning of Tamar’s prayer is similar to that of Hannah’s: give me a son now, and I will come to your rescue later on, through my son.\(^{26}\)

5. Aseneth

One of the difficulties faced by the authors of the midrash was to explain how it was possible that Joseph the Righteous married Aseneth, daughter of Poti-pherah the priest of On (Gen. 41:45). Several interpretations have been offered, one suggesting that Aseneth converted to Judaism. This chain of events does not appear in the Bible and is unknown in rabbinic literature, but it does appear in the apocrypha. In the apocryphal *Joseph and Aseneth*, we learn that Aseneth converted, and when she became aware of the existence of the Creator of the Universe, she did the following:

And she took a piece of sackcloth and girded it around her waist. And she loosened the clasp of the hair of her head and sprinkled ashes upon her head. And she scattered the ashes on the floor with both hands, and wept bitterly, and fell upon the ashes and wept with great and bitter weeping all night, with sighing and screaming until daybreak (Charlsworthy, II, p. 216).\(^{27}\)

Aseneth underwent physical mortification after the fashion of mourners and sinners, and shed tears all night long, like Eve. She fasted for seven days, raised her hands eastwards and her eyes heavenward and prayed:

Lord God of the ages, who created all things and gave life to them, who brought the invisible things out into the light, ...to you I will shout, Lord, to you I will pour out my supplication, to you I will confess my sins, and to you I will reveal my lawless deeds.

---

\(^{25}\) In D. Rieder, Targum Yonatan ben Uziel al ha-Torah (Jerusalem, 1974), p. 60.

\(^{26}\) A. Shinan, Aggadatam shel Meturgemanim (Jerusalem, 1979), p. 327 ff. (Hebrew).

\(^{27}\) Cf. the composition known as “The prayer of Manasseh”, a prayer said by a newly-observant Jew: Charlseworth, II, pp. 625 ff.
Spare me, Lord, because I have sinned much before you, I have committed lawlessness and irreverence, and have said wicked and unspeakable things before you. I have sinned, ...I, Aseneth, daughter of Pentephres the priest, the virgin and queen, who was once proud and arrogant. Rescue me before I am caught by my persecutors, For just as a little child who is afraid flees to his father... And the lion their father furiously persecutes me, but you, Lord, rescue me from his hands... Rescue me, Lord, the desolate and solitary, because my father and my mother disowned me and ...Behold, I put off my linen royal robe, interwoven with violet and gold, and dressed in a black mourning tunic. Behold, I loosened my golden girdle and threw it off me and girded a rope and sackcloth around myself...and have sprinkled ashes (upon my head) (Charlesworth, II, pp. 220-223).

Then an angel is revealed to Aseneth, announcing that God has heard her prayer. She is instructed to change her clothes of mourning. Upon his orders, the convert removes the scarf from her head, and the angel of God announces once more that God has heard her prayer and her name will be inscribed in the Book of Life. We have, then, a description of the conversion of a gentile woman who prays to God asking his forgiveness, like Eve before her, and God accepts her prayer and sends her an angel. It should be noted that Aseneth, like Deborah, refers to herself by name in her prayer. The mention of motherhood and the feminine items of clothing add a feminine imprint to this plea for forgiveness.

7. The wife of On, son of Peleth

On, the son of Peleth, was at first a member of the rebellious company of Korah (Num 16:1) but his name subsequently disappears from the text. The midrash explains this by saying that he distanced himself from the conflict, or, rather, his wife saved him from sinning by dissuading him from taking part in the rebellion. The authors of the midrash highly praised On’s wife for saving her husband. They relate that when the earth yawned open to swallow Korah and his company, On’s wife seized a staff and said:

Lord of All Worlds,
He has already sworn in Your great Name that he would never take part in a rebellion. As Your Name, God, is endless and lasts forever — thus will You be able to exact his punishment, if ever he transgresses his vow.

28 Compare to the conversion of the prostitute from the Cities of the Sea (below, ch. 6). Both cases feature beautiful gentile women who talk of their gods, sleep on golden beds, fall in love with a Jew of Eretz-Israel, distribute money generously to charity, convert to Judaism and marry their beloved. Various parallels to this composition are found in the early midrashei aggada, and for this reason, strands related to Jews and to Eretz-Israel are embedded in it, though it may have originated in Alexandria.

29 According to Midrash Ha-Gadol on Num 16:32, ed. by Z.M. Rabinowitz (Jerusalem,
This righteous woman first saved her husband from sinning, and then she prayed to God to rescue her husband from the gaping earth, saying her husband had previously sworn never to participate in a rebellion. Even if this is not a feminine prayer per se, it would seem that a woman pleading for her husband’s life is definitely a feminine matter.

8. Jael

Jael, a minor figure in the war against Sisera, won elaborate praise in the hymn of Deborah. However, the later traditions were not content with Deborah’s praise and added further details to the biblical account. Pseudo-Philos 31 recounts that Jael was a beautiful woman. Sisera fled to her and she adorned herself with jewels and approached him.\(^{30}\) Sisera requested milk, and while he was sleeping, Jael went out to the flock and got milk.

And when she was milking she said: “And now be mindful, O Lord, of what you assigned every tribe or race to the earth. Did you not choose Israel alone and liken it to no animal except to the ram that goes before and leads the flock? And so look and see that Sisera has made a plan and said, ‘I will go and punish the flock of the Most Powerful One,’ and I will take from the milk of these animals to which you have likened your people, and I will go and give him to drink. And when he will have drunk he will be off guard, and afterward I will kill him. But this will be the sign that you act along with me, Lord, that, when I enter when Sisera is asleep, he will rise up and ask me again and again, saying, ‘Give me water to drink,’ then I know that my prayer will have been heard (Charlesworth, II, p. 344).

Jael’s prayer raises several points of interest. First, it must be noted that it takes place at the hour of milking, showing a countrywoman whose metaphors draw upon the daily reality of her life.\(^{31}\) Jael appeal to God with a request for him to “remember” (reminiscent both of Hannah’s prayer and the “Remembrance” prayer for the New Year) and goes on to note Israel’s chosen status in her prayer for salvation.\(^{32}\) The author — whether man or woman — says that Jael requested God to give her a sign, like the sign requested by the servant of Abraham. This is, then, a form of prayer characteristic of non-Jews living in a Jewish environ-

---

1978), p. 278. Cf. b. Sanhedrin 109b, where the story appears in a similar version but with the omission of the woman’s prayer.

30 In: Charlesworth, II, pp. 297 ff. See more about Jael above, ch. 1.

31 Cf. Hannah’s prayer, described by a modern scholar (above, n. 13) as the prayer of a simple woman, and cf. the prayer said by the wife of Obadiah, below.

32 Cf. additional prayers for salvation that make mention of Israel’s chosen status, in M. Bar-Ilan, “Ra’ayon ha-behir a ba-tefillah ha-yehudit”, S. Almog and M. Heyd (eds.), Ra’ayon ha-behir a be-Yisrael u-va’amim (Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, Jerusalem, 1991), pp. 121-145 (Hebrew).
ment. Later, before Jael deals Sisera the fatal blow, she again turns to God in prayer and says: “Strengthen me today, Lord, on account of You and Your people and those who hope in You” (Charlesworth, II, p. 345).

The motif of Jael’s conversion to Judaism differs in rabbinic traditions and in the apocrypha: in the apocrypha, Jael is the ultimate heroine — she is beautiful and she prays to God, too. The post-biblical tradition is not content to portray the valiant Jael as the gentile wife of Heber the Kenite. This is the motivation behind the story of her conversion, and the specific mention of Israel as the chosen people in her personal prayer.

9 Mother of Samson

Judges 13:2-5 tells us that the wife of Manoah was barren. An angel came to her and announced the birth of her son, Samson. This biblical story was elaborated in Pseudo-Philo’s account: we learn that the wife’s name was Eluma, daughter of Remac, and that her husband Manoah asked her permission to take another wife so that he would not die without a son. The couple argued and were saddened that they had no son, until Eluma went up on the roof of her house one night and prayed:

> Behold you, Lord God of all flesh, reveal to me whether it has not been granted to my husband or to me to produce children, or to whom it may be forbidden or to whom it may be allowed to bear fruit in order that whoever is forbidden may weep over his sins because he remains without fruit. Or if both of us have been deprived, then reveal this to us also so that we might bear our sins and be silent before you (Charlesworth, II, p. 355).

After this prayer, God sent the angel to Eluma again, and He announced that she, and not her husband, was barren. He added that God had heard her entreaty and would grant her a child. The author of Pseudo-Philo, then — whether man or woman — linked the angel’s revelation to the woman, in itself a rare event in the Bible, to her prayer, and added, almost incidentally, “feminine” details unknown from other sources: a husband wishing to take a second wife but first requesting his wife’s permission (and the argument between the couple). The prayer said by Samson’s mother is of especial interest. In the biblical account, husbands of barren woman (Sara, Rachel, Hannah) had other wives and had sons from them, so it is clear that the wife’s barrenness was a punishment for her own sins. But since Samson’s father did not have another wife, how is one to know that the barren party was the wife — perhaps it was the man who had sinned. For this reason the angel appears and announces that the woman is indeed barren, but God has
heard her prayer. Clearly here is a feminine expression of the problem of sterility in antiquity.33

10. Hannah

To Hannah’s prayer, as recounted in 1 Sam., post-biblical traditions added other prayers, based on the verse saying that she “kept on praying” (1 Sam. 1:12). In b. Berakhot 31b there is a lengthy discussion about Hannah’s unique prayer. Different talmudic sages ascribe different versions of the prayer to Hannah:

(1) Said Hannah before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of the Universe, of all the hosts and hosts that Thou has created in Thy world, is it so hard in Thy eyes to give me one son?...

(2) Hannah said before the Holy One: Sovereign of the Universe, if Thou wilt look, it is well, and if Thou wilt not look, I will go and shut myself up with someone else in the knowledge of my husband Elkanah, and as I shall have been alone they will make me drink the water of the suspected wife, and Thou canst not falsify Thy law, which says, she shall be cleared and shall conceive seed.

(3) Sovereign of the Universe, Thou hast created in woman three criteria of death [(some say three armor joints of death), namely, niddah, hallah and the kindling of the light on Sabbath] Have I transgressed in any of them?

(4) Sovereign of the Universe, among all the things that Thou hast created in a woman, Thou hast not created one without a purpose, eyes to see, ears to hear, a nose to smell, a mouth to speak, hands to do work, legs to walk with, breasts to give suck. These breasts that Thou hast put on my heart, are they not to give suck? Give me a son, so that I may suckle with them (BT, translated under the editorship of I. Epstein, London: Soncino, 1988).

All three prayers attributed to Hannah by the talmudic sages differ from her biblical prayer. Three of the four prayers are distinctly feminine (2,3,4): prayers 1 and 4 make explicit requests for a son; in 2, the same request is implied. The prayers are each couched in a different tone: the first is a simple plea, the second aims to compel God to carry out the will of the woman praying to him (somewhat like a magical spell). The third prayer is a complaint lodged against God, like that of the barren Rebekah (with allusions to m. Shabbat 2:6). The fourth prayer is an attempt to persuade God that it is illogical that Hannah has no sons.34 All the prayers mention that the barren woman prayed often to God, as is indeed stated in the biblical account.35

33 Cf. other feminine literary qualities of Pseudo-Philo, above, ch. 3, n. 29.
34 Heineman (above, n. 19) cited only three out of the four prayers, and considered them one single prayer.
35 Cf. the woman in the apocryphal Vision of Ezra 7:38 who prayed “day and night” because she was barren.
PRAYERS BY WOMEN

The following is yet another prayer attributed to Hannah; once more, it is an attempt to persuade God that she deserves a son.36:

Master of the Universe, there is a host above, and there is a host below. The host above do not eat, nor drink, nor procreate, nor die, but they live for ever; and the host below eat, and drink, and procreate, and die. Now I do not know of what host I am, whether I am of the one above or the one below. If I am of the host above, I should not be eating, nor drinking, nor possibly bearing children, nor dying, for I should live for ever, just as the host above live for ever. But if I am of the host below, then not only should I be eating and drinking, but I should be bearing children and eventually dying, even as the host below eat, and drink, and procreate, and die (Pesikta Rabbati, tr. by William Braude, YUP, New Haven and London, 1968, p. 757).37

In conclusion, we see that many prayers were attributed to Hannah, and the authors of the midrash regarded her as the exemplary model of a woman praying to God.38

11. Tamar, daughter of David

The date of the composition of the apocryphal The Words of Gad the Seer is uncertain.39 The book deals chiefly with Gad, David’s seer, but refers to other events as well. It tells of Tamar, David’s daughter, who fled to Geshur after being raped by her half-brother, Amnon. There she again fell victim to an attempted rape. The biblical account tells only of Tamar’s rape by Amnon, while in the apocryphal account she prays to

36 Compare this prayer to the ancient liturgical poem composed in Eretz-Israel, recited as part of the Rosh Hashana service: ‘Today is the birthday of the world... if as children... if as servants’.
37 The words of R. Judah b. R. Simon in Pesikta Rabbati 43. The same rabbi also cites two other prayers which in b. Berakhot 31b are attributed to other sages (and then he cites an additional prayer), closely resembling prayer no. 3 in Berakhot.
38 In the discussion in b. Berakhot 31a-b, several halakhot are inferred from Hannah’s prayer, such as: “from this we learn that one who prays must direct his heart”; “from this, that a drunken person is forbidden to say the Tefillah”; “From this we learn that it is forbidden to sit within four cubits of one saying Tefillah”, etc. Pesikta Rabbati 40 has: “the requirement of nine benedictions in the Tefillah for the New Year’s Day may manifestly be inferred from the chapter with Hannah’s prayer” (which is the Haftarah portion for New Year’s Day. See: b. Megillah 31a; b. Rosh Hashana 11a). Midrash Samuel 5 has the following saying in the name of Rabbi Judah: “Korah and his community kept sinking lower and lower, until Hannah appeared and prayed for them.” That is, Hannah had power even over those who had long since descended to hell in the bowels of the earth. Cf. also the prayer that Hannah said for the sons of Peninah. In Pesikta Rabbati 43, p. 767: “be forbearing toward her in regard to her two children and let them stay alive.” In Yalkut Shimoni on 1 Sam, 80: “Hannah prayed – from this we learned that women are obligated to pray, since Hannah prayed the eighteen benedictions.”
39 Cf. ch. 1, above, regarding the plot itself, as well as the bibliographical details.
God, upon which she is immediately rescued from her second assailant. Thus does Tamar pray:

Tamar took up the harp to play pleasant tunes and said to herself:

God of David, your servant and my father:
send your light and your might to uphold me and do not permit the lust of the evil
and unclean uncircumcised; You know what is in my heart — do not allow the
daughter of your servant David to be violated;
my father David, my father David, my father David!
see the shame and disgrace of your daughter; Go, approach God’s Divine throne and
beg mercy for me from God Almighty to come to my rescue;
He does not want evil done by cruel men....
O God, save me! O God, be victorious!
I will call out to you when I fear and you will reply, and do not waste holy seed by
uncleanliness;
since you are the holy God and I trust in you.

Tamar, then, prays in her heart out of fear of her assailant, accompanied
by a kinnor (as in the temple service), and in fact says two prayers: one
addressed directly to God, and the other to David, her father, asking him
to pray before the throne of God on her behalf. She includes biblical
verses in her prayer, and God indeed heeds her. When the assailant
falls asleep, Tamar takes his sword from its scabbard and says:

God Almighty, Remember David, and give me of his strength and Your might to
sustain me; Help me, as you helped the wife of Heber the Kenite to abolish evil and
evil-doers from the land, So all will know that You alone are God.

Tamar addresses God (the text reads: Yahweh) and, like Hannah,
requests that God remember the merit of the patriarchs (like the
“Remembrance” prayer) and asks God for assistance, as he assisted Jael.
And indeed, after she has killed her assailant, she says aloud:

Thus do perish all Your enemies and the enemies of Your people, God;
I have now seen that You have heeded my father and have not abandoned his
daughter to the disgrace of evil men;
Blessed are Thou forever and ever, Amen.

Tamar’s last prayer ends with a reworking of Deborah’s prayer (Judg.
5:31), and her concluding words paraphrase the conclusion of the Book
of Psalms (Ps. 99:53). It may be said that the prayers of Tamar, daughter
of David, are unique, and merit further study, as does The Words of
Gad the Seer as a whole.

40 For the mention of the Chariot in the prayer service, see M. Bar-llan, “Birkat
‘Yotzer Ha’adam’ - mekomot hofa’ata, tifkuda unashmauta”, HUCA, 56 (1985), Hebrew
section, pp. 8-27.
41 I propose to deal elsewhere with the prayers in The Words of Gad the Seer in
12. The wife of the prophet Obadiah

The post-biblical authors of the midrash identified the prophet Obadiah with “Obadiah, the steward of the palace” (1 Chron. 18:3), the most senior official in King Ahab’s court. The verse goes on to say that Obadiah “revered the Lord greatly” and provided the prophets of God with food, drink and shelter when they were persecuted by Jezebel. The authors of the midrash inferred from this that the two were one and the same. This, in turn, led them to identify the woman referred to in the verse “A certain woman, the wife of one of the disciples of the prophets” (2 Kings 4:1), as Obadiah’s wife. This woman brings her case to Elisha, saying that a creditor is about to seize her two children, and Elisha performs a miracle with a jug of oil and saves her. The reasoning behind this identification was, apparently, to redeem Obadiah from obscurity. This is a well-known device in the midrash (the prophet’s father’s name is not mentioned) and to reward Obadiah. Just as Obadiah gave the prophets of God food and drink, the prophet Elisha extends aid to Obadiah’s wife in her hour of need. It thus transpires that God gives assistance to the woman thanks to the righteousness of her husband, not for any merit of her own. In a later midrash, Obadiah’s wife is praised over all women, and her husband’s righteousness in providing food and drink for the prophets is attributed to her. The compilers of the midrash believed that when God created Eve, he saw that women were destined to “lead his sons astray”; however, the thought of Obadiah’s righteous wife counterbalanced the future evil and justified the creation of Eve: “If I create Eve who is called “one” (Gen. 2:21), not for one alone, I am satisfied.”

Following this opening there are several formulas of prayer by the same woman:

(1) Master of the Universe,
I know that there is no forgetfulness before your Throne.
A man plants squash: he takes the large ones to sell, and takes pity on the small ones and sleeps on them; at night he goes to water them.

greater detail.

42 "Midrash be-isha ahat mi-neshey bnei ha-neviim", Magazin, 3 (1876), 153 (=J.D. Eisenstein, Ozar Midrashim, I, rep. Jerusalem 1969, pp. 144-145; on the fragments of the midrash found in The Lost Midrash to Ruth); L Ginzberg, Ginzei Schechter, I (New York, 1927), pp. 298-299 (Hebrew); L. Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, VI. CF also Midrash Ha-Gadol to Ex. 30:12: “Israel would have been destroyed were it not for the merit of Obadiah’s wife.” A similar wording is found in Pesikta de-Ra Kahana, tr. William Braude and Israel Kapstein (JPS, Philadelphia, 1975), p. 28: “Israel would have been destroyed in that hour of God’s wrath were it not for the merit of Obadiah’s wife.”

The authors of the midrash transferred Obadiah’s charity to his wife, apparently because it is usually women who feed the hungry (see further below).
You do not forget the squash, yet You forget the wives of the sons of the prophets?
Also, she said before Him:

(2) Master of the Universe,
In the heavens are the signs Pleiades and Orion. When the Flood descended upon the world, Pleiades stole two stars from Orion, and You will comfort it in the future, as it is written: (Job 38:32): “Can you... conduct the Bear with her sons?”
You forget not to return them, yet You forget the wives of the sons of the prophets?
Also, she said before Him:

(3) Master of the Universe,
I know that You are merciful and support no cruelty, as it is written (Ps. 116:9): “(He) who gives the beasts their food, to the raven’s brood what they cry for.”
You forget them not, yet you forget the wives of the sons of the prophets?
She said before Him:

(4) Master of the Universe,
My husband lends to You alone, who lend and demand payment honestly, as it is written (Prov. 19:17): “He who is generous to the poor makes a loan to the Lord.”
And your servant, my husband is dead!
She said before Him:

(5) Master of the Universe,
If a woman’s father and mother die she depends on her husband. If her husband dies, whom can she depend on?
If she be wealthy — people assist her according to her wealth. And who takes a widow and her two sons into his house?

After the widow says these prayers, she goes to the cemetery and calls to her husband to rescue her: “She gathered some earth and threw it on her head and from the dirt she called to him: ‘my husband, my husband.’” We see, then, that in addition to the five prayers cited in the midrash, the woman prays at her husband’s grave with dust heaped on her head. She then goes with her children to Elisha “in sackcloth,” that is, in mourning, and the children beg: “Take us, father, for we have no savior,” in other words, they prayed to die. These prayers raise several points of interest. In the first three prayers like Hannah, mother of Samuel, the woman appeals to God not to forget her. Moreover, the mention of God’s throne as an expression of respect, is a metonymic substitution for the name of God himself, familiar from the prayers of Eve and Tamar, daughter of David, and the “Remembrance” prayer: individual and communal prayers converge here.

The widow employs an interesting and unfamiliar form of address. The image of squash indicates that she is a countrywoman, and details

---

43 Cf. the prayer said by the people of Israel to God, according to Resh Lakish (b. Berakhot 32b). This is a feminine prayer said by a woman when her husband takes a second wife.
44 See M. Bar-Ilan, Sitrei Tefillah ve-Hekhalot (Ramat-Gan 1987, Hebrew), under zikhronot in the general index.
of her daily life are integrated into her prayer, similar to Jael, who prays in the very act of milking the goat; in that same context, the ram — another image from nature — symbolizes Israel. The image of Pleiades and Orion makes use of a popular legend (based on an alternative reading of नाय, one that differs from the accepted vocalization) which appears in b. Berakhot 58b-59a: What is meant by Kimah (Pleiades)? ... What is meant by 'Ash (the Bear)...'Ayish will be comforted for her children... she is saying to her, give me my children... The woman (or the midrash that attributes the prayer to her) was familiar with the aggadah that mentions consolation for the mother whose two children were taken from her, in a situation similar to that of Obadiah’s wife, and she included the legend in her prayer. In this way, composers of liturgical poetry drew upon rabbinic aggadah and wove them into their work. One of Hannah’s prayers, too, alludes to Mishnah Shabbat. Three of the five prayers conclude with a biblical verse, after the traditional format of prayers. Femininity appears explicitly only in the fifth prayer, and perhaps in the second prayer as well. This prayer belongs to the genre of remonstration against God: the woman sets forth her case before God, like a defendant in court (cf. the prayers of Rebekah and Hannah, above), calling upon God to come to her assistance. All the prayers by women were uttered in their hour of need, when they were alone, and presumably reflect familiar prayers — not necessarily said by woman.

13. Esther

In the biblical Book of Esther, God’s name is not mentioned once. Esther’s moral and religious standards too leave much to be desired. This lack was rectified in the apocryphal Additions to Esther, which paints Esther in a more religious light, with the intent of improving her image so that the wife of a gentile king can assume a place of honor in the Jewish community. According to this addition, Mordechai prayed for the rescue of the Jewish people, and afterwards Queen Esther recited the following prayer:

My Lord, our King, Thou art God alone; help me who stand alone, and have no helper save Thee: for my danger is in my hand.

46 Cf. also the characterization of Esther, above, ch. 1.
I have heard ever since I was born in the tribe of my family that Thou, Lord, didst take Israel out of all the nations, and our fathers from their progenitors, for an everlasting inheritance, and that Thou didst for them all that Thou didst promise.... But save us by Thy hand, and help me who stand alone, and have none save Thee, O Lord, Knowledge hast Thou... and Thou knowest that I hate the glory of the wicked, and I detest the bed of the uncircumcised and of any alien.... And thy servant hath not eaten at the table of Haman... And Thy servant hath known no joy since the day I was brought until now, save in Thee, Lord God of Abraham. O God, whose strength is over all, hear the voice of the hopeless, and save us from the hand of them that deal wickedly, and save me out of my fear (R.H. Charles, The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament, Oxford 1913, pp. 676-8).

In her prayer for her people, Esther calls upon God to save Israel, His chosen people.47 It is clear, therefore, that the mention of the chosen people in a prayer for the rescue of the people of Israel is a vital component of the prayer, as in Jael's prayer and others of a similar nature. Esther also refers to the omniscience of God, a theme that appears too in the “Remembrance” prayer; she emphasizes her status as a mother, a feature of women’s prayers which we discussed above.48 Of special note is Esther’s apologetics: she distances herself from any possible charge that could be leveled against her, charges which indeed surface in a discussion in the Talmud.49 In addition, Esther’s prayer is known also from rabbinic sources and not from the apocrypha alone: in the former, however, it is precisely those positive arguments in Esther’s favor that are missing.50 It would seem that at the end of the talmudic period the doubts about the sanctity of the book of Esther had all but dissipated, and the midrash felt no further need to justify Esther, although they did add a gratuitous prayer to the biblical account.

47 See above, n. 32.
48 The text continues “and upon the third day, when she ceased to pray.” That is, the author read Esther 4:16 “and fast for me... for three days,” as though the fasting was accompanied by praying. However, the prayers discussed hitherto cannot confirm this, and there is no proof that Esther’s fast was accompanied by prayer.
49 B. Sanhedrin 74b: “Esther was merely natural soil” (meaning that it took place against her will, as in Esther 2,8: “Esther too was taken into the king’s palace”). Regarding Esther’s statement that she never ate at Haman’s table, we read in b. Megillah 12a: “R. Simon b. Yohai was asked by his disciples: Why were the enemies of Israel in that generation deserving of extermination. He said to them: Do you answer. They said: Because they partook of the feast of that wicked one”. See further ibid. 13a.
50 Cf. Esther’s prayer in Esther Rabbah 8 (it is clear there that the author was familiar with the apocryphal Additions to Esther); a second translation of Esther, ch. 5 (a very lengthy prayer of a completely different nature); A. Yellink, Beit Ha-midrash2 (Jerusalem, 1938), V, pp. 5-8.
14. **Sitis, Job’s wife**

The apocryphal Testament of Job preserves several prayers and sayings by women, notably elegies.\(^{51}\) The book tells of Sitis, Job’s wife, who faced eastwards, fell down and prayed in the following words:

Now I know that I have a memorial with the Lord. So I shall arise and return to the city and nap awhile and then refresh myself before the duties of my servitude (Testament of Job, Charlesworth, p. 860).

Immediately upon concluding this prayer, Sitis falls dead. Obviously this is a deathbed prayer, though this is not stated explicitly. Like Hannah, Sitis requests that God remember her, and asked for a reward in the hereafter, showing that she was certain of being found innocent.

Herea, Job’s daughter, sings hymns of the angels to God; the exact nature of these hymns is unknown. Of Job’s other daughter, Amaltheia’s Horn, it says that she was: “...glorifying the Master of virtues by exhibiting their splendor (cherubim). And finally whoever wishes to grasp a trace of “The Paternal Splendor” will find it written in “The Prayers of Amaltheia’s Horn”. The author here knows of — or invents — the existence of a compilation of prayers by the woman Amaltheia’s Horn, which included, aside from prayers to God, also praise by her father, Job.\(^{52}\) It is difficult to know what book of feminine prayers the author was referring to, since a compilation of women’s prayers in book-form would be created only over fifteen hundred years after the supposed date of the book of prayers of Amaltheia’s Horn.

Following this look at biblical women, or rather, at post-biblical traditions of biblical women, we turn now to the prayers by women in the apocrypha, which would seem to be of later composition than those treated until now.

15. **Judith**

The *Book of Judith* deals mainly with the bravery of Judith, who saved her city and her people.\(^{53}\) The author heaps all possible praise upon Judith, short of calling her a prophetess: she was high-born, obedient, beautiful, wealthy, pious, and most importantly — brave. Chapter 9 in the book is devoted wholly to the prayer of Judith, a woman crying out for help:

---

\(^{51}\) See, on this matter and on this book in general, above, ch. 3.

\(^{52}\) Cf. the prayer of Tamar daughter of David, who mentions her father in her prayers. See further, below, in the prayer of Judith, and in M. Bar-Ilan, *Sitrei Tefillah ve-Hekhalot*, p. 125.

\(^{53}\) See above, ch. 1, for more on this matter.
O Lord God of my father Simeon, into whose hand Thou gavest a sword to take vengeance of the strangers who loosened the girdle of a virgin to defile her, and uncovered the thigh to her shame, and profaned the womb to her reproach... gavest their wives for prey and their daughters to be captives... O God, O my God, hear me also that I am a widow... and they know not that Thou art the Lord that breaketh the battles, the Lord is Thy name. Dash down their strength in Thy power, and bring down their force in Thy wrath... break down their staleness by the hand of a woman... Yea yea, God of my father and God of the inheritance of Israel... And make every nation and tribe of thine to know that Thou art God, the God of all power and might, and that there is none other that protecteth the race of Israel but Thou (Judith, Charles, p. 258).

Two themes figure in this prayer: on one hand, there is a general appeal for salvation to the God of the patriarchs (not the matriarchs), and Judith beseeches God to save the Jewish people. On the other hand, this is clearly a feminine prayer. The supplicant emphasizes the suffering of women who were raped or taken captive, and prays for a woman to achieve victory. Judith ignores the fallen male warriors (as does Deborah in her hymn of praise) and emphasizes the fact that she is female and a widow. She makes an inter-textual allusion to the hymn of victory sung by Moses and Miriam by quoting the verse: “The Lord, a Warrior — Lord is His name” (Ex. 15:3).

Further on, Judith reveals to the gentile general that she prays every night (11:17) and again at the break of dawn (12:6). When held captive by Holofernes, Judith prays even after her baptism (12:8), apparently continuing her previous habit. Afterwards, right before she kills Holofernes who is lolling drunkenly on his bed, she prays in her heart:

O Lord of all power, look in this hour upon the works of my hands for the exaltation of Jerusalem. For now is the time to help Thine inheritance, and to do the thing that I have purposed to the destruction of the enemies which are risen up against us (Charles, Judith, p. 262).

Later, Judith escapes to Bethulia, and the Israelites pursue their enemies. After this, the Jewish women dance with her, then take palm fronds, crown themselves with olive branches as a symbol of victory and joy, and finally Judith leads all the women in a dance. Chapter 15 (Charles, I, p. 265) of the Book of Judith is devoted to Judith’s hymn of victory:

---

54 The statement that ‘The putting of sackcloth on everything in sight... [or] Judith’s pausing to pray before chopping off [Holofernes’] head are acts which satirize standard behavior in such settings’ seems to me a misunderstanding of (ancient) religious life where every act has a religious meaning. See: A. LaCocque, The Feminine Unconventional (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1990), p. 44 (following T. Craven).
And Judith began to sing this thanksgiving in all Israel, and all the people sang with loud voices this hymn of praise. And Judith said:

Begin unto my God with timbrels,  
Sing unto my lord with cymbals  
Sing unto him psalm and praise;  
Exalt him, and call upon his name. 
For the Lord is the God that breaketh the battles....

The Almighty Lord brought them to naught by the hand of a woman  
For their mighty one did not fall by young men,  
Neither did sons of the Titans smite him  
Nor did high giants set upon him;  
But Judith the daughter of Merari made him weak with the beauty of her countenance;  
For she put off the apparel of her widowhood.  
For the exaltation of those that were distressed in Israel  
She anointed her face with ointment  
and bound her hair in a tire.  
She took a linen garment to deceive him....

I will sing unto my god a new song....  
For the mountains shall be moved from their foundations with the waters — and the roots shall melt as wax at thy presence....

This is but a shortened version of Judith’s pæan, requiring some elucidation: this hymn, like Deborah’s, was an original composition (not a woman’s echo of a man’s song, like Miriam responding after Moses); it was performed together with other women and accompanied by musical instruments. Despite certain similarities between Judith’s victory hymn and that of Moses and Miriam, Judith’s is eminently feminine; her hymn, along with her entire book, belong therefore to our category of feminine prayers.

16. Sara, wife of Tobias

The Book of Tobias is one of the most ancient books of the apocrypha and is mentioned in midrashic and medieval sources. For our purposes it suffices to present the prayer said by Sara, only daughter of Raguel of Medea. Sara was married seven times and all her husbands died; her maidservants now taunt her. The tearful Sara goes up to the attic, thinking to commit suicide. She raises her hands to heaven and prays:

---

55 On the different ways of performing the song: by alternating responses, playing musical instruments or dance, see above, ch. 3.
Blessed are You and Your name forever, Merciful God, and may all Your creatures bless You forever. Now, I turn my face and my eyes to You. Pronounce that I shall be lifted from the earth and know no further disgrace. You, my Lord, know that I am pure of the impurity of any man. My name has not been disgraced nor the name of my father in my captivity. I am my father’s only daughter and he has no other son to inherit him, nor nephew nor relative for me to marry. Seven husbands I have already lost and why should I still wish to live. If you do not want to take my life, God – heed my disgrace.57

The desperate and humiliated woman approaches God in a mixture of accusation and pleading. She wants to die, but at the same time, she reminds God that she is righteous (as did Tamar, daughter-in-law of Judah, who had also buried her husband).58 At the same time, she states her wish to marry. It should be added that after the marriage, Tobias and Sara pray to God in the bedroom: now it is Tobias alone who prays, while his wife only answers “Amen.” Previous to her marriage, Sara had prayed independently, whereas afterwards her prayers are already dependent on her husband’s prayer.

The original Book of Tobias underwent subsequent revisions; it now includes Sara’s prayer, among others.59 After the “marriage prayer,” Tobias recites a liturgical poem and prays for salvation:60 “As You answered the prayers of our holy fathers, of Abraham in Ur Kasdim, of Isaac on Mount Moriah, of Jacob in Bethel, and the prayers of all righteous men.”61 Immediately afterwards, Sara, too, prays for salvation, and after praising God and adds the following plea:

Now, All Merciful God, listen to my prayer and my tears and remain not silent; as You listened to the prayer of our mother Sara praying over her maidservant Hagar, and the prayer of Rebekah while her two sons struggled in her womb, and the prayer of Rachel, mother of sons, and of the house, when her sister angered her...

57 An expression of a suicide wish, reminiscent of other women who could not cope with difficult problems and committed suicide. See above, ch. 1.
60 This is a liturgical poem in the ancient format of the genre, and does not appear in any other source: “God of all, Creator of all, mighty over all, knowing all, He who can do all, above all”, etc. It is my own opinion that a study of the liturgical poem and the marriage blessing indicates that the redaction of the Hebrew Book of Tobias was done before the fifth century B.C.E.
61 God’s victories for the patriarchs are mentioned in a prayer in m. Ta’anit 2:4. See also 2 Maccabees, 49-61; b. Pesahim 117a; the geniza amidah prayer, in: I. Elbogen, Hatefillah be-Yisrael behiopathutta ha-historit (Tel-Aviv 1972), pp. 397-398 (Hebrew); D. Goldschmidt, Mehkaret Tefillah u-ffyyut (Jerusalem, 1989), p. 177 ff. (Hebrew).
and the prayer of the prophetess Miriam....
and the prayer of the wife of Elkanah when angered by her rival...
So too shall my prayer rise to You in Your goodwill and I shall be worthy of this man, my husband, and send us Your blessings.

This prayer follows the traditional masculine format, but bears a clear feminine imprint. The redactor of the Book of Tobias attributes the traditional form of prayer to the man, and attributes to the woman a prayer imbued with a feminine character that transcends the traditional form. In her prayer, she cites precedents of God's responding to prayers by women.

17. *Susannah*

In the apocryphal Book of Susanna we learn of Susannah, daughter of Hilkiyah, slandered by the townspeople, who claim that she has committed adultery with a stranger. Susannah weeps and implores God to prove her innocence: "O Lord, the eternal God, who knowest all things before they come into being, thou knowest that I have not done what these lawless men maliciously allege against me" (Charles, Susannah, p. 649). Once more we have a prayer along the lines of the "Remembrance" liturgy. The praying woman is put on trial before men of flesh and blood, but she considers God her sole judge, and reminds Him that she is a righteous woman. It is therefore no surprise that the text goes on to say that God heeds her prayer, and she is saved.

We have included most of the prayers by biblical women, that is, prayers that pre-talmudic (or even contemporary) traditions attributed to biblical women, in the above discussion. We now turn to women's prayers of a later period.

III. *The first centuries*

Very few allusions to women who prayed have reached us from the first centuries C.E. The small number of prayers said by women, compared to dozens or more of attested prayers by men, does not necessarily indicate, of course, that women did not pray. Talmudic literature reflects the bias of the masculine authors and compilers, who did not award women or their prayers a place of significance in their works. Let us examine the prayers uttered by women in this period.

---

62 For more about Susannah, see above, ch. I.
1. The wife of Abba Hilkiyah

B. Ta`anit 23a-b gives a lengthy account of Abba Hilkiyah and his wife, who prayed for rain (circa the start of the first century C.E.):

Abba Hilkiyah was the grandson of Honi the Rainmaker, and when the world was in need of rain, the sages would send for him to ask for mercy and the rain would fall... One time the world was in need of rain... When Abba Hilkiyah reached the town, his wife adorned herself and went forth to greet him. When he reached his house, his wife entered first and he followed, and then the sages entered... Said Abba Hilkiyah to his wife: "I know that the sages have come here for the rain. Let us go up on the roof and ask for mercy, perhaps God will be appeased and the rain will come, and we will ask for nothing for ourselves." They went up on the roof: he stood in one corner and she in another corner. The first clouds appeared in his wife's corner. He was asked: "Please explain several things: why did the first clouds appear in your wife's corner?" He replied: "Because a woman stays at home and gives bread to the poor." Some thugs lived near Abba Hilkiyah and his wife. He requested mercy and asked for them to die. She requested mercy and asked that they repent, and they repented.

This story is not typical of rabbinic literature, telling as it does of the supernatural that causes the rain to fall; the man's grandfather, Honi, was nearly excommunicated by the sages for praying for rain. The husband's title "Abba" is also atypical, as sages are usually called "rabbì". It is difficult to ascertain to what degree this story is representative of the milieu of the sages.

The interesting point in this story is that Honi's grandson, unlike the grandfather, addresses God together with his wife, apparently believing that their joint appeal would be more effective than his solitary one. Moreover, even the direction of the moving clouds proves, according to the author, that the woman's prayer was more potent than her husband’s. Furthermore, the woman's superiority is seen in that Abba Hilkiyah's prayer for the death of the thugs went unheeded, while his wife's prayer (according to some of the manuscript variants) was answered. In addition, she was a righteous woman and gave bread to a poor man who appeared at her house. Abba Hilkiya's wife can be considered an exemplary model of a woman praying for the good of the community, whose prayer is heeded by God even more than her...

---

63 For a close reading of this text, see: S. Safrai, "Hasidim ve-anshei ma’aseh", Zion, 60 (1985), pp. 133-154 (especially pp. 141-143, Hebrew). Based on a study of the MSS, Safrai concludes that the last prayer is not authentic, because of the superiority of the wife's prayer.

64 For a similar story, see: S. Buber (ed.), Agadat Bereshit, Wilna 1925 (second ed.), p. 74.
righteous husband's. This praying couple can be compared to Isaac and Rebekah; they, too, prayed together, albeit for a private matter. However, while God heeded Isaac's prayer, it is Abba Hilkiya's wife who is more righteous and pious than her husband.

2. Anna the prophetess

Another example of a woman's prayer appears in the New Testament: "And there was a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having been married for seven years and then was widowed. At the age of eighty-four, she never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers" (Luke 2:36-7). The sages held that the vocation of prophecy had ceased to exist hundreds of years before Anna's time, and hence would disqualify this woman as a prophetess. However, they, too, admit that Anna was an exemplary figure of a pious, righteous widow, who spent her time praying to God for the redemption of Jerusalem (even before its destruction by the enemy!). In this respect, Anna resembles Judith: widows with no family obligations, and ample time for prayer. Anna also resembles the praying biblical prophetesses: Miriam, Deborah and the biblical Hannah. Like the biblical mother of Samuel, Anna prayed at the temple (or tabernacle). The biblical Hannah prayed for her private cause; Anna prayed for Jerusalem. She embodies all the positive qualities known to us from the various biblical women, of which she most closely resembles Judith, the daughter of Merari, not a prophetess.

3. Zaphenat, daughter of Peni'el

B. Gittin 58a contains the following story, attributed to Resh Lakish about the destruction of the temple,

It is related of a certain woman named Zafenath bath Peniel [she was called Zafenath because all gazed - zofin - at her beauty, and the daughter of Peniel because she was the daughter of the high priest who ministered in the inner shrine] that a brigand abused her a whole night. In the morning he put seven wraps around her and took her out to sell her. A certain man who was exceptionally ugly came and said, "Show me her beauty." He said: "Fool, if you want to buy her, buy for I tell you that there is no other so beautiful in all the world." He said to him, "All the same [show her to me]." He took six wraps off her, and she herself tore off the seventh, and rolled

---

in the dust, saying, “Sovereign of the universe, if Thou hast not pity on us, why hast Thou not pity on the sanctity of Thy name?”

This prayer bears the mark of the genre of prayers for salvation, but a closer look reveals more than a hint of bitterness towards God. The tearing of the last robe by the woman herself expresses a kind of spiritual suicide, since now the woman is left exposed; the image is an externalization of the travesty of her modesty. However, despite her personal plight, her plea takes on a religious formulation, an appeal to God to vindicate His own name.

4. Rabbi Judah’s maidservant

B. Ketuboth 104a tells of the final hours in the life of Rabbi Judah Hanassi. That day, the sages declared a fast and prayed to God that Rabbi Judah would not die. His maidservant went up on the roof and prayed: “The immortals desire Rabbi [to join them] and the mortals desire Rabbi [to remain with them]. May it be the will of God that the mortals overpower the immortals.” She does not join in the prayer of the sages, but prays independently to prevent Rabbi Judah’s death. The maidservant’s prayer resembles the opening of one of the versions of Hannah’s prayers, mentioned above: “There is a host above, and there is a host below”; it is well-known that Rabbi Judah’s maidservant was proficient in Hebrew. The story continues: the maidservant saw that Rabbi Judah was wretched due to his frequent need to empty his bowels, changed her request and prayed in defiance of the sages: “May it be the will of God that the immortals overpower the mortals.” The sages continued to pray for Rabbi Judah, staving off his death. The maidservant, out of pity for Rabbi Judah, threw a stone from the roof, and the noise made the praying sages fall silent for a moment. At that precise moment Rabbi Judah died. The wise maidservant defied the sages; however, by causing them to stop praying, she enabled Rabbi Judah to die and be released from his suffering.

5. The praying maiden

B. Sota 22a quotes the following beraita: “Our rabbis have taught — a maiden who gives herself up to prayer, a gadabout widow, and a minor whose months are not completed — behold these bring destruction

66 B. Rosh Hashana 26b.
67 The rabbinic sages told a similar story of David’s death — R. Judah Hanassi was a descendant of David: b. Shabbat 30b.
PRAYERS BY WOMEN

upon the world." The gemara adds that R. Johanan saw a maiden fall upon her face and recite the following prayer:

Lord of the Universe!
Thou hast created Paradise and Gehinnom,
Thou hast created righteous and wicked.
May it be Thy will that men should not stumble through me.

This prayer is a request by a pious young woman asking God that she not lead men astray. This form of prayer is couched elegantly, and is the highest moral degree of prayer by a woman, as the prayer is not for herself but for others. There is, however, some self-interest here as well, since she fears punishment for herself if others sin with her. This point is stressed in b. Ta'anith 24a: "R. Jose of Yokereth: My daughter, you are a source of trouble to mankind; return to the dust so that men may not sin because of you." Perhaps the praying maiden, above, feared a destiny similar to that of the daughter of R. Jose.

It should be noted that three out of these four praying women (the wife of Abba Hilkiyah, Anna the prophetess, and Rabbi Judah's maid-servant) do not belong to the spiritual milieu of the sages. Even when the Talmud quotes a prayer by a woman, it is viewed in a derogatory fashion as potentially harmful, something that "brings destruction upon the world". Although the talmudic sages were familiar with the fact that women did pray, their knowledge of these prayers from outside their own spiritual world was limited.

Following this discussion of over twenty prayers said by women, the majority of which date from the talmudic period, we will now examine the social significance of these prayers.

IV. The social aspect

The following table presents a schematic view of all the prayers discussed hitherto:

68 See Job 31:1: "I have covenanted with my eyes not to gaze on a maiden", and see below. However, S. Lieberman believed that this referred to a hypocritical, falsely modest maiden. See: S. Lieberman, Mehhirin be-Torat Eretz-Israel (Jerusalem, 1991), p. 204. Similarly, Tur-Sinai interpreted this to refer to a maiden who throws herself at a man, and thus no righteous woman. See: N.H. Tur-Sinai, "Mi-leishon hakhamim umelitzatam be-Masekhet Aboth de-Rabbi Natan", M. Davis (ed.), Jubilee Volume in Honor of M.M. Kaplan (New York, 1953), Hebrew section, pp. 83-93 (especially p. 92, and see the textual variants discussed there).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Type of prayer</th>
<th>alone /with others</th>
<th>original/ imitation of men</th>
<th>content: masculine or feminine</th>
<th>place</th>
<th>description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miriam</td>
<td>victory</td>
<td>with women</td>
<td>imitation of men</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>prophetess, Aaron’s sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>victory</td>
<td></td>
<td>independent</td>
<td>feminine</td>
<td></td>
<td>prophetess, judge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>plea</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td>independent</td>
<td>feminine</td>
<td>temple</td>
<td>mother of Samuel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eve</td>
<td>forgiveness</td>
<td>with husband alone</td>
<td>imitation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mother of all mankind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebekah</td>
<td>plea</td>
<td>with husband alone</td>
<td>imitation</td>
<td>feminine</td>
<td></td>
<td>matriarch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>plea</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td>independent</td>
<td>feminine</td>
<td></td>
<td>matriarch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leah</td>
<td>plea</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>feminine</td>
<td></td>
<td>matriarch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamar</td>
<td>rescue</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td>independent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Judah’s daughter-in-law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aseneth</td>
<td>forgiveness</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td>independent</td>
<td>feminine</td>
<td></td>
<td>daughter of priest of On</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>rescue</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td>independent</td>
<td>feminine</td>
<td></td>
<td>wife of On son of Peleth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jael</td>
<td>rescue</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td>independent</td>
<td></td>
<td>sty</td>
<td>wife of Heber the Kenite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eluma</td>
<td>plea</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td>independent</td>
<td>feminine</td>
<td></td>
<td>mother of Samson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>plea</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td>independent</td>
<td>feminine</td>
<td></td>
<td>mother of the prophet Samuel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Type of prayer</td>
<td>alone /with others</td>
<td>original/ imitation of men</td>
<td>content: masculine or feminine</td>
<td>place</td>
<td>description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamar</td>
<td>rescue</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td>independent</td>
<td>partly feminine</td>
<td></td>
<td>king's daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>plaint</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td>independent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>wife of the prophet Obadiah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>rescue</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>queen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sitis</td>
<td>plea</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td>independent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Job's wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amaltheia's Horn</td>
<td>thanksgiving</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Job's daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judith</td>
<td>rescue</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td>independent</td>
<td>feminine</td>
<td>attic</td>
<td>daughter of Raguel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>help</td>
<td>with women</td>
<td>independent</td>
<td>feminine</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>plea</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td>independent imitation</td>
<td>feminine</td>
<td>attic</td>
<td>daughter of Hilkiya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rescue</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td>independent imitation</td>
<td>feminine</td>
<td></td>
<td>Rabael, wife of Abba Hilkiya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susannah</td>
<td>rain</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td>independent imitation</td>
<td>roof</td>
<td></td>
<td>daughter of Hilkiya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>repentance</td>
<td>with husband</td>
<td>independent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>redemption</td>
<td>with husband</td>
<td>independent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>prophetess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of Jerusalem</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>rescue</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td>independent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>daughter of Peni'el</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zaphenet</td>
<td>rescue</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td>independent</td>
<td></td>
<td>attic</td>
<td>Rabbi Judah's servant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>plea</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td>independent</td>
<td></td>
<td>attic</td>
<td>maiden on a pilgrimage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>prevention</td>
<td>alone</td>
<td>independent</td>
<td></td>
<td>attic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of sin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The above shows a rich variety of prayers composed by different women in different times and places. They span a wide range: requests for rescue and victory; hymns of praise; prayers for children; for rain; for death; for the redemption of Jerusalem; pleas for mercy. At times women emphasized their inferiority, at others, they stressed their righteousness, and even leveled accusations against God. Most of the prayers are related to death in some manner, since they are usually said in times of dire need. We have already associated the keening women with a death-related function.

The feminine nature of the prayers still requires clarification. A large number of the prayers reflect the supplicant’s femininity. More than ten fall into this category: the prayer includes a reference to the fact that it is said by a woman, mentions physical qualities of women, or alludes to clothing or typical belongings of women. However, many of these prayers are in greatest likelihood fictional compositions attributed by men to a female character. Nevertheless, it must still be recalled that the author tried to provide an accurate description of his subject, and so attributed to women prayers similar to those they heard from women in reality. Hence, the assumption that men attributed prayers to women does not necessarily cancel out the original feminine quality of the prayers. Men must have thought that this was how women’s prayers sounded, and women, in turn, probably took their cue from this expectation. The feminine content of the prayers raises the question of what makes traditional prayers “masculine”: most of the traditional prayers are said by men and women alike. Even the prayers that do not bear a distinct “feminine” stamp, then, might have been composed by women.

Finally, we will address the status of women in society, and its expression in prayer. The vast majority of the prayers said by women appear outside of any social context, evidence of a conscious disaffiliation from

70 Other prayers are yet to be analyzed, including: a prayer of a mother for the recovery of her ailing son; the prayer of a woman for her husband to return safely from battle; the childbearing prayer, etc.

71 Cf. C. Ozick, “Notes for finding the right question”, D. Rappel (ed.), Hapeninah (Jerusalem, 1989), pp. 129-152 (Hebrew; originally published in Lilith, n.v.)

72 This exception proves the rule: the prayer of thanks “that You did not create me a woman” (t. Berakhot 6:18), which women replace with the prayer of thanks “that You have created me according to Your will” (formulated in the post-talmudic period). However, with this exception, the text of the prayer service is identical for men and women. One other exception is the phrase “and for the covenant that You have marked in our flesh” in the Grace after meals. In some Sepharadi customs women omit this phrase.
the masculine context. Aside from the biblical story of the prayer of Miriam and other women, Deborah’s victory hymn with Barak, and Judith’s with her friends — all the other prayers are said by solitary women for themselves, not in the presence of men or even other women.

Women did not, as a rule, pray in the temple or synagogue; sole exceptions are Hannah, mother of Samuel, and the prophetess Anna. This does not prove that women did not pray in the synagogue at all, but it is clear that they took no part in the public ceremony of prayer, and it is doubtful if they were even present in the synagogue during prayer. Only two of the prayers said by women allude to any fixed habit of prayer on the part of their authors (namely, Judith and Anna the prophetess). Once again, this accords with the observation that most of the prayers were said in connection with death or birth. The time of need has no fixed hour, and the prayers cited above do not teach us anything about women’s participation in regular rituals of prayer.

An example of women praying in their hour of need appears in 2 Maccabees, where mature women (not young girls) participate in public mourning. Women participating in public fasting appear also in Pseudo-Philo 30:4, where the prophetess Deborah proclaims: “And now come, let us fast for seven days, from ‘man to woman and from the least to the suckling child’ (paraphrase of 1 Sam. 15:3; 22:19) (Charlesworth, p. 343). There is no mention here of public prayer, but in pseudo-Philo on Jephtah of Gilead, we read: “and all the people prayed together, men and women and children” (Charlesworth, p. 352). The Book of Judith (4:10-11) emphasizes the role of women on public fast days. The apocryphal books clearly indicate that women were an integral part of the community. A comparison of these apocryphal customs with the description in m. Ta’anit, where women are not mentioned at all, shows that the Mishnah’s omission of women is calculated, and we must draw conclusions ex silencio. In the time of the sages, then,

73 On the prayer of women in the synagogue, see: S. Safrai, Eretz-Yisrael va-hakhameha bi-tekuflat ha-Mishnah ve-ha-Talmud (Hakibbutz Hameuhad, Jerusalem, 1984), pp. 94 ff. (Hebrew, the evidence that he presents will be discussed elsewhere); S.J.D. Cohen, “Women in the Synagogues of Antiquity”, Conservative Judaism, 34 (1980), pp. 23-29; Bernadette J. Brooten, Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue (Scholars Press, Chicago, 1982). The conclusive evidence from the talmudic sources about a raised women’s gallery refers apparently to Alexandria. See above, ch. 1 (but see Safrai). In the post-talmudic period, conclusive evidence of the existence of a separate women’s gallery is available from the ninth century onwards. See: M. Ben Dov, Batet Knesset bi-Sefarad (Tel-Aviv, 1989), p. 47 ff. (Hebrew).
women did not, as a rule, participate in public fasts and regular public prayers.

One of the differences between biblical and talmudic prayer is that the former was always spontaneous (with the exception of prayers in the Temple), while the sages of the Mishnah and Talmud compiled a canonical liturgy. The canonization of the prayers provided no role for women in the talmudic period. The minority opinion that the obligation to pray included women had little success. Women in antiquity did pray, but not with a regular, fixed text — they prayed spontaneously, especially in times of victory or in the hour of need.

In addition to this difference, of regular, public prayer versus spontaneous, individual prayer, the requirement for modesty also precluded mixed praying. Thus, when prayer began to assume its fixed form, women were excluded and continued to pray spontaneously, as women had done for centuries.

The exclusion of women from praying in a social context, that is, not in a synagogue; and the spontaneous quality of their prayers, highlight the anti-establishment, or individualistic, element of their prayers. Though strong in numbers, women never constituted an organized force. Many of the prayers said by women were occasioned by the behavior of men (for example: Judith, Miriam, Deborah). Women prayed because of men; otherwise, they would not be suffering and would have no need to pray. The sages did not interfere in the prayers said by women, whether because they attribute no value to prayers uttered outside the social institutions, or because they stood on the other side of the sexual divide.

Conclusion

The many prayers said by women that appear in apocryphal works, compared to the rarity of women praying in biblical stories, demonstrate the intention of the apocrypha to rectify the image of the biblical woman. While the early authors were usually not interested in reporting prayers by women, later authors did so at great length, believing that prayers by women were important. Later authors attributed prayers to great women such as the matriarchs, but also attributed prayers to secondary figures such as the wife of Obadiah, and even the wife of On, son of Peleth, who is not even mentioned in the Bible.

Women prayed separately from men, outside the fixed rituals of the masculine world, and frequently expressed their femininity in prayer.
Their prayers span a variety of form and content, and were said chiefly in times of dire need. Since feminine prayers were considered unimportant, they were excluded from the canonization of normative — that is, masculine — prayer. An examination of the prayers said by women in antiquity reveals the authentic nature of the affinity between these women and God, even if some of the prayers were in fact written by men in a female persona.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{74} On prayers by women in later periods, see: Yael Levine, "‘Tzena u-re’ena” bekitvei S.Y. Agnon," \textit{Bitzron}, 9 (New Series), 41-42 (1989), pp. 17-22 (Hebrew).