



# Moses The Man, Miriam ... The Missing?

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When I finally saw *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, it was only a few days after I finished teaching a course entitled *Sex and Texts: Gender, Sexuality, and the Bible*. Entering the theater I wondered, “What will Ridley Scott do with the complex portraits of the women and men of the Exodus story, especially when questions of gender intersect with issues of violence, war, and the divine? How does one sell a movie about Moses: one of the greatest men of the Hebrew Bible, yet a man who stammers, who runs away, who relies on both his brother *and* his sister to defeat Pharaoh?” The answer, of course, is simple: rewrite Moses, add more battle scenes, and forget the shepherd’s garb. Moses, a “real” man, wore armor.



But what does it mean to be a “real” man according to the biblical texts? In some ways, the Bible adheres strictly to the binary gender paradigm: “male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:26; never mind the androgynous *ha-adam* that follows in Genesis 2:7). As such, it is possible to list characteristics of both the ideal biblical man and woman; biblical scholars who worry about gender routinely note these so-called ideals. A biblical “man” is often strong, an expert on the battlefield, able to speak persuasively, and, while procreative, he spends little time with the woman (or, more often, the *women*) who bear his (hopefully male) children. Good biblical “women” are mothers and daughters, safely-guarded property to be given away (or bought and sold), and largely silent actors in the (mostly) patriarchal texts. More often than not, the women of the Bible are nameless except in relationship to the men who control their lives: Lot’s Daughters, Potiphar’s Wife, Jephthah’s Daughter, Manaoh’s wife ... the list goes on.

Yet there *are* non-binary exceptions to the so-called masculine and feminine “ideal” constructs listed in brief above. Such exceptions serve as a reminder that gender expectations are ever fluid and always changing; what might be true about the “ideal” man or woman in 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE Judah is not necessarily the case in the Greco-Roman landscape of 1<sup>st</sup> century CE Palestine. A few examples: Deborah is the only true judge (in the judicial sense) in the book of Judges; moreover, she is remembered as a warrior, without whom Barak would not go out to fight

(Judges 4-5). King Josiah (a *male* king) seeks advice from Huldah (a *female* prophetess) after discovering the scroll hidden in the temple (2 Kings 22). Even God sometimes breaks the norm: Deuteronomy 32 depicts YHWH as both a father *and* a mother. Later, the prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and even Hosea all bend gendered descriptions of the deity in some ways, too. Despite these exceptions to the so-called "rule," today's society often invokes a binary standard. "Take it like a man!" "Boys don't cry!" "Act like a lady!" "You throw like a girl!" The Bible is filled with similar aphorisms: "As is a man, so is his strength (Judges 8:21); "Gird up your loins now like a man" (Job 40:7); "the Egyptians will be like women, and tremble with fear before the hand that the Lord of hosts raises against them" (Isaiah 19:16).

In much of the Bible, violence and war are (mostly) "masculine" endeavors (though, again, there are exceptions, like Deborah, Yael, or the unnamed woman of Judges 9). In this way, the hegemonic biblical masculinity of the "fighting male" (though that is certainly not the only biblical masculinity) does not overtly contrast with North American notions of hegemonic masculinity. Many readers can fill in this blank: "\_\_\_\_\_, a real American hero!" G.I. Joe is the hegemonic ideal of the American man: strong, patriotic, courageous, and good at fighting. When biblical masculinities get in the way of that ideal, we as readers are often trained to ignore the problematic details: Jacob cleverly gets the birthright from Isaac! (Never mind the trickster behavior and the lies, or the fact that Esau is actually more "manly" according to the norms listed above.) Samson is a man of strength and a model of faith! (Never mind the fact that his behavior ends with his wife's death and his own suicide.) David is brave when he kills Goliath! (Never mind that such a passage condones child warfare, or that David grows up to impregnate Bathsheba, another man's wife, and send her husband to the battlefield to die, all the while remaining at home while his troops fought "at the time kings went out to war" [2 Samuel 11:1]). But what about Moses, masculinity, war, and women?

Clearly, biblical Moses presents a problem for those interested in looking to the biblical texts for hegemonic masculine ideals: he is a man with a [stammer](#), a reluctant conscript in God's plan to save the Hebrews, he needs his brother Aaron in order to speak persuasively, and Miriam, his sister, plays no small part in enabling him to save the Hebrews. Yet in Scott's movie, Moses is a warrior from the outset: the initial scenes show him as a muscled, bearded adult in warrior garb, off to fight the Hittites in a spectacular battle scene where he saves Ramses from death, thwarting the to-be-Pharaoh's own glory. This Moses has a [sword](#), not a staff, and there is conspicuously little mention of his inauspicious beginnings, of midwives, mothers, and sisters who work to save Moses from the decree to kill all the newborn Hebrew boys. Scott's Moses is ridiculously, unabashedly a hegemonic North American male: not only is he [white](#) (!), but he is overly rational, shunning superstition and prophecies, and he is a better general than his not-



quite-brother Ramses—even, according to [Christian Bale](#), a terrorist rather than a reluctant and divinely appointed leader.

While the biblical account is, in some ways, about battle and war, it's not really about *Moses the Warrior*. Rather, that place is reserved for the deity: “The LORD is a man of war, the LORD is his name” (Exodus 15:3). Moses' story is a call narrative about a reluctant savior who *eventually* turns into a religious leader and law-giver (Exodus 3-Deuteronomy). Biblical Moses never teaches a troop of Hebrew slaves how to shoot arrows, doesn't watch as families of Hebrews are cruelly executed in front of him, and never wonders if what is happening is fair or just. Biblical Moses takes Tziporah with him to Egypt—he's not womanless; biblical Moses relies on Aaron to be his spokesperson—he's not persuasive; biblical Moses fights not with a sword and his own bulging, tanned muscles but with a staff whose power is controlled by God—he's not a warrior, but one divinely chosen to tell Pharaoh to [“Let My People Go!”](#) Biblical Moses is complicated in terms of both ancient and contemporary hegemonic masculine ideals (supporting the case that, perhaps, the hegemonic male doesn't really exist, in either ancient or contemporary contexts—it's nothing more than an *idea(l)*).



If Scott's Moses isn't quite biblical Moses, there are certain things the film does seem to capture correctly about women and war in the ancient Near East. For instance, the film accurately (if briefly) portrays the power of women at court, especially when it comes to battles, warfare, and prophecy (see Huldah in 2 Kings 22, as well as a host of texts from Ugarit, Assyria, and Babylon that attest to the presence of women as forthtellers, speakers for the gods and goddesses). The Egyptian high priestess is the

only one in Ramses' court that seems to get it, predicting, “a leader will be saved and his savior will become leader.” But she quickly disappears from the movie as Ramses realizes she cannot stop the plagues. Nevertheless, that women could be and were prophets and held some power in monarchic courts in the ancient Near East is true—and though the Bible mentions no such female prophet in the Egyptian court, her presence is more likely than a rational, muscled, action figure Moses.

While Moses is made more “masculine” than he is in the biblical texts, Miriam is made more “feminine.” She is demure, quiet, willing to sacrifice herself for her brother. In order to do this, Scott erases Miriam almost completely from the story. Yet according to the book of Exodus, Miriam is not just Moses' mostly silent sister, but she is also a *prophetess*: “And Miriam the prophetess, the



sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances" (Exodus 15:20). Timbrels and dancing often occur in conjunction with both the worship of YHWH and the celebration of victory in war (Judges 11:34; Psalm 149:3; 150:4), suggesting Miriam was present and celebrated the crossing of the sea. In short, in the biblical book of Exodus, not only did Miriam help Moses to escape infanticide, she also helped to bring the Hebrews out of Egypt, singing, dancing, and praising God along the way. In Scott's film, she's given only a few scenes—and in those scenes she rarely speaks. This is especially shocking since many scholars think that the so-called "Song of Moses" once belonged to—gasp!—Miriam; it was rewritten later to shift the spotlight to Moses rather than his sister. That Miriam was important is stressed in other biblical texts, which remember her not just as Moses' sister, but as an unqualified equal: "And I brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, and I sent before you Moses, and Aaron, *and Miriam*" (Micah 6:4). Her significant absence in Scott's vision is perhaps one of the greatest disappointments of the film. When she does appear, she largely plays the passive, submissive role that one might expect a woman from the Bible to play, especially when there's a war happening (and especially if one has never read the book of Exodus or the book of Joshua or the book of Judges, to name only a few). Of course, it's not only Miriam who is written out of the story; Scott keeps Tziporah, Moses' wife, at home when Moses returns to Egypt. Gone is her fearless saving of Moses and son en route to Egypt in the strange scene where the deity attacks his newly appointed leader (Exodus 4:24-27).



Overall, the role of women in war is mostly ignored. Scott fails to show the inevitable Hittite female victims in the initial fight scene (the women mysteriously disappear amid the chariots and horses and sword fights). Only towards the end of the film, and only very briefly, do women (often alongside their husbands) appear afflicted as the plagues rush across the screen: Egyptian soldiers brutally attack Hebrew women, men, and children (even executing whole families), and Scott poignantly portrays the grief of the Egyptians, male and female, in the death of the firstborn scenes. Perhaps most powerfully, it is Ramses' wife that illustrates the problem of how intertwined violence, gender, and understandings of the deity are in the Exodus story as she rocks the empty cradle following the death of her son (a scene Scott inserts into the narrative that is absent from the biblical account).

Finally, gender, war, and the depiction of God go hand-in-hand in Scott's film: "I need a general" says the messenger of YHWH, portrayed in the film as a young boy. In this way, Scott challenges contemporary notions of a bearded, mostly benevolent God-in-the-Sky and seems to take the biblical narrative seriously: the God of the Exodus account is powerful and he's

praiseworthy (especially if one is a soon-to-be-free Hebrew slave, but perhaps less so if one is a common Egyptian who watches their eldest son die). Yet he is also a theologically troubling God: how many times does Pharaoh harden his own heart? Not nearly as many times as YHWH hardens Pharaoh's heart, a reality that means that the plagues are not all due to the Egyptian king's own stubbornness. Scott's film helps us to ask: what kind of God punishes not only Pharaoh, but also the ordinary Egyptians who likely had as little power as the Hebrews themselves? Or the horses and oxen that die violent deaths in both the fight scenes and the plagues narrative? Or how does a child—especially a tiny infant—become responsible for the sins of his forbearers? How do we imagine God to look when innocent children and animals die? Portraying the divine messenger as a little boy reminds us that the God of the Exodus story seems petulant at times—even childlike. This is a God who is willing to wage war on the Egyptians to gain glory for himself, even if it meant hardening hearts to do it: “Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers” (Exodus 14:17). Although making the messenger a male child reinforces gendered stereotypes, a messenger in the form of a child does make viewers pause more than a booming voice from the sky.

As I left the theater, I wondered: what script might my students have written in the *Sex and Texts* course? They often cheered for the underdog, for the marginalized (male and female), and for the faithful and valiant women whose names, like Deborah and Hannah, some of them shared. I suspect they might have written a film that captured the ambiguity of Moses, highlighted the roles of Miriam and Tziporah, challenged gendered stereotypes especially in relation to war, and focused on how the story in Exodus celebrates men and women and God in a way that is vastly different than one that sells movie tickets by using flashy cinematic effects, shiny swords, and vengeance. While the film fails to take seriously that to enter the Bible is, per [Michael Coogan](#), to enter a “foreign country” (ancient Israel and the many centuries it took to compile the final form of the texts we now call “the Bible” ≠ contemporary North America), Scott's vision remains a useful pedagogical tool for asking difficult questions about our conceptions of war, gender, God, and what sells when it comes to the Bible. Why do we need a white, fighting, super-masculine Moses? Why do we cast the female figures onto the sides of our screens—robbing them of the roles they play in the biblical account itself? Why do the male Egyptians wear more eyeliner the more “evil” they become? And how do we imagine God when we think about war and its victims—men, women, and otherwise?