

# **Women Musicians and Women Composers in The Bible**

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When I was asked to present a paper on the Woman musician and the woman composer in the Bible I started to contemplate whether ‘women musicians’ and ‘women composer’ are separate groups in the biblical context; or, is it one entity, as a rule, which contains both musician and composer. The mission of writing a paper gave me a chance to go over biblical stories in which women play an important role in general and stories about women making music in particular. Relying on the biblical text and their interpretations on the one hand, and on feminist criticism and gender theories on the other I came up with a typology of women composers in the bible; a typology, which I am going to share with you today.

My discussion contains two parts: The first, based on the story of J daughter: draws the typology of this specific young woman, for whom music was the main tool to deal with her destiny as a woman in biblical times in general and as ‘daughter of’ J in particular. In the second part I will try to apply the typology I have drawn to two other figures known as composers in the Old Testament, Miriam sister of Moses, and the prophetess Deborah.

Let me begin with the most touching story of Jephthah’s daughter in Judges 11.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jephthah’s daughter has no name of her own in the biblical context. The omission of some women’s names in the bible may result from biblical androcentrism, literary strategy, concern with male lineage, or other factors. Another reason that may have caused the omission of Jephthah’s daughter’s name is the fact that Jephthah was the son of a harlot, and thus, his daughter was the granddaughter of a harlot who was not respected enough in order to be named specifically.

It was to be the happiest moment after the war. She was preparing herself for the big welcome celebration in honor of her father Jephthah, who was approaching his home at Mizpah, adorned by his victory over the Ammonites. She was his only child, his joy and his pride, and at that very moment, surrounded by her women companions, all dressed for the special performance in his honor, she was the proudest on earth. But when she came out of the house dancing to the sound of timbrels instead of rejoicing he looked at her, burst into tears and he tore his cloths: "Oh my daughter", he cried, "What sorrow you are bringing me! Must it be you, the cause of my ill fortune! I have given a promise to Yahweh and I cannot unsay what I have said". "What was it that he cannot unsay?" she thought? But then she learned to know of her father's vow: "If you deliver the Ammonites into my hands", Jephthah said as he was fighting the Ammonites, "then the first person to meet me from the door of my house when I return in triumph from fighting the Ammonites shall belong to Yahweh and I will offer him up as a sacrifice." (Judges 11/30-32).

Think of the young woman who was sentenced by her own father to become the lamb for sacrifice. One would expect her to fall apart, to beg on her life, to try and change her tragic fate. Yet, Jephthah's daughter surprises her audience when she turns to her father conveying her full acceptance of her faith on the one hand and asking for an extension of time before parting on the other: "You have given your vow to Yahweh", she says, "treat me as the vow you took [yet], grant me one request. Let me be free for two months. I shall go and wander in the mountains, and with my companions bewail my virginity." (Judges 11/36-38).

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In the subtext of her request lies the dialectic of emotional and controlled response to death. One can assume how shocked she was to hear that she was to become the lamb for sacrifice, yet she Jephthah's daughter moves immediately into a phase in which she has total control of her actions. During these two months, as we learn from the biblical text, she will wander to a detached place in the mountains. There, far away from the eyes of the community, and surrounded by her women companions, she intends to construct a lament.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Jephthah's daughter is going to perform a rite of passage that will serve as her personal catharsis and prepare her for her forthcoming death.<sup>3</sup>

In ancient societies, as well as in underprivileged societies until this very day, laments are generally performed by women. This is not to say that men did not, and do not, mourn over the dead; but it is probably women's pitch, and the color of their voice that is preferable for producing the sound of weeping. In the Kululi culture for example, it is women, not men, who are the makers of patterned weeping because the sound they produce is "considered to be the most moving human sound expression in their society 'because it is the closest sound to being a bird.'"<sup>4</sup>

And maybe that women rather than men conceived and performed laments because of the stereotypical perception of gender roles; thus, women could "allow" themselves to

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2 The word 'lament' (moirólóghia) is composed of two ancient elements: moira (fate) and logos (speech, word): foretelling one's fate or doom. The connection of foretelling one's own fate to lament is familiar from tragedy, where, among others, Antigone, Cassandra, Oedipus, Jocasta, Medea and Phaedra all lament their own fate". (Alexious 1974: 40).

3 Koskoff 1989: 27

Holst-Warhaft 1992: 21<sup>4</sup>

convey their feelings on the open without fearing that it will be interpreted as weakness of heart. In fact lamenting was perceived as a powerful role and lamenting women were known as having control over the community's relationship. Women were the ones who could move easily from experience to art. And death and loss lead almost naturally to artful songs.

When she turns to her father with what seems at first glance a peculiar request Jephthah's daughter forms the ground for moving from experience to art, from tears to idea. This marks her transition from one state to the other – from the nameless girl to a young woman who insists on being represented in culture. Announcing her artistic intentions (“I shall wander and I shall be wailing”) signifies her awareness of becoming a trope of social representation of female eloquence in which woman's voice and woman's subjectivity are embedded; an emblem of articulated loss.

Yet, it is not just poetic power that this young woman gains, but historical power and power of leadership. Consequently it is not the voice of Jephthah's daughter we hear at this point but the voice of Joan, Melanie, Emily, Beth, and others, who were sentenced to death by their own fathers, physically, mentally, or, metaphorically. It is their subjectivities she conveys; the subjectivity of women who take upon themselves the powerful role of conceiving a work of art in a place where dialogue and communication lost their authentic meaning.

With dance and lament as her main significations Jephthah's daughter becomes an interdisciplinary authority; a dancer, an instrumentalist, a composer, a poetess and improviser. What form did this lament take we do not know, for all we have in the biblical text is the story mentioned above. Laments, like other musical texts in ancient

times, were part of an oral tradition. Thus, composing depended largely on improvisation. The text had the most powerful effect and as we well know from reading the bible, it was set in a high literary style in which the rules of prosody were strictly kept. Music was set much in recitative style. The main organizational principle consisted of responsorial singing mostly a-cappella; sometimes accompanied by tambourine.<sup>5</sup> In modern terms of gender studies the interchange between soloist and chorus signifies a formal procedure for the production of truth [as well as] a political strategy that organizes the relationship of women to male dominated institutions.<sup>6</sup> In Jephthah's daughter's case it is a woman who by insisting to be represented in culture forms a new phase in creative women's lives; from a woman whose name is unknown she becomes a symbol of creativity whose work has been canonized ever since: "And from this comes this custom for the daughters of Israel to leave home every year and go out and lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite for four days every year" (Judges 11 verse 40).

The question arises: Is this formula of Jephthah's daughter typical of all women composers in the Bible? The answer is "yes", and "no"; yes, because the signification of woman composer as presented in Jephthah's story has much in common with other women composers in the bible. No, because it definitely varies from one composer to the other not only because of personal characteristics, but mainly as it is related to the context of the specific story as well as to the time and place of happening.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that when we say 'woman composer in the bible' we mean a woman whose creativity moves within a wide (and quite flexible) range of artistic skills (see figure 1). Yet, does this mean that a composer like Hanna, thus, she

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<sup>5</sup> Shai 2001: 89

<sup>4</sup>Caraveli-Chaves & Seremetakis

can be singer, dancer, poet, composer, choreographer etc.; but she can also be a composer who is poet and composer, but is not a dancer.

If we take Miriam who is considered one of the first musicians in the bible as a comparative example we detect some significant similarities to the typology we have drawn so far. Miriam, like Jephthah's daughter, is a dancer, but she is also a singer who accompanies her music with the tambourine. The tambourine, a skin-taut drum, was used both in warfare and in celebrating victory.<sup>7</sup> Like most instruments that appear in the bible the tambourine too is gendered; therefore, while the lyre and the harp are associated with men making music, the tambourine is associated with women's dancing and singing.<sup>8</sup>

When Moses sings the song in honor of God after saving Israel from Pharaoh's cavalry Miriam takes up a tambourine and all women follow her with tambourines as they dance and sing the refrain: "Sing of Yahweh: he has covered himself in glory/horse and rider he has thrown into the sea" (Exodus 15/21). But Miriam is not merely an accompanist of her brother; like Jephthah's daughter she becomes the leading voice of this performance; thus, she is the poet, the composer and dancer, but she is also the first conductor of choral music sang by a women's choir. And when we speak of women's singing (in choirs and in smaller groups) we speak of a phenomenon that was established by Miriam and became popular thereafter in Ancient Middle East. Used as a poetic expression for wars, battles and miracles this

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<sup>7</sup>In Psalm 149: 2-4 it says: Let them praise his name with dancing... make melody to him with tambourine and lyre. In Exodus 15 verse 20 Miriam leads the women in praising God for His deliverance from the Egyptians. In Samuel 18v6 David's victory over the Philistines is celebrated with tambourines.

<sup>8</sup>Figurines from excavations in Israel, all dating from the 11<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century BC show women with what has been identified as a tambourine held over their left breast (see Figure 2 below).

phenomenon served as a historical survey as well as an exclamation of awakening and a call for the future.

If we examine carefully the text of the "Song of victory" ("Song of the Sea" in Hebrew) we see that it starts as follows: "It was then that Moses and the sons of Israel sang this song in honor of Yahweh". Whether they really sing, or recite the song we do not know, but then, at the end of the song it says: "Miriam, the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took up a timbrel, and all the women followed her with timbrels, dancing. And Miriam led them in the refrain:

"Sing of Yahweh: he has covered himself in glory,  
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

(Exodus 15/21)

When Miriam lifts up the timbrel an interchange between soloist and chorus is marked. But it is not just a technical marking point; Miriam, as stands in the biblical text, leads the performance, and all the women follow her. She is familiar with the music and the poetry probably because she created it in the first place. Here, again, the interchange between soloist and chorus signifies a formal procedure for the production of truth [as well as] a political strategy that organizes the relationship of women to male dominated institutions (see page 7 above).

And my mission would not be completed properly if I do not mention a third kind of composer whose political strategy organizes the social relationship between men and women: the judgess and political prophetess Deborah. Like Miriam and Jephthah's

daughter, Deborah produces a choral piece through which she declares that music and poetry reside from her:

"Listen, you kings! Give ear, you princes!

From me, from me comes a song for Yahweh.

I will glorify Yahweh, God of Israel."

(Judges 5/3)

In her special personal style Deborah emphasizes her status as poetess; she is the source of the work. Furthermore, Deborah presents her idea of how political power should be divided between men and women. Men's task, according to this perception, is to fight the war physically :

"Awake, awake, Deborah!

Awake, awake, declaim a song!

Take heart, arise Barak,

Capture your captors, son of Abinoam!"

(Judges 5/12)

Women, in comparison, should be responsible for the creative forces of society. Although her song deals with what is considered 'masculine topics' (war, warriors, battles) Deborah does not perceive herself in the image of Joan of Arc; she does not wish to lead the army to war, and does not want to watch it from afar. Deborah perceives herself as the artist who is the catalyst of society; a vocal authority who with her art arouses a wide range of feelings in her audience: for it is art that penetrates the soul and it is the eternal desire to understand it in depth that keeps us going.



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Figure 1:

### Woman Composer in the Bible

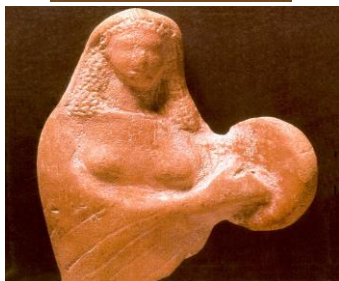
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- **Conductor**

Figure 2:

### **Timbrel (Tambourin)**

In Hebrew: 'Toph', or 'Toph Miriam'



Woman figurine (clay) playing the Timbrel  
6<sup>th</sup> century BC – Haifa Museum

