



Persistent Women: Achsah

Judges 1:8-15

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In recent weeks, I've been too well reminded of the need to speak on the behalf of the women who have come before us, and to clearly claim that women have a voice, and that women deserve to be heard. Both in our nation, and in the church, women have too often been offered little more than a silent seat, asked to obey the directions of patriarchal leaders, and relegated to tertiary roles where they could not upend the male-dominated status quo.

To ignore the voice and the role of women in our historical faith and our history as a nation is a failure of nerve. The practice of silencing women in a male-dominated society is just one tactic in an attempt to maintain the power structure and the history of male privilege over women. Such a practice is not faithful to the Biblical promise that men and women were created equal in God's eyes – man and woman, created both in the image of God. Nor is such a practice faithful to the Biblical stories where women are empowered and encouraged to speak up against the injustices that exist in society, and where women provide faithful examples of spiritual leadership to be modeled today.

To speak directly against this marginalization of women in the church and in society, we are looking at stories in the Bible that name women as leaders and that offer us stories of women as mentors and models of faithfulness.

We are calling these women *Persistent Women of the Bible*. As we read about their stories, we find that these stories are defined by the woman's *persistence*. Persistence is defined as "standing firm in a course of action in spite of difficulty or opposition." Though these women were designated by their surroundings as being of marginal significance – they are after all living in a society where only men were thought to have any substantial worth – the persistence of these women is characteristic of their faithful willingness to go against the powers of society to speak on behalf of God, and to stand up for the eternal will of God.

Today, we are learning about Achsah. As in previous weeks, knowing her story is important for knowing her significance.

Admittedly, Achsah is a hard character to know much about. She is really only mentioned in two places – here in Judges, and previously in Joshua 15. Both stories are the same.

Achsah is Caleb's daughter. We've talked about Caleb in recent months. When Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt, God brought them to the precipice of the promised land. Moses sent twelve spies into the land to see if they could take the land. That should be understood exactly as it sounds - Moses needed to know if Israel had the strength to overthrow the current

inhabitants of the land. Caleb was one of the twelve spies that Moses sent to scout the promised land.

When the twelve returned, ten of them said the land was too well protected, and that they – Israel – would never be able to conquer it. Yet, two – Caleb and Joshua – returned saying, “Let us go at once, for we can certainly overcome it.” They were faithful men, saying, “If the Lord is pleased with us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us.” But the voice of the ten prevailed, and the congregation threatened to stone Caleb and Joshua. Because the congregation listened to the ten, instead of Caleb and Joshua, the people were sent into the wilderness to wander for 40 years before re-entering the promised land.

Because of their faithfulness, God allowed Caleb and Joshua to live, while the other ten died due to a plague among the people. After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, Caleb and Joshua are still living amidst the community as they come back to the promised land. At the start of Chapter 13 in Judges, we learn that Joshua has died. The people inquire of God, who will lead us now in our attempt to conquer the Canaanites? God declares Judah will lead their armies, and as the one who is leading the people in the conquest of the land, Judah would inherit the land.

In Joshua 15, the other place this story is remembered, we’re told Caleb was given a portion of Judah’s men, and he led them in conquering the area of Hebron – in the south of modern day Israel. As the leader of the armies, Caleb inherited the land. To note, Caleb was about 40 years old when he was sent as a spy for Moses as the people escaped Egypt, which means as he is helping Israel conquer the land now, he’s some 40 years older. So this 80+ year old man is leading a subset of the armies of Israel as they seek to conquer the native inhabitants of the promised land. When he led them up against the people of Debir, he seemed to be having difficulty conquering the people.

Perhaps it’s because of his older age – I don’t know of any 80-year-olds still on the battle field for our military – or, perhaps Debir was really that difficult to conquer, and Caleb saw no way to win himself, but in his attempt to defeat Debir, Caleb set out a challenge, “Whoever attacks this land and takes it, I will give him my daughter Achsah as wife.”

Let’s not forget the patriarchal society in which the story is set – the women of this community are treated and viewed as little more than the property of their fathers, their husbands, or their masters. Achsah is not immune to this male dominated world.

There are some who try to speak favorably of Caleb, who claim that offering his daughter as a spoil of war was just his way of ensuring she ended up with a valiant and worthy husband. Surely, anyone who could defeat Debir, something Caleb himself was unable to accomplish, would be a worthy man to take his daughter’s hand in marriage. Forgive me if I’m skeptical of this reading of the story – it seems more that Caleb cared so much about conquering the land, he was willing to give up his own daughter for victory. Any man would be foolish not to attempt

this task, as Achsah is the daughter of a war hero – Caleb had clout, and land. Who wouldn't want to marry into that dowry?

Yet, there's also a Jewish tale that says Achsah was so beautiful, every man across Israel wanted her as their wife. In the Midrash, an ancient Jewish commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures, it's claimed that Achsah was such a beauty, "'Whoever sees her is angry with his wife,' who is not as ravishing as she is."ⁱ ... She's so beautiful, even married men who see her become angry with their wives because their wives are not as beautiful as she. Her great beauty might explain the willingness of men to go into battle to win her hand in marriage.

And go into battle they do. One man, Othniel, was able to conquer Debir, and as was promised, he is given Achsah as his wife. ... But let's pause and not leave out the less than desirable details. Othniel is Caleb's little brother. Again, the Biblical text has a way of trying to minimize the outright naming of the all too present incest. Othniel is Achsah's uncle. HE IS HER UNCLE – and he risked his life so that he could have her as his wife. ... gross, right?

I get that this story takes place in a different time, in a different society, with different social stigmas at play – but Caleb either's the most honorable man in the history of humanity (because he honors his word and gives his daughter as wife to his brother without any apparent problem), or he really doesn't care about his daughter, because he gives his daughter as a wife to his little brother with no hesitation. ... I mean, can we consider for a minute what Achsah thinks about this whole thing? Her father has just given her as a military trophy to her uncle. I can only imagine how much protesting she must have put up before her father – but clearly to no avail. She's nothing but property to her father, used as a war incentive. Of all the men she could have wanted to marry, dad gives her to her creepy uncle, who literally risked his life just to take her as a wife. Just think about how awkward the next Thanksgiving meal would have been.

Anyway, if we can move past the absurdity of this move by Caleb, we find that along with giving her to Othniel as wife, he also gave a dowry – as was customary of the time. Only, the dowry Caleb offered was a desert waste land. Caleb gave Othniel the land of the Negeb, which is the largest of the arid waste lands in the south of Israel.

Imagine what Achsah is thinking. "Awesome, I get my creepy uncle as a husband, *and* I get to make my home in a dry wasteland. Thanks dad. Glad to know you care about me."

She wasn't pleased, as anyone can expect. But unlike the customary role of women at the time, she doesn't take this treatment without pushing back. Unsatisfied with her father's offering, Achsah urges her new husband to go to Caleb – his brother, her father – to ask for a field – to ask for more. I'm not really sure what happens next in the story. Neither Joshua nor Judges offers the details of Othniel's response. But admittedly, I'm curious. How did Othniel respond to her request. Did he just outright ignore her? Did he say, in that creepy uncle voice, "I've got what I wanted"? The story cuts, perhaps for our own benefit.

Whatever his response, at a minimum, it seems he didn't really care what Achsah had to say. Othniel is now a war hero himself, with a prized wife, what more does he need? He doesn't listen to his wife and he doesn't go to Caleb.

Nevertheless, Achsah does go to her father. As she approaches him, she dismounts from her donkey – a sign of respect for her father. Her father asks, "What do you want?" She responds, "Give *me* a gift. Since you have set me up in the land of the Negeb, give me also Gulloth-mayim."

Hear how she names the locations – "Since you have *set me up in* the Negeb." This land is not hers – it's what was given to her husband as a dowry, and thus it is where she has been forced to live. But she continues, "give *me* Gulloth-mayim." The desert can be Caleb's gift to Othniel, but now it's her turn. She wants the surrounding lands, where the springs exist. Caleb agrees, and gives her the Upper Gulloth and the Lower Golluth – the upper springs and the lower springs that surround the Negeb.

"Achsah is a woman who understands the importance of the land and its life-giving water. She recognizes that the land is a gift, and she takes the initiative to secure the water that will sustain life in the land."ⁱⁱ

In the full Biblical text, whether you read of this account here or in Joshua, this is the only story we have of Achsah. She was the daughter of a great leader, and it's claimed she was of unimaginable beauty, and after being given by her father as a spoil of war to her own uncle, she was forced to speak up on her own behalf due to the injustice of being set up with a man she didn't want on land that couldn't bear fruit.

She persisted to advocate on her own behalf, such that she could not be relegated simply as someone else's trophy, but sought what was right and just, so that she could produce life. She didn't want to settle to be a helper, but wanted to claim the image in which she was created, the image of God which claims us all as co-creators – as life givers – as participants in God's work in the world. Achsah's story is a reminder to us all of the value of voice. Those who tell women to be happy with what life has provided them clearly don't know Achsah's story. Those who tell women to be quiet and accept the lot they have been given clearly haven't read the full Biblical text. Those who claim women aren't supposed to speak up for what is right by God's standards haven't paid close enough attention to the voice of the marginalized in the story of God's people.

We have to share the stories – the stories that name the truth of faithful women in our historical text of faith – because many women today struggle to believe their voice matters or that God wants to use them as leaders in the faith, as leaders in the community because men still tell them, either by their words or their actions, that their voice, their witness, and their truth doesn't matter. We have to proclaim the truth of the Biblical witness – that is our call as people of faith. We cannot proclaim Christ as the way, *the truth*, and the life, if we ignore the very truth that is the Word of God – for the Word of God is made manifest in the life of Christ.

It matters not if you have a book named after you, like Esther, or if you play such a small part in the story, like Achsah, the women of the Biblical story proclaim that each person has a responsibility to speak up for the justice of God's creation. It matters not if hold a high position in society, like a queen, or are thought to be just a spoil of war for a barbaric warrior, the women of the Biblical story proclaim you are called to speak up for the justice of God's creation. It matters not if the laws deem you ineligible, like Noah and her sisters, or if you have to break laws, like Miriam, the women of the Biblical story proclaim you are called to speak up for the justice of God's creation.

May we have the courage to be as bold and persistent as the women of the Biblical story, the women of our faith, to speak up for the truth, to give voice to the marginalized, and to advocate for the justice of God's creation. For the glory of God, we give thanks for the persistent women of our faith. Amen.

ⁱ Kadari, Tamar. "Achsah: Midrash and Aggadah." *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 1 March 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. (Viewed on September 25, 2018) <<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/achsah-midrash-and-aggadah>>.

ⁱⁱ *The Women's Bible Commentary*. Eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.