



## Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

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### **MS-4787: Abba Hillel Silver Papers, 1902-1989.**

Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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Mothers of the Bible, 1952.

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MOTHERS OF THE BIBLE

May 11, 1952

He then becomes, in part, a designer himself of the story, and also a part of the design. This is excellent psychology - a wisdom which is known only to the great.

Take, for example, some of the stories in the Bible and see how much is left unsaid, but not unfelt; incomplete, which the reader is compelled to complete himself. For example, how did Eve, the first mother of the race, "the mother of all living", as the Bible calls her - how did she feel when she learned that of her two sons, one was now slain and the other was the slayer? On top of the grief of having caused the downfall of her husband and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, she is now confronted with a terrible tragedy of murder and death. How did she feel? The Bible is silent, but the human heart, which reads the story, comes to the edge of this appalling precipice and is not silent, has never been silent. You react to music which you don't hear, and the silent voice continues to speak in the corridors of your heart.

Take another incomplete story. How did Sarah, the wife of Abraham, the mother of Isaac, feel. Isaac, the child for whom she had waited so long, so prayerfully and so longingly for so many years, and had endured through the years bitter envy and the scorn of her bondwoman, Hagar, whom she gave to Abraham as his wife and who had born him a son - how did she feel when, after she was finally blessed with her own child, Isaac, how did she feel when Abraham told her that at the command of God, he must take this son, Isaac, whom she loved, whom they both loved so dearly, and offer him as a sacrifice to God? The Bible is silent. How did Sarah feel during these long, dreadful days when Abraham was walking away with Isaac to Mt. Moriah, there to be slaughtered



upon the altar? The Bible is silent. And how did she feel when they returned - Abraham and Isaac, unharmed - after the terror and the anguish of the day? Here, too, the Bible is silent. The Midrash, the later Jewish homilies - why, they revel in elaborating legends and they fill in the lacuna, but the Bible is silent. And the very silence stirs the hearts of men more deeply than the most eloquent words. We are invited to pick up the strands, as it were, and to finish the pattern ourselves. That is what makes the Bible a deathless book, for each reader helps to make it.

How did Hagar feel when she was driven by Sarah from her home and took her little child, Ishmael, with her with a loaf of bread and a skin of water - driven out into the wilderness, wandering about in the wilderness until the water was spent. And then, says the Bible, she put the child under one of the bushes in the wilderness and she went and sat down about a bow's shot away from the child, for she could not bear to see her child die. What thoughts went through her mind during that frightful vigil? The Bible again is silent, but no one reading that story can help but think, wonder, and from that silence derive a tremendous emotional stirring, hope!

How did the mother of Moses, Jochebed, feel when, having given birth to a child, she was constrained to keep him in hiding for three months because of the cruel decree of the Pharaoh, and when she was no longer able to hide him, she put him in an ark of reeds which she made and placed that ark among the reeds beside the banks of the Nile. Her child, dearly beloved, turned over to the waves and the winds of the river, to probable if not to certain death. How did she feel, this mother of Moses? The Bible says not a word. And the Bible is silent also throughout that long vigil when Miriam, the sister, watches to see what would happen to the child. And the Bible is silent also about the mother when the daughter of the Pharaoh, the princess, finds the ark with the child, and at the suggestion of Miriam, the mother, Jochebed, is summoned by the princess to become the nurse of the child. How did the mother feel when she held her child in her arms again?



And the Bible is silent, too, about the mother through the years when she weaned her child, until ~~he~~ was grown up, and silent, too, when she had to bring him again to the princess and he, Moses, "became her son", says the Bible - the son of the princess. Moses was no longer Jochebed's son. And even the name that was given to her child was given to him not by the mother, but by the princess. She turns him over to the princess and she never sees him again. What deep pathos unspoken and unrevealed is here, and yet, how powerful to move the hearts of those who read the story reflectively, creatively, imaginatively.

Sometimes the Bible, by one single stroke, by a simple gesture as it were, by what appears to be an off-hand detail, lays bare depths of human emotion and opens up unsuspected vistas.

Take another story of one of the mothers of the Bible - the mother of Samuel the prophet, Hannah. Like Sarah, like Rachel, she had long longed for a child. She was greatly beloved by her husband Elkanah, but she was childless and the other wife of Elkanah, Penninah, who had children, used to vex her bitterly, says the Bible. And so one year when they went up to worship the Lord in Shiloh, as was their custom annually, Hannah was very wrteched and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly and then she vowed a vow, and said: "If Thou, O Lord, wilt look upon the affliction of thy maid servant and remember me and give me a child, a baby boy, then will I give him to the Lord all the days of his life." She would dedicate her child, give him away to the service of the Lord forever. And a baby boy was born to Hannah and she called his name Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the Lord." And when next the time of the annual pilgrimage to Shiloh arrived, and Elkanah, her husband, reminded her of her vow, she pleads with him for a little delays. And here one comes suddenly again upon one of those rare flashes of insight, those rare touches which bestow the glory of immortality upon a simple tale. Hannah says to her husband, "When the child is weaned, then I shall bring him. He will be the Lord's for so long; let him remain with me just a little while longer."



And on the next pilgrimage then, she took her little son to Shiloh and surrendered him to the High Priest, to Eli. She left him there before the Lord. But - and here again one comes upon one of those magic touches of the Bible, a little detail. "Moreover," says the Bible, "his mother used to make for him a little outer garment, a little coat, and bring it up to him each year when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice." He was the Lord's, to be sure, for ever and ever, but forever and ever also, he remained her little boy.

Does the Bible understand motherhood?

There was a famine in the days of King David and it lasted for three dreadful years. Israel was being punished of the Lord because Saul, the King who had preceded David, had broken a covenant which his people had made with the Gibeonites who were not of the Israelites, but were the remnant of the Amorites. They had made a covenant with them and Saul had broken that covenant, and in punishment thereof, the whole people was suffering. And so David called the Gibeonites and said to them: "What can I do for you and how can I make expiation so that this dread punishment may pass away?" And they said: "The man who consumed us and who planned to destroy us - let seven men of his sons be given to us that we may hang them in Gibeon." And David, to save his people, took the two sons of Rizpah, the wife of King Saul, and the five sons of Merab, the daughter of King Saul, and he turned them over to the Gibeonites, and they hanged them. They were put to death in the first days of the harvest.

Then, the Bible continues, "Then Rizpah, the mother, took sackcloth and spread it for her on the rock, from the beginning of the barley harvest until the rains came down, and she did not permit the birds of the heavens to light upon her children by day, nor the beasts of the field by night." And so, for six long months she kept her solitary vigil there on the rock by night and by day, until King David, moved by her tragic maternal fidelity, gave honorable burial to her children in the family sepulchre along with the remains of King Saul and Jonathan.



Now, if volumes were written, could more be expressed? There is the picture.

Does the Bible understand the heart of a mother? Yes, even among the fallen and the sinners, the sacrificial love of motherhood is not wanting, and it transfigures the base into the sublime.

Two harlots were brought before King Solomon. One woman said, "We live in the same house. We gave birth to our children about the same time. This woman's child died in the night, and in the night she took my son and laid her dead child in my bed." But the other woman said, "Mine is the living child. The dead child is hers." Then the King said, "Fetch me a sword. Divide the living child in two and give one-half to the one and one-half to the other." The woman whose child was the dead child said: "It shall be so; it shall be neither mine nor thine. Divide it." But the woman whose child was the living child, said to the King, "for her heart yearned upon her son", says the Bible, "Oh, my Lord, give her the living child, only don't kill it." Then the King said, "Give this woman the living child; she is the true mother."

Now, far more than the wisdom of King Solomon is here vindicated, far more than his keen insight into human nature is here illustrated. The love that passeth all understanding, the love that will make every surrender, every sacrifice in order that the beloved may not suffer, may live, may be fulfilled - that is illumined here in this unforgettable story of a fallen woman and her redeeming love.

My dear friends, there are many women in the Bible - the ruthless, the ambitious, the scheming, the loved, the unloved, the tender, the loyal, the brave. They all have their faults and ~~their~~ virtues, but they are all personalities in their own right. They are not toys; they are not chattels. They are not screened from life behind a purdah curtain. Some of them are judges and some of them are prophetesses, and some of them are queens; some of them are matriarchs, and many of them played a significant role in the history of their people.



The status of women in Israel was early established. Already in the days of Moses was the right of women to equality and inheritance established. The daughters of Zelophehad, who died leaving no sons, approached Moses, so we are told in the Book of Numbers, and asked that their father's inheritance be distributed among them. In those days only sons inherited and for many, many centuries thereafter throughout the world, only sons could become the legitimate heirs. And when there were no sons, the inheritance went to the father's brothers or kinsmen. Here the daughters, the women, approach the great law-giver of Israel and ask that their rights be established on the same basis of equality as the sons, the men. And Moses listens to them, agrees with them and decrees a new law of inheritance in Israel.

Throughout the Bible love and respect are inculcated for motherhood, for parenthood. "Honor thy father and mother." "My son, hearken to the instruction of thy father, and do not forsake the teaching of thy mother."

You listened this morning to the reading of that magnificent 31st Chapter of the Book of Proverbs, and there in that superb passage you have the ideal of womanhood in Israel presented in matchless phrase. And what is the ideal of womanhood in Israel? It's the "woman of valor, of competence, of purpose", the woman who is the helpmate, the woman of intelligence, "who looketh well to the ways of her household". Beauty is not held lightly, nor is grace, nor is charm in the literature of the Bible. Time and again the writers point out, in speaking of some of these great women of the Bible - Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Ruth, Esther - they were beautiful women of fair appearance, lovely. One need only read that superb book of the Bible, Song of Songs, to realize how much the people of Israel appreciated beauty, but it is not enough for the building of a home, for the maintenance of a society, for happiness - that is not enough. "Beauty is vain if it is only that." The ideal woman in Israel is one, as this chapter so beautifully puts it, "her clothing is strength and dignity". And that's what builded the Jewish home and the Jewish family.



The Rabbis say, "The home of a man - that is his wife."

Well, it's good on this Mother's Day to be able to recapture some of the immortal thoughts of our people, some of the profound insights of our people, as expressed in the Bible of mother, motherhood and family.





1) There is a remarkable gallery of Women in the Bible -  
unforgettable portraits of all types  
Some drawn at full length, in rich detail, in a wealth of color  
Others are just sketched in - in sketches and illusive outlines -  
but memorable nevertheless.

The very mention of ~~the names~~ their names evokes drama:  
Eve, Sarah and Hagar, Rachel and Leah, Deborah, The <sup>Arthaph</sup> Daughter of Jephthah, Delilah, Ruth, Bathshaba, Jezebel,  
Esther.

No wonder that they have all inspired dramatists, poets,  
novelists and musicians throughout the ages; who built  
upon the Biblical narratives, their lives, great literature  
and great art. - great poetry - great painting, great sculpture  
and music.

2/ They are all so profoundly human - so precious and so  
enthralling - ~~so electrically alive~~ in their qualities of love, and hate, of loyalty  
and selfishness, of sin and of sorrow - that the heart of man  
has always been drawn to them - and the hand, the artist  
as well.

3/ The Bible does not elaborate! It cuts across! It expects the  
reader to participate, to fill in with his <sup>own</sup> imagination  
and out of his own experience... ~~to fill in with his own imagination~~  
Not at all like the modern novels, for example, which are  
so discursive, so awfully long-winded and <sup>whole</sup> leave no-  
thing to the reader's own creative imagination. Every thing  
is spelled out - even the last dirty word. And in a  
few both the title, the book and the author's very  
name are forgotten.



The Bible employs <sup>a strict economy</sup> a ~~rare~~ austerity in character portrayal. 12  
a paucity of words - deep, precise, intense. Enough is said  
to set ~~you~~ <sup>you</sup> a-thinking, and enough is left unsaid to  
~~challenge~~ set ~~you~~ <sup>you</sup> a-wondering.

It is not surprising <sup>no-then</sup> that great artists are <sup>no-then</sup> ~~embarrassed~~  
to talk up when the Bible bears off - and to explain  
further in the evocative words where gates ~~are~~ <sup>are</sup> left  
invitingly open by a word or a phrase or a haunting  
line from that ~~Book of Books~~. Source book, the spirit

4). It is reported, the Navaho Indians that they always leave  
part, the design in a basket or a blanket unfinished. When  
a modern man instructs an apprentice, he always leaves  
a little left, the story is told. They avoid what may be  
called "closure". You must leave something to the learner  
and the listener, ~~and~~ the spectator to feel us - to complete.  
He ~~then~~ <sup>then</sup> becomes part ~~the~~ designer & part the design.  
This is excellent psychology - a wisdom known ~~to~~ <sup>to</sup>  
only to the great.

5). How did Eve - the first mother, the race - the mother of the  
living - feel when she learned that of her two sons - one  
was ~~was~~ slain and the other was the slayer. On top, the  
grief, having caused the downfall, her husband and  
their expulsion from Paradise - she now is ~~confronted~~  
with the terrible tragedy of murder and death. The Bible  
is silent - but ~~it is~~ the human heart which reads  
that story and comes to the edge, that appalling  
precipice is not silent - has never been silent.



6/ How did Sarah, feel, the mother of Isaac, the child for whom (3) she had waited, prayerfully longingly for so many years, - and had endured the years, bitter envy and the scorn of her bondswoman whom she gave to Abraham, as his wife, and who had been true to her - how did she feel, when Abraham told her, that at the command of God, he must take his son - their son - Isaac - and give him as a sacrifice to God. -

The Bible is silent! How did she feel during the long, dreadful days, during which Abraham walked with his son to Mt. Moriah and their return - the child unharmed - ~~the anguish the terror~~ <sup>the relief</sup>

The Midrash reveals in ~~long~~ eloquently legend - filling in the lacuna - But the Bible is silent - and the very silence stirs the heart, more deeply than the most eloquent ~~language~~ <sup>eloquent</sup> ~~words~~ - We are invited to pick up the strands

and finish the pattern.

6a) Hagar - bread + a skin of water - wandered about in the desert - water gave out - put the child & baby on the back - she wept and set down also a bowshot away - I cannot bear to see the

7/ How did <sup>child & baby on the back</sup> ~~the~~ mother feel - To be sure - the mother, Mary - how did she feel when, having given birth to her child, she was constrained to ~~hide~~ keep him in hiding for 3 months because, the cruel decree, the Pharaoh - and when she <sup>was</sup> ~~is~~ <sup>no</sup> longer able to look him she ~~put~~ <sup>placed</sup> ~~on~~ him in an ark of reeds and placed in among the reeds beside the bank of the Nile. - Her child - dearly beloved - turned over to the winds and the waves, the river - to perish of us to certain death. - How did she feel? The Bible is silent - silent <sup>alone</sup> ~~thence~~ the long vigil while Menaim watches to see what would happen to the child. Silent, too, about Jacob's feelings, when the daughter of Pharaoh



found, the ark of the covenant, and, at the mystery, Miriam, Jehoiada &  
\* is summoned by the prince to become the child's nurse - Rebekah  
too, in the Bible, about Jehoiada (thus the years when she was  
the child - until he is grown up - and Rebekah - when she has  
to ~~leave him~~ <sup>bring him</sup> to the prince and he becomes  
her son" - no longer <sup>Jehoiada's</sup> son - ~~an~~ even the name she - is the  
name which the prince gives her! - And she <sup>is here</sup> sees him  
again! - What deep pathos, unspoken, unrepeated - get  
how powerful to move the hearts of those who read  
8x the story reflectively, creatively, unrepeated -

8/. Some times the Bible by one simple picture, by  
what appears to be <sup>only</sup> an off-hand detail <sup>unspoken</sup> <sup>unrepeated</sup> startlingly  
depicts human emotion - and <sup>often with</sup> ~~unrepeated~~ vistas.  
Take the story of another mother the Bible - Hannah the  
mother of Samuel, the prophet - like Sarah, like Rachel  
she had long longed for a child - she was greatly beloved by  
her husband Elkanah - but she was childless - and the other  
wife, Elkanah's Penninah, ~~who~~ <sup>both</sup> had children, used to  
 vex her bitterly. And so ~~when~~ <sup>every</sup> year, when they went up  
to worship the Lord in Shiloh, as was their custom annually  
she was very watched and prayed to the Lord, and weeping  
bitterly - she vowed a vow - and said: "If thou, O Lord,  
wilt lift up the affliction, they would renew, and renew  
her are - and give me a child - a lady boy - then will I  
give him to the Lord all the days of his life. - ~~the~~



8

A baby boy was born to Hannah - and she called his name Samuel - for she said "I have asked him, the Lord" -

When next, the time, the annual pilgrimage to Shilo, arrived - and El Hannah reminds her of her vow - she pleases with him - for a little delay: And here one comes suddenly upon these flashes of insight - these rare touches - which bestow the story of immortality upon a simple tale.

"When the child is weaned then I shall bring him" - He will be the Lord's for so long - let him remain with me just a little while longer -

In the next pilgrimage she took her little son to Shilo - and surrendered him to Eli, the High Priest - and she left him there before the Lord - But - and here is another flash on, these magic touches - a little detail which ~~little~~ touches off a world of emotion - Moreover, say the Bible - his mother used to make for him a little <sup>- a little</sup> ~~an~~ garment, and bring it up to him each year when she went up with her husband to give the yearly sacrifice? He was the Lord's, the son, for ever and ever, but, for ever and ever also her little boy -

9/. Does the Bible understand Motherhood?

There was a famine in the days of David for 3 years. Israel was being persecuted, the Lord because Saul had broken a covenant which his people had made with the Gibeonites who were not, the Israelites but of the new want, the Ammonites -



David called the Ishboshites and said to them what can I do for  
you and how can I make expiation. They said: "The man  
who consumed us and who planned to destroy us: - Set  
7 men of his sons before us that we may hang them  
in Ishbosheth -"

David took the 2 sons of Rizpah - the <sup>wife</sup> ~~daughter~~ of  
Saul and the 5 sons of Merab - the daughter of Saul  
and he turned them over to the Ishboshites - and they  
hanged them - They were put to death in the best  
days, the harvest.

Then - the Bible continues - "Then Rizpah, took sack-  
cloth, and spread it for her on the rock ~~from the highway~~  
the barley harvest until the rains came down, and  
she did not permit the birds, the heavens to light upon  
her children by day - nor the beasts, the field by  
night." And so for <sup>long</sup> 6 months she kept her solitary vigil  
there, by night, by day, until King David, moved by her heroic  
maternal fidelity saw her noble burial in the family  
sepulchre to those who had been hanged along with the  
remains of King Saul and Jonathan. - If volume were written  
could you be exposed?

10/. Does the Bible understand the heart, or no then?

Even among the fallen and the sinners - ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup>  
even great loss, motherhood is not wanting - and it  
transfigures what is the base into the sublime.



Two harlots were not before King Solomon. An unmarried (7)  
woman in the same house. We gave birth to an children at the  
same time. This woman's child died in my at for the neglect  
she took my son, and and her dead child in my best. But the  
other woman, mine is the living child. The dead child is hers!

The King said: 'Fetch me a sword!' - 'Divide the living  
child in two, and give  $\frac{1}{2}$  to the one and  $\frac{1}{2}$  to the other'

The woman, whose child was the dead child, said: 'It  
shall be neither mine nor thine, divide it.'

But the woman whose child was the living child, said  
to the King: 'For my heart yearned when he saw, 'Oh my  
lord, give her the living child, and only don't kill it!

Then the King said: 'It is <sup>this woman's</sup> ~~for~~ the living child - she is  
the true mother.'

Far more than the wisdom / Solomon is here illustrated  
is here illustrated. The love that passes all understanding  
the love that will make every sacrifice, every sacrifice is  
order that the beloved may not suffer, may live, may be ful-  
filled - is here illustrated in this unforgettable story of a fallen  
woman and her redeeming love.

11). There are many women in the Bible - the gentle, the ambitious  
the scheming, the tender, the loyal, the brave. They have their  
faults and their virtues.  
But they are all personalities in their own right - They are not  
toys or chattels; or they are not screened from behind  
behind a pundah curtain



