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The Ministering Women and their Mirrors

This paper will argue that the women who served at the door of the tabernacle, mentioned in Exodus 38:8 and 1 Samuel 2:22, did so in a Levitical capacity.

These texts read:

Exodus 38:8

They made the bronze basin and its bronze stand from the mirrors of the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting.

1 Samuel 2:22

Now Eli, who was very old, heard about everything his sons were doing to all Israel and how they slept with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting.

Several questions came immediately to mind when I read those verses:

1. Who made the bronze basin and its stand?
2. What was it used for?
3. Who were the women who served near it?
4. What did their serving consist of?
5. Why did the priestly author of Exodus choose to leave this rather embarrassing little verse (to later readers at least) in the text?

I will explore possible answers to these questions in this paper. So firstly,

Who made the Bronze Basin?

Beginning with Exod 38:8 the context of this verse concerns the building of the Tabernacle in the wilderness. Exod 37-38 details the way the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altar of incense, the altar of burnt offering, the bronze basin, and the courtyard, were to be made.

Materials were required to create these items and the people of Israel were asked to make voluntary offerings from their personal possessions so that this could be achieved (Exod 25:1-7; 35:5-10). Exod 38:21-31 details the quantities of materials that were donated. The Septuagint translates the request for donations in this way; that the Israelites were to give: “the first fruits of all the things that **seem good** in the heart” (Exod 25:2).

The people of Israel were asked to donate specific materials (Exod 25:3-7) which included:

- precious metals
- yarn and fine linen
- goats’ hair
- ram’s and sea cows’ skins
- acacia wood
- olive oil
- spices for the anointing oil or fragrant incense
- precious gems (Exod 25:3-7).

In Exod 35, those who are asked to donate are specifically defined as “men and women” (vv. 22, 24 (everyone), 29).

Exod 35:22, 24 and 29 says: “And the men came in together with the women, **every one** willing of heart; they brought in bracelets, and nose rings, and rings, and jewels, every gold article ... **every one** bringing an offering of silver and bronze” ... “and every man and woman whose hearts impelled them brought a voluntary offering to the Lord”. Carol Myers says that

“this *inclusio* (from v. 22 to v. 29) suggests that women, no less than men, had access to all materials that could be contributed”.¹

Exod 25:3 says that the list of materials that could be donated included a request for quantities of bronze. Exod 38:29-31 (cf. 25:3; 35:5) says that the response to this request was overwhelming and that two and a half tons of bronze were donated.

But, interestingly, the bronze basin is not listed amongst the items made from this stockpile of donated bronze. Separate to the general bronze donations were the mirrors donated by the ministering women.

We might assume that the women’s mirrors used for the bronze basin were made of glass, like our mirrors, but from both biblical and archaeological evidence we know that ancient mirrors were made from burnished metal, not glass. So the mirrors supplied by the women were made of highly polished bronze.

This type of mirror is referred to in Job 37:18 (NIV) which reads: “Can you join him in spreading out the skies, hard as a mirror of cast bronze?”

An apocryphal writer, Ecclesiasticus (Ecclus 12:11) also mentions metal mirrors when he refers to the treatment of enemies; “... Even if he (the enemy) appears humble and cringing, keep your distance and be on your guard. Behave towards him like someone who polishes a mirror to ensure it does not rust.”

After all the donated materials were stockpiled, God, through Moses, conscripted two head artisans named Bezalel (Exod 31:1-2) and Oholiab (v. 6) to oversee the crafting of the voluntary donations into items for the Tabernacle; whether furniture, curtains, utensils, hooks or poles.

Exod 31:4; 35:32 says that the head artisans were told to “devise artistic designs” out of the donations given by the men and women. Verse 9 says that the bronze basin was included in

¹ Carol Meyers, *Exodus* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 276.

the list of items that were made under the tutelage of the master craftsmen, and we know from Exod 38:8 that it was made out of the mirrors donated by the serving women. At this point I want to stress that the bronze basin is the only item in the tabernacle that was made from gender specific donations.

Another important point is that Bezalel and Oholiab did not do the artistic work alone. Moses is told by God in Exod 31:6 that skills have been given to Heb: *kol chacham lev* “every wise-hearted one” to craft what was needed for the Tabernacle. So who are these “wise-hearted ones” who had been given skills by God to craft the Tabernacle items? The text informs us that they were both men and women.

The phrase from Exod 31:6 *kol chacham lev* “every wise-hearted one” is repeated with feminine specificity in Exod 35:25-26 where it reads: “every wise hearted woman” spun with her hands, and brought what she had spun in blue and purple and scarlet stuff and fine twined linen. And all the women whose hearts were moved with ability spun the goat’s hair” (Exod 35:25-26).

After a while God asked Moses to stop men and women giving further donations because they had been too generous. Exod 36: 7 states: “And their property was sufficient for *all the work*, to do it, and it was too much”.

So, on to our second question ...

What was the Bronze Basin used for?

The basin is first mentioned when it is commissioned by God in Exod 30:18 which reads:

Make a bronze basin, with its bronze stand, for washing. Place it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and put water in it.

Lev 8:4-7 says that priests were washed all over at the Bronze basin before being clothed with priestly garments and anointed. Lev 8:6 says they did not wash themselves at their consecration, but were washed by Moses. After their consecration the priests had to wash their

own hands and feet at the bronze basin which would be a daily exercise. Exod 40:31 says they must do this before entering the Tent of Meeting or sacrificing on the altar.

This washing ritual was a never ending law that was to continue from generation to generation. The penalty for non-compliance was death (Exod 30:21). The position of the basin right beside the door of the Tabernacle is probably so the priests cannot miss this ritual (Exod 30:18), and is made of highly reflective bronze perhaps for the same reason.

Evidence of the basin's importance is found in its inclusion in the list of items which were anointed with special perfumed oil (Exod 30:23-25); after the basin was anointed whatever and whoever touched it became "most holy" (Exod 30: 26 ff.). The "holy" composition of the oil remained closely guarded for if it was used for an unseemly purpose, the punishment was excommunication (v. 33).

So, from the outset, it is clear that the bronze basin was significant to Israelite religious practice. This is evidenced by the stringency, on pain of death, of priestly washing before attendance at the altar or Tent of meeting. The washing of priests was a "never ending statute". As well, the bronze basin is included in the list of items anointed with the special, and specifically designated, perfumed oil. Whatever and whoever touched the bronze basin became holy.

So, on to our third question ...

Who were the mysterious women who served near the Basin?

The women are said to *tsaba* 'serve/minister' near the door of the Tabernacle. It is at the door that much ritual activity took place. Exod 30:18-19 tells us that the priests prepared the sacrifices and offered them on the bronze altar near the door.

Lev 8:4 tells us that from time to time the entire congregation met near the door. Individuals like Hannah (1 Sam 1:9-10) came there to make vows and requests and to offer sacrifices. Num 27:2 tells us that the daughters of Zelophehad approached the door with a request for their rightful inheritance. Num 6:10 tell us that some rituals related to the Nazarite vow were

performed at the door. So, many activities occurred at the door of the Tabernacle but neither Hannah, nor the daughters of Zelophehad, nor female Nazarites were said to *tsaba* 'serve' near the door. They simply came to perform certain vows and sacrifices.

The serving/ministering women are also mentioned in 1 Sam 2:22. This verse says that Eli's sons "slept with the women who served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting" (missing only from LXX b). This is one of at least two offences committed by Eli's sons, the other being their habit of eating raw sacrificial meat (vv.13-15). Because of the shocking behaviour of Hophni and Phineas the prophecy that the priesthood would be taken away from the line of Eli (1 Sam 2:27-36) was fulfilled at the time of King Solomon (1 Kgs 2:27).

Some scholars argue based on 1 Sam 2:22 that the ministering women of Exod 38:8 were involved in some type of cultic prostitution (Ralph Kline, Word Commentary), but there is no evidence for this because the two Hebrew nouns for harlot - *zanah* and *qodesha* are absent from the text.

Other commentators make a connection between the women of 1 Sam 2:22 and the Midianite woman of Num 25:6-15 (Kyle, McCarter: Anchor Bible, 1 Sam, p. 81). They do this because Num 25 describes inappropriate sexual activity at the door of the Tabernacle as does 1 Sam 2:22. What these commentators fail to acknowledge is the main difference between these texts. Righteous Phineas, the son of Eleazer, thrusts the Midianite woman *and* the Israelite man of Num 25 through with a spear and they die, whereas there is no mention that the ministering women of 1 Sam 2:22 are punished.

There are persistent modern views that seek to discredit the ministering women but it is Hophni and Phineas who are called "worthless men" in 1 Sam 2:12, and "those who despise YHWH" in 1 Sam 2:30. It is they who lose the ancestral priesthood because of their behavior (1 Sam 2:32), and eventually die on the same day for their crimes (1Sam 2:34). Their behaviour may mimic that of male shrine prostitutes mentioned in 1 Kgs 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kgs 23:7; Hos 4:14, though these probably appeared later.² In any case their crimes against

² John Mauchline, *1 and 2 Samuel*, New Century Bible (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott Ltd., 1971), pp. 52-53 assumes these male prostitutes are female.

the women are serious since celibacy was probably required in YHWH's presence (NOTES to 1 Sam 19:15 in Propp, Anchor Bible).

Josephus (*Ant.* 5. 354) sheds interesting light on this story. He says that Phineas was already acting as the High Priest while Eli was alive by reason of old age, which 4QSam^a estimates at 98 years. According to rabbinic tradition Eli's blindness (1 Sam 3:3) would have also disqualified him from office according to Jewish Law (Lev 21:18, Josephus *B.J.* i. 270).

Josephus describes Hophni and Phineas and their relationship to the ministering women this way (*Ant.* 5.339):

Eli the priest had two sons, Hophnies and Phinees. These, both grown insolent to men and impious to the Divinity, abstained from no iniquity: of the offerings some they carried off as the prizes of office, others they seized in robber fashion; they dishonored the women who came for worship, doing violence to some and seducing others by presents; in short, their manner of life differed in no whit from a tyranny.

From all the evidence, I deduce that the ministering women suffered abuses of power at the hands of Hophni and Phineas and therefore justly avoided punishment. And I concur with Janet Everhart when she says: "I suspect that the women of 1 Sam 2:22 are somehow related to the women of Exod 38:8, and that cultic prostitution does not play a role in either situation".³

So, on to question 4...

What does their ministering consist of?

What does the word *tsaba* 'serve/minister' mean in other contexts? And can this shed light on what these women were doing near the door of the Tabernacle?

Tsaba 'is used to describe the women's service in Exod 38:8 and 1 Sam 2:22. In the majority of other cases where *tsaba* ' appears in the Hebrew Bible it means "to go forth, as a soldier, to

³ Janet S. Everhart, "Serving Women and Their Mirrors: A Feminist Reading of Exodus 38:8b," *CBQ* 66 (2004) 44-54 (45).

war” (Num 31:7; Isa 29:7, 8; 31:4 and Zech 14:12), and along these lines *tsaba*’ is often attached to God’s military name -YHWH *tsabot* – meaning “the Lord of hosts”. But, in the context of Exod 38:8 this particular meaning does not fit. The women do not appear to be engaged in warfare or guarding the door of the Tabernacle.

So is *tsaba*’ used in another way in the Hebrew Bible?

Yes it is. *Tsaba*’ is also used to describe the period of indentured service for the Levites in and around the tabernacle in Num 4:23, 35, 39, 43 and 8:24. It describes the duty performed by Aaron’s descendants, the Kohathites, Gershonites and Merarites who minister in the Tabernacle. Each of these groups had different tasks.

The Kohathites cared for the most holy things (Num 4:3), the Gershonites worked and carried burdens (Num 4:24), and the Merarites carried the frames of the Tabernacle and the equipment of the courtyard (Num 4:29). Those that served were thought to be male (Num 3-4).

But it appears that the women who ministered in a tabernacle context may have performed some kind of sacred service as well, in a Levitical role. There is another piece of evidence that may point to this conclusion as well. The bronze censers of Korah, the Levite, were used to plate the Altar, as a negative consequence of sin (Num 16:38-40).⁴ The mirrors of the Levite women of Exod 38:8 were used to make the bronze basin, perhaps as a positive consequence of voluntary offering.

And it could also be that the women’s role as Levites was compulsory. Num 8:14 and 16 says that the Levites “belong to YHWH” and were completely dedicated or given over to YHWH which led Baruch Levine to say that the Heb: *natan* may, in certain contexts, connote a compulsory assignment to cultic service.⁵ If the women were at the door of the Tabernacle as part of their compulsory service it makes the behaviour of Hophni and Phineas even more repugnant, particularly as Eli heard about their behaviour more than once. 1 Sam 2:22 says he

⁴ William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2006), p. 666.

⁵ Baruch Levine, *Number 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible Series; New York: Doubleday, 1993), pp. 277-278. They are certainly known as *netinim* or ‘devoted cultic servitors’ in Ezra 2:43.

“kept hearing” about it and the seriousness of this situation is reflected in Eli’s words to his sons in 1 Sam 2:25:

If one person sins against another, God [Elohim – the judges] may mediate for the offender; but if anyone sins against the LORD, who will intercede for them?

The sins against the ministering women were more serious than those adjudicated by the judges (who were perhaps a tribunal of priests) – they were sins against God. In other words, ‘the sin of the priest against God cannot be adjusted before the tribunal of the priest, but incurs the direct vengeance of Heaven’.⁶

But many modern commentators are very challenged by the possibility that women performed sacred service like that of priests and Levites.

The JPS Torah Commentary says this of the women of Exod 38:8: “None of the evidence supports the notion that they (the women) exercised any ritual or cultic function. The idea here is that even though these women were at the bottom of the occupational and social scale they displayed unselfish generosity and sacrificial devotion in donating their valuable bronze mirrors. They performed menial work ...” (p. 230).

Along these lines other commentators say they performed a cleaning and repair service. Yet others say they were part of a singing and dancing troupe. Professor Margoliouth of Oxford went one step further when he said: “The idea of women in attendance at the Tabernacle is so odious that it has to be got rid of.”⁷

Even ancient translators were challenged by what these women did. The King James Version mistranslated *tsaba*’ as “assembled” and the Septuagint has “women who fasted.” The Latin Vulgate has “women who stood guard” and the Syriac Peshitta has “women who prayed”.

⁶ Rev S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913; reprinted, 1960), p. 36.

⁷ David Samuel Margoliouth, *Lines of defence of the Biblical revelation* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1900),

But *tsaba* ' is never used in the Hebrew Bible for fasting or praying and in the context of the Tabernacle it is unlikely they were guarding. There are different Hebrew words to describe the first two activities.

Later, the Targum Onkelos to Exodus, a translation and commentary written in Aramaic in Palestine arguably in the second century C.E., calls the women “chaste”. This is perhaps to quell the notion that their duties were somehow inappropriate.

In sum, the convoluted and unsubstantiated explanations and erroneous translations about the women’s activity are numerous. But in spite of all the attempts to explain it away, there it stood in the text: women served in a Levitical capacity at the door of the tabernacle.

And so, to question 5 ...

Why did the author of Exodus leave this verse in the text?

If we accept the scholarly consensus that Exod 38 comes from the hand of a late priestly writer and compare the use of *tsaba* ' in Exod 38:8 to its use elsewhere in the priestly material, logic dictates that the women at the tent of meeting are understood by the writer(s) to be engaged in some type of religious (and thus presumably appropriate) service.

Some scholars (Ismar Peritz, Joyce Baldwin, and others) agree that the word *tsaba* ' in this context might mean “to render service in connection with the tabernacle in a Levitical capacity.”

In most English translations Exod 38:8 is displayed by itself, as if it doesn’t really belong with what precedes or follows. It is true that part of its placement is odd. The first half of the verse fits well in its context as it discusses the crafting of the bronze basin and other Tabernacle furniture. The second part of the verse does not fit so well. It concerns the ministering of the women in a completed Tabernacle – but here is the problem – the tabernacle isn’t completed until Exod 39:32.

It is as if the second part of the verse has been inserted later. Perhaps it was misplaced by some scribal error or perhaps it was so important that it warranted an interruption in the flow of the text.

Whatever the reason, it has survived when many other feminine aspects in the Hebrew Scriptures have been suppressed (for e.g. Exod 15 - song of Miriam – attributed to Moses in v.1 when 15:20 was the original beginning; deliberate substitution of masculine for feminine pronominal suffixes at Qumran). The LXX a, Vulgate and Peshitta struggled with its significance and even changed its meaning to speak of women who fast, pray or stand guard.

In conclusion, after the tabernacle period, we hear no more of the women who ministered near the door of the tabernacle or of the bronze basin that was made from their mirrors. We cannot tell if they served in Solomon's temple or in the second temple, completed in 515 BC. We are unsure whether they served in the temple restored by Herod the Great, around the time of Jesus' birth.

But the women of Exod 38:8 remain a fascinating inclusion in the texts. Despite centuries of scribal emendation, poor translation and ineffectual commentary, the witness of their ministry remains. Their presence by the door of the Tabernacle, performing service like that of the (male) Levites, raises the possibility that Levites derived from the ranks of men *and* women in Israel.

While scholars are quick to compare the evil deeds of Hophni and Phineas, and the righteous child Samuel, they rarely compare Hophni and Phineas with the ministering women at the door of the Tabernacle. Scholars apparently have no qualms drawing a direct link between Samuel and the priesthood via the Hebrew word *mesaret*. For them Samuel is acting as a priest. But they are far more reluctant to describe the women at the door of the Tabernacle as Levites on the basis of the Hebrew *tsaba'*. Perhaps we can now correct that ignorance and compare the behaviour of Hophni and Phineas and the ministering women. Despite repeated acts committed against them, these women continued to perform service at the door of the Tabernacle, as they were required to do, until God intervened and punished the perpetrators.