



A Woman's Voice In a Man's World

The voice of Achsah is heard today, and provides a framework for God's people in times of crisis and transition.

by Beverly Beem and Viviane Haenni

Then from there he went against the inhabitants of Debir (now the name of Debir formerly was Kiriath-sepher). And Caleb said, "The one who attacks Kiriath-sepher and captures it, I will even give him my daughter Achsah for a wife." And Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, captured it; so he gave him his daughter Achsah for a wife. Then it came about when she came to him, that she persuaded him to ask her father for a field. Then she alighted from her donkey, and Caleb said to her, "What do you want?" And she said to him, "Give me a blessing, since you have given me the land of the Negev, give me also springs of water." So Caleb gave her the upper springs and the lower springs (Judges 1:11-15, NASB).

Deserts and Wellsprings

Israel is standing on the borders of Canaan. The old generation has died out in the wilderness. The new generation is prepar-

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ing to take the Promised Land. The aging Caleb, the last survivor of an older time, faces two challenges. First, as commander of the Israelite armies, he is in charge of taking the land and dividing it up among the tribes. Second, as father, he needs to provide for the welfare of his daughter in a new and strange land. Caleb hits on a plan that would do both. The great city of Debir has yet to be taken. Only the man strong enough and wise enough to take the city is good enough for his daughter. He issues the challenge, and the man to meet the test is no less than the first judge of Israel. A happy ending. The story could have ended right there. It is complete. The fate of a daughter is decided by men. But there is more to the story.

The next scene takes us to the wedding day. Achsah's dowry has been established, the great land of the Negev: A wonderful, generous dowry befitting the daughter of a chief marrying the hero of the hour. But something is wrong. The men don't know it yet. They are too involved in their duties of conquering and dividing the land. Achsah sees the problem

immediately. She has received a magnificent estate, it is true, but the land is a desert. Without a water supply, she would be dependent on the bit of rainfall she could capture in the cisterns. If she is to transform this desert into productive gardens and orchards, she needs her own independent supply of water.

She acts quickly. She speaks to her husband and urges him to ask her father for land with the needed wellsprings. He remains silent. You can almost hear him thinking: "Caleb has been wonderfully generous. How can I tell my new father-in-law that his wedding gift is inadequate and ask for more?" But Achsah can. Caleb is not only the national leader but also her father. In a gesture that signals both respect and urgency, she jumps down from her donkey and goes to him. Caleb meets her with a question that invites her to speak. "What do you wish?" She lays out her need. "You have given me good land, but it is dry, and I need water, too." Caleb responds instantly with the generosity of a father. "Of course. Water. Why didn't I think of that before?"

So he grants her request. In double measure. She asks for springs. He gives her two. She doesn't have to beg or persuade. As soon as he sees her need, he acts.

Two Generations Meet

The story of Achsah is the first instance in the Book of Judges where a woman makes a surprise appearance. The world depicted in the first chapter of Judges is a world of military conquest and political division. It is the world of men. In this patriarchal society, the affairs of state and family are decided by men. Silent women are passed from one male custodian to the next. This story is different. When Achsah comes to the scene, she has lines. She has opinions and speaks her mind on this masculine stage. She is not content to

remain the passive object of discussion; she, too, is a participant. Achsah sees the land differently from the men. To them it is a place to conquer; to her it is a place to live. For the land to sustain life, it must have water. She understands that. Why don't they? The answer may lie in the times. It is a time of transition. Israel is moving between two worlds. The generation of Caleb has wandered in the wilderness; the generation of Achsah will settle the Promised Land. They speak from the perspective of two different callings. That is why Caleb does not foresee Achsah's need for water. His task is not hers. He does not understand the task of the new generation. He does not perceive her mission. But she understands her mission and what she needs to accomplish it. Now, she must speak if she is to live. She addresses her husband and asks him to mediate for them. But he does not do so. Why not? The story does not say. It might be that he does not need to speak. It is not his story, after all. It is hers. He has already played out his role in the taking of the city. Now, it is her turn to act. He stands back and watches as his new bride moves on their behalf.

And she moves with dispatch. She slips off her donkey and runs to Caleb to speak. She doesn't hesitate for a moment to make her request. She goes boldly to her father, who happens also to be the highest authority in Israel. She asks for a blessing. The language evokes the story of Jacob and Esau who also ask of their father a blessing. "Give me a blessing. Since you have given me the land of the Negev, give me also springs of water." She lays out the reasons for her request. She reviews with Caleb what he has done. She acknowledges his generous gift. But there is more to do. The land he has given her is a desert and needs water. "Because you have given me the Negev, give me also the springs of water I need to make the desert bloom." And he does. Immediately.

Achsah receives two blessings not custom-

arily given to women. She receives land, a possession reserved for sons. She also receives springs, a privilege reserved for chiefs as a sign of authority. Caleb in giving his daughter the Negev has already given her something outside of tradition, and now, he does not even hesitate to go further and grants her two wellsprings.

Caleb, in meeting the demands of women, is not the first to go beyond local custom and that which is considered proper in his time. He has precedent. Moses had also gone beyond tradition in dealing with Zelophehad's daughters—Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah (Numbers 27:1-11; 36:1-12). They, too, had come boldly to the highest authority in Israel to claim an inheritance for themselves. Moses received their request in the presence of the priests, the leaders, and the assembled people. He did not know what to do. However, he did not run from the issue. He did not reject their request by citing custom. He did not tell them to go away while he debated with the priests. He did not worry that some of his leaders would misunderstand. He did not fear what the surrounding nations would think if women were to receive an inheritance in Israel. He did not explain that such things had never been done before. He did not say that now is not a good time. He did not tell them to come back another day. Rather, he took the matter directly to the Lord. And the Lord answered directly back. "The daughters of Zelophehad are right; you shall give them possession of an inheritance among their father's brethren and cause the inheritance of their father to pass to them" (Numbers 27:7, RSV).

Like the daughters of Zelophehad, Achsah does not hesitate to step out in her own behalf. She does not wait for her husband to be her mediator. Rather, she goes boldly and immediately to the highest authority in Israel to present her case. And, like them, she is heard.

Models of Wisdom

The story of Achsah at the beginning of the Book of Judges, sets forth the ideal of how things could be in Israel. Her story provides as much a normative framework as other stories to be remembered by God's people in times of crisis and transition. It provides a model for change. However, the Book of Judges also unfolds the sad consequences coming upon a people when they are unable to enter this model. As Israel falls farther and farther away from God's ideal, the voices of women are ignored or diminished. Violence and divisiveness prevail. The rest

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of the book reveals what happens when the cooperation of father and daughter disintegrates, as in the story of Jephthah; when the peace of husband and wife vanishes, as in the story of Samson; when the voices of women are silenced and their names forgotten, as in the story of the concubine. This last story inverts the story of Achsah as it depicts the total disintegration of relationships between men and women, fathers and daughters, husbands and wives, and ultimately the disintegration of the nation. After all, the murder of one woman launches the country into civil war. But the social chaos depicted in the story is not the last word. The entire Book of Ruth,

set in the time of the judges, portrays once again the truth of Achsah's story. There again, women step out of local tradition to take initiative in their own behalf and to shape their own futures. There again, a man responds openly to the outrageous and unconventional demands of women. There again, God uses women's boldness to change the course of history and bring about salvation.

The voice of Achsah is heard today, too. Her story provides a normative framework to be remembered by God's people in times of crisis and transition. As one generation moves off the scene and the needs of a new generation become pressing, the story of Achsah is a model of wisdom. It gives women permission to take initiative on their own behalf and to boldly express their own vision. Like Achsah, women often have insights into the future and the developing needs of their communities that men do not have. Like Achsah, women must sometimes step outside their fears and the constraints of what has always been done to clearly and directly communicate their insights.

And just as women have the responsibility to speak, men have the responsibility to listen. The story of Achsah is also a model of strong and courageous men, real heroes, who know when to remain silent and listen to the voice of a woman. It is a story about men secure enough in God and their own calling that they are not afraid to recognize the limits of their influence and understanding. It is about men who can gently retreat from center stage to allow women to handle their own affairs. It is about men who affirm women's creative interruptions into the masculine status quo and allow new blessings to come about through women's bold speech and action. It is about men who invite women to speak and listen to

what they have to say. It is about men who ask questions and are not afraid of the answers. It is about men who let women narrate their own stories and shape their own dreams. Finally, it is about men who are not afraid to forsake past traditions and let women share the inheritance of power and authority given to both male and female at the beginning (Genesis 1:28).

The story of Achsah stands like a permanent sign in God's salvation history. It points to a God who works through the unconventional and honors change. It reveals a God who is present in the creation of new laws and the reshaping of old ways of thinking to meet new times. It unveils a God who acts through courageous people to overturn stifling customs and unjust practices caused by time, circumstances, or false interpretations of his will.

Precedents for Change

Like Israel, the Adventist Church is going through a period of transition. In the Western world, the ways of the old generation in worship, leadership, and mission may not always meet the needs of the new generation. After 150 years of conquest, the church is facing issues of settlement. After the evangelistic crusade, the church must provide a "sanctuary," a safe place for people to grow and mature until Christ comes. The wisdom of both generations is needed for the church to move into the next stage of its history. If the church is to be alive for the new generation as it was for the old, it must be a place where men and women can hear each other speak, where old and young can affirm and receive each other's gifts. In this community of the future, the wisdom of Achsah and the might of Othniel work together for the settlement of the land.