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A Survey of Female Heroism in Jewish Tradition

Abstract.

Did warrior heroines exist in the Hebrew tradition? The answer is a seemingly reassuring yes, but the paper shows that the topos of female heroism was not a popular theme in Jewish tradition. To imagine ancient war scenes according to depictions in modern media can be misleading; the central purpose of this brief survey is to give a glimpse into this topic.

Keywords: heroines, Book of Joshua, Book of Judges, Book of Judith, Josephus, wars in Antiquity

Introduction

Female warriors are common in both modern and ancient media. Stories of Amazon-like heroines arguably had their heyday on screen in the 1990s. The scenes from that time still make an impact on modern consciousness. Here the protagonists, the heroines on the good side, are attractive but also ruthless and cold-blooded proponents of the truth. Often the actresses of these movies are super-sexualized and involved in intensive sex scenes in the films. Such works still influence the public. A prime example of this trope is *Xena: Warrior Princess* (TV series aired in the period of 1995–2001).

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Probably the heyday is over, but movies with heroines still sell. *Mulan* (2020) and *The Legend of Tomiris* (2019, based on Queen Tomiris of Massagetae) are recent examples of modern renditions of past heroines. A fascinating historical figure was Ana Nzinga, Queen of Ndongo, who fought against the Portuguese colonizers for the independence of her homeland in the 17th century. The film based on the story of this real warrior woman and her life struggle (*Nzinga, Queen of Angola*, 2013) became popular. She is not just a heroine of modern filmmakers; the first novel about her appeared in 1769 (*Zingha, Reine d'Angola*, Paris). The figure of Joan of Arc is also important in shaping our views. So much for the movies, but these historical female figures, or at least some of them, ended their lives as actual practitioners of power as queens; or at least pursuit of power led their efforts.

Female Fighters in Ancient Literature

Due to shows and other elements of pop culture, the general public may have the image that Amazons, i.e. women who took up arms when necessary (and even when not) were common in the Greco-Roman world. On the other hand, even the passing observer can see that in classical Hebrew thought and literature, the heroine is present only very rarely and always operates at the level of individual heroism. Still, the heroine's actions often affect the wider community and can even influence the outcome of a war. Classical antiquity was well aware of female warriors.

Not central to our subject, but ancient women did not always appear as champions of pacifism, not even in the hinterland. Once Athenian women brutally lynched the entire family of a peace-loving but voted-out politician!² Herodotus also preserved the memory of another event when local women became violent against their own. This case is about a war from which only one Athenian man returned home. The wives of the fighting men surrounded this unfortunate fellow and brutally took his life for daring to come back alive without his fallen comrades. From this story, we also learn that sometimes war affects fashion:

² HERODOTUS, *Hist.* 9.5.

—when he returned to Athens he reported the calamity which had happened; and the wives of the men who had gone on the expedition to Egina, hearing it and being very indignant that he alone of all had survived, came round this man and proceeded to stab him with the brooches of their mantles, each one of them asking of him where her husband was. Thus he was slain; and to the Athenians it seemed that the deed of the women was a much more terrible thing even than the calamity which had happened; and not knowing, it is said, how they should punish the women in any other way, they changed their fashion of dress to that of Ionia,—for before this the women of the Athenians wore Dorian dress, very like that of Corinth,—they changed it therefore to the linen tunic, in order that they might not have use for brooches. (Herodotus, *Hist.* 5.87, translated by G. C. Macaulay)

As for the Amazons, they were not simply a type of woman. According to Herodotus, they were competent riders but knew nothing about sailing or ships (Herodotus, *Hist.* 4.110), and they founded a new people in the Scythian territory with Scythian warriors. The text says that in the formation of the new people, the will of the Amazons prevailed in everything. The Scythian men could not learn the language of the mighty ladies, but these women became competent in the native tongue of the Scythian men; finally, they became Scythian in every aspect except in lifestyle. These women then forced their new husbands to ask their families for their property and choose a territory to settle in.

We are possessed by fear and trembling to think that we must dwell in this place, having not only separated you from your fathers, but also done great damage to your land. Since then ye think it right to have us as your wives, do this together with us, come and let us remove from this land ... and having arrived at the place where they are now settled, they took up their abode there: and from thenceforward the women of the Sauromatai practice their ancient way of living, going out regularly on horseback to the chase both in company with the men and apart from them, and going regularly to war, and wearing the same dress as the men. (Herodotus, *Hist.* 4.115–116)

Previously, these mighty female warriors had slaughtered masses of men, so the text interprets the name of the Amazons name as “man-killer”. “...the Amazons are called by the Scythians Oiorpata, which name means in the Hellenic tongue slayers of men, for man they call *oior*, and *pata* means to slay” (Herodotus, *Hist.* 4.110).

In the Greek world, too, only a few exceptional women took part in active combat with weapons. Greek women, especially the Athenians, were unquestionable patriots and supporters of fighting men.³ Spartan women occasionally took an active part in the defence of their city as well. Apart from these, there are only sporadic records of female war activity from Mediterranean antiquity. We know from Plutarch's *Moralia* (244) that the fear of rape and enslavement several times led women to kill their children and take refuge in suicide.⁴ This behaviour is familiar to us, as it appears in Josephus's description of the siege of Masada,⁵ with a notable difference: in Masada, men, and not women, planned and terminated the mass suicide. Plutarch dealt in detail with the subject of female heroism, dedicating a large part of his work to this issue.⁶ He used plenty of examples to prove his main point: "Man's virtues and woman's virtues are one and the same" (Plutarch, *Moralia*, 243, translated by F. C. Babbitt).

Even if Plutarch was right, we have to ask the simple question: were women expected to take an active role in times of war? According to other authorities, women did not fight because they were physically unfit for combat.⁷ "For he made the man's body and mind more

³ LOMAN, P. (2004): No Woman No War: Women's Participation in Ancient Greek Warfare. In: *Greece & Rome*. 51, 1. 34–54; 53.

⁴ Id. 41–43.

⁵ Note the speech of Eleazar: "Who will not, therefore, believe that they will certainly be in a rage at us, in case they can take us alive? Miserable will then be the young men who will be strong enough in their bodies to sustain many torments! ... But certainly our hands are still at liberty, and have a sword in them; let them then be subservient to us in our glorious design; let us die before we become slaves under our enemies, and let us go out of the world, together with our children and our wives, in a state of freedom. This it is that our laws command us to do; this it is that our wives and children crave at our hands; nay, God himself hath brought this necessity upon us; while the Romans desire the contrary, and are afraid lest any of us should die before we are taken. Let us therefore make haste, and instead of affording them so much pleasure, as they hope for in getting us under their power, let us leave them an example which shall at once cause their astonishment at our death, and their admiration of our hardiness therein" (*War* 7.384–388, translated by W. Whiston). Josephus says that only two women and five children survived the following massacre and self-slaughter (*War* 7.399).

⁶ On Plutarch and women, see: ANTONIOU, Z. (2020): Women in Antiquity through the Eyes of Plutarch. In: *Journal of Gender and Power*. 13, 1. 59–69.

⁷ OOST, S. I. (1977): Xenophon's Attitude toward Women. In: *The Classical World*. 71, 4. 225–236; 226–229.

capable of enduring cold and heat, and journeys and campaigns; and therefore, imposed on him the outdoor tasks. To the woman, since he has made her body less capable of such endurance, I take it that God has assigned the indoor tasks” (Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, 7.23, translated by E. C. Marchant).

The reality was more complex; even the queen of a Hellenistic monarchy (e.g. Teuta of Illyria in the 3rd century BC) might have led an army. This could mean two things: either Greek women did not fight, or they fought, but due to the literary style of the time, authors did not characterize them as war heroines.⁸ On the other hand, from the Hellenistic period onwards, the presence of women and children became common in military camps during campaigns.⁹

Heroes, Fighters, and Heroines

Heroes are born in war. Throughout its history, ancient Israel was involved in many military conflicts and suffered defeats under several great empires, but the Hebrew Bible avoids the description of female heroism in connection with these wars.

It is always memorable to preserve individual heroism in a struggle for freedom against oppressive powers. However, when we consider the character of freedom fighters, it is often not easy to decide whether these fighters might simply be called terrorists. This problem fundamentally arises in texts dealing with the early history of Israel. An important distinction is necessary here: we are not dealing with the wars fought per se; we evaluate their literary representation. As we read the stories of the Judges, sometimes it is difficult to draw a line between terrorism and heroic acts in war. The Ehud–Eglon conflict is a prime example: was Ehud a terrorist or a freedom fighter (Judg 3:12–30)? The killing of Eglon seems to be a simple act of terror, and Judg 3:26 tells us that Ehud hid in solitude in Seirah after the attack. It would seem that the continuation of the story in verse 27, the public declaration of war, is an unrelated event. It is legitimate to speak of a broad military conflict, as described in 3:27–30, but in this unit, Ehud’s name does not occur, and there is no reference to the killing of the king of Moab. We may explain this with the literary

⁸ LOMAN 2004, 45–49.

⁹ Id. 41–53.

composition of the text: the assassination of Eglon and the battle against Moab could be two independent traditions, and a creative writer linked the two in a single narrative. Thus, the storyteller presented Ehud as a positive hero,¹⁰ even though the passage does not mention the spirit of the Lord.¹¹

As for women, in the book of Joshua, Rahab, the prostitute plays a crucial role (Josh 2 and 6:22–25) by hiding the spies and exposing the city’s weakness. She remains a positive example as a supporter of Israel’s fight for land during the wars of Joshua. Her influence is also perceptible in the New Testament: she is included in Jesus’s genealogy (Matt 1:5) and in the list of heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11. Her story underwent serious reconsideration during the centuries both in Jewish and Christian interpretation. In rabbinic circles, she became “the example of the ideal proselyte”, while some Christian interpreters presented her as “the figure of the penitent prostitute”, and others emphasized that her “gentile origins serve as a parallel to the church’s gentile origins”.¹² Jael, the murderer of Sisera in the Book of Judges (4:17–21, 5:24–27) is a prime example of individual heroism;¹³ she is comparable only to Judith, a central figure in later Jewish literature. An unnamed woman is also worth recalling, who crushed the skull of Abimelech, the petty ruler of Shechem, with a stone thrown from the tower of Thebez (Judg 9:53), although probably she did it with someone else’s help.¹⁴ Abimelech, her adversary, is a failing hegemonic male in this story.¹⁵

As for the Book of Judith, we must recall the constant motif of deliverance through the hands of a woman. Her fascinating story took place during the time of the siege of the city of Bethulia. The Israelite town was cut off from its water source by enemy forces,

¹⁰ CHISHOLM, R. B., Jr. (2011): Ehud: Assessing an Assassin. In: *Bibliotheca Sacra*. 168, 671. 274–282; 277–282.

¹¹ BOLING, R. G. (1975): *Judges. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Garden City (New York), Doubleday; 88.

¹² DE WET, C. L. (2020): Rahab the Harlot in Severian of Gabala’s *De paenitentia et compunctione (de Rahab historia)*: Paradox, Anti-Judaism and the Early Christian Invention of the Penitent Prostitute. In: *HTS Theological Studies*. 76, 3. 1–7; 2–5.

¹³ On the analogy of Jael and Rahab: ASSIS, E. (2004): The Choice to Serve God and Assist His People: Rahab and Yael. In: *Biblica*. 85, 1. 82–90. Judges ch. 4 and 5 differ in the details of Sisera’s assassination. SOGGIN, A. (2nd 1987): *Judges. A Commentary*. London, SCM Press, 101.

¹⁴ BOLING 1975, 182.

¹⁵ CARMAN, J.-M. (2019): Abimelech the Manly Man?: Judges 9.1–57 and the Performance of Hegemonic Masculinity. In: *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*. 43, 3. 301–316.

suffering from thirst, and the besieged decided to surrender after five days. Then, the wise and brave, God-fearing Judith came onto the scene. She made a vow in front of the elders of her town that the Lord would visit Israel by her hand (8:9–34). She left the city armed, and the guards of an Assyrian outpost captured her and took her to their camp. There, the general of the attackers, Holofernes, said to her, “Take courage, woman!” (11:1). Maybe he did not expect Judith to take his words literally. In the end, sexual desire and excessive wine drinking prevailed over Holofernes, and Judith, after the feast, now in the intimate confines of the tent, separated the chief soldier’s body from his head with two strikes (13:8). Thus, the campaign was essentially over.

Before her attack, Judith prayed. Her prayer is certainly humble,¹⁶ but it is still in the style of Ex 15 and Ps 83. In this passage, we read: “Look at their pride, and send your wrath upon their heads. Give to me, a widow, the strong hand to do what I plan. By the deceit of my lips strike down the slave with the prince and the prince with his servant; crush their arrogance by the hand of a woman” (9:9–10, NRSVCE).

This idea of a mighty woman appears several times in the book (cf. 8:33; 12:4; 13:4, 14; 15:8–9; 16:5). Judith was a great dramatic heroine, probably the bravest among the mighty women of ancient Israel. According to Crawford, “Judith’s action is loaded with sexual innuendo; the line between sex and death was very close in pre-modern times. Holofernes’s decapitation is a symbolic castration; he loses his potency and his power to harm the Israelites.”¹⁷

Women of Courage in the Works of Josephus

The significant female figures in the books of Joshua and Judges did not escape the attention of Flavius Josephus. In *Jewish Antiquities*, Rahab is presented as an innkeeper who misled the king’s messengers and thus saved the spies. This bravely illustrates the “danger she had undergone for their sakes” (*Ant* 5.11, translated by W. Whiston). It is

¹⁶ CRAWFORD, Sidnie White (2010): *NIV One – Volume Commentary*. 547–557; 551.

¹⁷ Id. 553.; JOOSTEN, J. – יוסטן, י. (2007): יהודית ספר של ההיסטורי וההקשר המקור לשון / The Original Language and Historical Milieu of the Book of Judith. In: *Meghillot: Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls* / מגילות / מחקרים: 159–176.

noteworthy that she is never called a harlot in Josephus's version of the story. In Judaism, just as in the Christian interpretation, there is a clear tendency to whitewash her character,¹⁸ but we should still remember that hospitality (local inns, cafes) and prostitution went hand in hand in antiquity.¹⁹

Josephus's rendition of the Jael narrative follows the text of Judges 4. She secured Sisera, the commander of the Canaanite army, to the ground with a hammer and a nail (*Ant* 5.207–209). Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* also records the account of the women who killed Abimelech with a "piece of a millstone" (Judg 9:53). As far as one can tell, the event's description in the *Antiquities* (*Ant* 5.252) follows the biblical text.²⁰ The story of Nabal and Abigail is similar. In this case, an armed conflict between two bands of clans was about to break out (1 Sam 25). We may call this clash an armed conflict between non-state actors.²¹ In modern terms, we would call this a possible clash between paramilitary groups. The basic outline of Josephus's version (*Ant* 6.300-309) follows the biblical text: the woman makes an apology, David accepts gifts, and finally, after the death of Nabal, Abigail becomes the wife of the future ruler. At the beginning of David's reign, the king faced two harsh rebellions. First came the uprising of Absalom and then Sheba's revolt. We read that brave women helped the king's cause in both cases (2 Sam 17:19; 20: 16–22). Josephus, in turn, records all these cases (*Ant* 7.225–227; 7.289–292).

¹⁸ CHARLES, R. (2011): Rahab: A Righteous Whore in James. In: *Neotestamentica*. 45, 2. 206–220; 208.

¹⁹ DAVIDSON, Richard M. (2007): *The Flame of Yahweh. Sexuality in the Old Testament*. Peabody (Mass.), Hendrickson; 304; BAR-ILAN, M. (2020): Some Jewish Women in Antiquity. In: *Brown Judaic Studies*. Online edition. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvzgb9b6>. Last accessed on: 15.09.2022.; 149–152.

²⁰ BEGG, C. T. (1996): Abimelech, King of Shechem According to Josephus. In: *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*. 72, 1. 146–164; 161.

"In the first eleven books of the Antiquities... he generally follows the order of the biblical narrative", but in certain cases he "rearranges the order of verses in the Bible; he does so to produce a more coherent, thematic narrative, in accordance with the views of Diodorus and Dionysius of Halicarnassus" (FELDMAN, L. H. (2000): Josephus' Portrayal (Antiquities 5.136–174) of the Benjaminite Affair of the Concubine and Its Repercussions (Judges 19-21). In: *The Jewish Quarterly Review*. 90, 3/4. 255–292; 256–257).

²¹ For the phenomenon in modern contexts, consult FJELDE, H. – NILSSON, D. (2012): Rebels against Rebels: Explaining Violence between Rebel Groups. In: *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*. 56, 4. 604–628.

Josephus rewrote biblical stories with notable female characters, but he was always careful to follow the central elements of the biblical tradition. Sometimes he changes the details to a greater extent; however, as is clear from the story of the murder of Ishbosheth:

So when they (i.e. the assassins) once found him alone, and asleep at noon, in an upper room, *when none of his guards were there, and when the woman that kept the door was not watching but was fallen asleep also, partly on account of the labor she had undergone, and partly on account of the heat of the day*, these men went into the room in which Ishbosheth, Saul's son, lay asleep, and slew him; they also cut off his head and took their journey all that night and the next day... (*Ant* 7.48–49, translated by W. Whiston; italics added)

Here Josephus makes an unnamed woman responsible for the death of Saul's son. The story in 2Sam 4 (MT) did not mention her – in that text, we read about the killers that

... they arrived there in the heat of the day while he was taking his noonday rest. They went into the inner part of the house as if to get some wheat, and they stabbed him in the stomach. Then Rekab and his brother Baanah slipped away. They had gone into the house while he was lying on the bed in his bedroom. After they stabbed and killed him, they cut off his head. (2Sam 4:5–7, NIV)

It is worth noting that the LXX version of 2 Samuel mentions this woman.²² It is far beyond the scope of our paper to discover the Bible Josephus used, but this and similar variant readings contain data regarding the nature of his source text(s).²³ According to Nodet, “The best hypothesis to explain the peculiarities of his text was that he [viz.

²² Some influential modern translations follow this reading, e.g. RSV: “The doorkeeper of the house had been cleaning wheat, but she grew drowsy and slept” (2Sam 4:6). The verse causes text-critical problems (MURAOKA, T. (2018): 2 Sam 4:6: A Case of Textual Criticism Interfacing with Hebrew Verb Syntax. In: *Vetus Testamentum*. 68, 1. 169–171), and it is central for understanding the recorded assassination. MASTÉY, E. (2011): A Linguistic Inquiry Solves an Ancient Crime: Re-examination of 2 Samuel 4:6. In: *Vetus Testamentum*. 61, 1. 82–103.

²³ BEGG, C. T. (1998): The Assassination of Ishbosheth according to Josephus. In: *Antonianum*. 73, 2. 241–253; 244.

Josephus] had not used a Greek Bible, but paraphrased a much altered Hebrew source including marginal glosses or variant readings.” Other scholars, also quoted by Nodet, state: “Josephus used a ‘proto-Lucianic’ Greek Bible almost three centuries before Lucian.” It is also possible that, eventually, both Josephus and Lucian “depend on the same Hebrew source”.²⁴ A fourth option by Begg: “Josephus may well have had various text forms of 2 Samuel 4 available to him.”²⁵ Besides, Steve Mason states that Josephus was “capable of shaping his work to reflect his own agenda, interests, and style”,²⁶ and he probably employed literary assistants as well. It is not impossible that his aids composed extended portions of his texts.²⁷

Josephus and Women’s Suffering

Josephus frequently refers to women’s suffering, and not just at war. He movingly rephrased the Biblical story of the brutally insulted woman (Judg 19) in Ant 5.146–148.²⁸ He also gives a detailed description of Herod as he tortured women:

... certain of his freedmen came ... to the king, and told him that his brother had been destroyed by poison, and that his wife had brought him somewhat that was prepared after an unusual manner, and that, upon his eating it, he presently fell into his distemper; that Antipater’s mother and sister, two days before, brought a woman out of Arabia that was skillful in mixing such drugs, that she might prepare a love potion for Pheroras; and that instead of a love potion, she had given him deadly poison. The king was deeply affected with so many suspicions, and had the maidservants and some of the free women also tortured. ... Then did the king send for her [viz. Pheroras’s wife], and bid her bring to him what

²⁴ NODETT, E. (2007): Josephus and the Books of Samuel. In: Cohen, S. J. D. – Schwartz, J. J. (eds.): *Studies in Josephus and the Varieties of Ancient Judaism. Louis H. Feldman Jubilee Volume*. Leiden, Brill. 141-168.

²⁵ BEGG 1998, 250.

²⁶ MASON, S. (2001): *Flavius Josephus on the Pharisees*. Brill, Leiden; 47.

²⁷ Id. 48–51.

²⁸ FELDMAN 2000, 275–276.

she had received immediately. So she came out of her house as if she would bring it with her, but threw herself down from the top of the house, in order to prevent any examination and torture from the king. However ... she fell not upon her head, but upon other parts of her body, and escaped. The king, when she was brought to him, took care of her ...; and gave her his oath, that if she would speak the real truth, he would excuse her from punishment; but that if she concealed any thing, he would have her body torn to pieces by torments, and leave no part of it to be buried. (*War* 1.582–598, translated by W. Whiston)

It is noteworthy that in Rome sometimes women had to fight in the arena, too.²⁹ Suetonius wrote about Domitian:

He constantly gave grand and costly entertainments, both in the amphitheatre and in the Circus, where in addition to the usual races between two-horse and four-horse chariots, he also exhibited two battles, one between forces of infantry and the other by horsemen; and he even gave a naval battle in the amphitheatre. Besides he gave hunts of wild beasts, gladiatorial shows at night by the light of torches, and *not only combats between men but between women as well*. (Suetonius, *Life of Domitian*, 4.1, translated by J. C. Rolfe; italics added)

At this point, we must repeatedly recall the description of the end of the war, the Masada scene (*War* 7.389–398), where husbands had to slaughter their wives and children. But these are still not the most extreme situations women had to suffer. Josephus writes about Mary, a fugitive from a Transjordanian village (Bethzob), who left her belongings behind and fled to Jerusalem. Here, the “rapacious guards, who came every day running into her house”, took all she had left. Finally, she killed her child, made food for herself from the parts of the body, and during the next raid, she offered the rest to the attacking mob. For this woman, famine was worse than Roman slavery: “With the Romans there is only slavery, even if we are alive when they come; but famine is forestalling slavery, and the partisans are crueller than either.” The news spread, and upon hearing it, Caesar declared:

²⁹ MCCULLOUGH, A. (2008): Female Gladiators in Imperial Rome: Literary Context and Historical Fact. In: *The Classical World*. 101, 2. 197–209.

“men ought not to leave such a city upon the habitable earth to be seen by the sun, wherein mothers are thus fed” (*War* 6.199–218).

In Josephus’s view, women were vulnerable and potential sources of trouble in the war. During the siege of Jotapata, the soldiers had to shut the women up in their houses because of their demoralizing outcry.

...but then for the useless part of the citizens, the women and children, when they saw their city encompassed by a threefold army (for none of the usual guards that had been fighting before were removed), when they also saw, not only the walls thrown down, but their enemies with swords in their hands, as also the hilly country above them shining with their weapons, and the darts in the hands of the Arabian archers, they made a final and lamentable outcry of the destruction, as if the misery were not only threatened, but actually come upon them already. But Josephus ordered the women to be shut up in their houses, lest they should render the warlike actions of the men too effeminate, by making them commiserate their condition, and commanded them to hold their peace (*War* 3.262–263)

Josephus was uncomfortable with the idea of women at war. Probably this originated in his personal military experience.³⁰ His works echo his concerns (e.g. when the Romans attacked Gamala: “some of them caught hold of their children and their wives, and drew them after them, and fled away to the citadel, with lamentations and cries”, *War* 4.71). He saw war, had first-hand experience, and knew how men behaved when they could not protect their loved ones. He, as a soldier, knew it was better to keep women out of war. This attitude is visible all over his work. In *Antiquities*, already in the camp in the wilderness, women were already causing trouble:

³⁰ He served as a military commander of Galilee (MILLER, Stuart S. (2001): Josephus on the Cities of Galilee: Factions, Rivalries and Alliances in the First Jewish Revolt. In: *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte*. 50, 4. 453–467). According to some authors, he remained a soldier for the rest of his career, even when his only weapon was his pen: “Josephus stresses that he proposes to set forth the details of biblical history in accordance with their proper order (...), using the military term *τάξις* (arrangement of troops, battle array or order of battle), as if he were in literature the general he had been in the field during the war against the Romans” (FELDMAN 2000, 257).

The multitude of the children and of the women also, being of too weak capacities to be persuaded by reason, blunted the courage of the men themselves. Moses therefore was in great difficulties, and made everybody's calamity his own. For they ran all of them to him, and begged of him: the women begged for their infants, and the men for the women, that he would not overlook them, but would procure some way or other for their deliverance. (*Ant* 3.5–6)

In Josephus's view, women typically played a passive role in war. He usually mentions them alongside children or those advanced in years; thus, women are one of the vulnerable groups. Apart from the great biblical heroines (Rahab, Jael), there are no references to unquestionable female courage on the battlefield or at threat. Women possibly endured but did not influence warfare. According to Reeder, the distress and trauma of women have a central rhetorical function in Josephus's work: "In Jewish War, the suffering of women and children is ... a significant element in the condemnation of the rebels for their ill-fated decisions."³¹

Conclusions

The triumph of a female against a male warrior was always a humiliation of the enemy. Rahab, Jael, the unnamed woman from the time of the wars of Abimelech, and Judith were women ready to stand for a cause and fight. Their traces in the tradition are vivid and colourful. These engaging stories represent positive, affirming examples of female heroism, an idea that was not popular in Jewish thinking. Men wrote war reports, and we come across extremely few references. Generally speaking, in most cases, women could be only supporters of male fighters or mediators. We find capable women in the texts, but the brave, Amazon-like characters are usually missing from the war stories; the literary theme of female heroism is almost absent. Even Josephus was unwilling to create a second Judith.

³¹ REEDER, C. A. (2013): Pity the Women and Children: Punishment by Siege in Josephus's Jewish War. In: *Journal for the Study of Judaism: In the Persian Hellenistic & Roman Period*. 44, 2. 174–194; 176.

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