

Inspiring Women: discovering biblical role models, Ruth Perrin (Grove Books B52, 2009)

One of my colleagues recently commented on the number of books on my shelves about women in the Bible or in leadership – and yes, I do have quite a collection. So I was all the more impressed to open this booklet and find myself reading about biblical women of whom I knew nothing!

This booklet sets out to explore the significance of role models, and to uncover the stories of lesser-known biblical characters, especially women. It also focuses on how some of the difficult stories about women can be seen in a different light, and how lesser known women can be role models for *men*. After all, women have always found value in male biblical role models!

Right from her introduction, Perrin had me reading with anticipation. She writes of her experience of preaching on Colossians 4, 'Paul's team', and of how congregations often identify strongly with seemingly ordinary characters. A quick look at a lectionary commentary confirmed what I thought, that Colossians 4, a passage of 'further instructions' and greetings, does not feature – but I'll be going back to this passage in 'open season' or when I'm teaching about teamwork.

The chapter on role models seeks to examine how role models function. 'People look for role models with whom they can identify.' She cites the results of a survey of young Christian women who were asked about role models in relation to their faith: 75% of the models cited were women, which she suggests implies that women consciously look to other women to model what their faith should look like. But when asked about *biblical* role models, the women selected mainly men – they had rarely heard teaching about women in the Bible.

Perrin suggests that the absence of women is partly because it's the 'big name' characters who are most commonly taught and used as examples – and most of them are men. She encourages us not to reject those characters, but to also use the stories of lesser known, more minor characters, with whom many in our congregations, both men and women, may identify.

I confess to never having given Jehosheba (2 Kings 11) a second thought. But aided by some historical background, imaginative scene-setting and comparison with other biblical stories, I'm quickly gripped by the potential application of her story to modern congregations who ponder the slaughter of children, the experience of violence, and the challenge to take risks for others who are in danger. I cannot recall ever noticing Sheerah (1 Chronicles 7), who founded three towns, or Shallum's daughters (Nehemiah 3), the only women in Nehemiah's list of builders, either. The New Testament women whom Perrin mentions are more well-known (at least to me), and she reminds readers that despite sometimes brief mentions, more is known about some of the women than we may think, and certainly enough to portray them as real women who walked with God.

Abigail, whose story is told in 1 Samuel 25, is used as an example of a woman who is significant but neglected. Perrin suggests that one way to explore the story would be to give some notes for a guided discussion and invite people to read the story carefully. The author suggests using the stories of Sarah, Leah and Rachel, Ruth and others, in a similar way.

When it comes to passages in Scripture that describe violence against women (for example, Tamar, and the Levite's concubine), most commentators ignore it, while some feminists denounce a God who could allow such things to happen. It is good that Perrin does not avoid this difficult area, but gives brief pointers on how to handle what does, she suggests, reflect the reality of a broken world.

A readable and inspiring booklet, and one that should be read by men as well as women.