



CLOTHED WITH STRENGTH

*Women who
built the church
and changed
the world*

SARAH
ALLEN

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10Publishing, a division of 10ofthose.com
Unit C, Tomlinson Road, Leyland, PR25 2DY, England
Email: info@10ofthose.com
Website: www.10ofthose.com

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Introduction

Twelve generations ago, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, a woman from the African Gold Coast was taken in chains across the Atlantic. Two hundred years later, another woman lay dying in London, worn out by hard-fought battles for social transformation.

Between these two points in history the world changed beyond recognition. Colonial empires expanded, slavery was outlawed and the United States gained independence. From steam engines to trains and street lights, everyday life was transformed by technology. The world became smaller, communication became easier and the industrial era was born.

This book details the lives of four women during this period: Rebecca Protten, Hannah More, Ellen Ranyard and Josephine Butler. While the two centuries in which they lived saw dramatic cultural and spiritual change, what draws these women together is their God-given drive to fight injustice, help the oppressed and seek the transformation of society through the offer of salvation in Jesus.

Like the noble wife described in Proverbs, all four women had 'faithful instruction' on their tongues and opened their 'arms to the poor'. In doing so they established patterns for women's ministry which we still see today. Rebecca Protten, a freed slave, was set aside as a worker by the church, standing strong despite

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being jailed. Hannah More used her fame as a popular author to transform British attitudes to slavery and promote education amongst the emerging working classes. Ellen Ranyard pioneered the training of underprivileged women as evangelists in the slums of London. Josephine Butler campaigned against state-sanctioned prostitution and child abuse, bringing to light the evils of nineteenth-century culture. These four women may not be well known today, but their influence can still be felt.

In a world where we are encouraged to claim our power and shout about our identity, these women teach us what it means to lay aside the significant privilege of wealth, reputation and freedom. They show us how a powerful God delights to use his people's weakness. Their identity was in him and they did not fight for their own rights but for his glory and the good of others. In that sense, this book is his story, not theirs. We should honour them for their work but remember that they lived and served clothed in his strength.

My prayer is that this book would inspire us to do the same.

*She is clothed with strength and dignity;
she can laugh at the days to come.
She speaks with wisdom,
and faithful instruction is on her tongue ...*

*Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
Honour her for all that her hands have done,
and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.*

(Proverbs 31:25–31)

Servant of the Enslaved

REBECCA PROTTON,

1718-1780

Beginnings

Only one picture of Rebecca Prothen exists. In her mid-thirties, Rebecca sits upright beside her husband, plainly clothed in a dark dress, white scarf and close-fitting white cap, with blue ribbons to mark her married status. Her dark skin contrasts with that of her little two-year-old daughter, Anna Maria, who sits between them, naked to the waist, one hand raised in greeting. What Rebecca thought about being painted is hard to tell. Her lips are almost smiling, her gaze is intelligent and confident, but she gives little away.

Very few records of her life remain, and the only place we can hear her own voice is in fragments of three letters which have survived. She owned next to nothing and founded no movements. Rebecca may be to some degree a mystery, but her life is important because of how God used her, and others like her in the eighteenth century. Born a slave in Antigua, Rebecca was at the heart of an extraordinary movement of God, the fruits of which are still being formed today.

The eighteenth century was a time of significant change. The industrial revolution was beginning to disrupt ancient ways of

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life, as manufacturing moved out of cottage workshops and into factories. Much of this development was financed by the Atlantic trade in human lives: cheap mass-produced goods were taken to Africa to exchange for slaves, and the wealth that poured back into Britain could be invested in new businesses. Away from industry, philosophers were challenging traditional concepts of truth and knowledge while at the same time some churches were rediscovering the message of justification by faith and finding new ways of sharing this through outdoor preaching and small Bible classes.

Rebecca's story, shadowy though it is, shows us something of how, in the midst of all these other changes, the Protestant church was developing its ideas on how women could serve.

Of course, throughout history, women have served God. Before the Reformation in the first half of the sixteenth century, many nuns were scholars and writers whose works were treasured by the church. Then there were the faithful noblewomen, princesses and queens who were involved in politics. They used their influence to support the church and its teachings. And beyond these, there are the many, many unknown girls, women, wives and mothers who spoke of Christ to others, cared for the sick, visited those in prison and counselled the suffering. Rebecca Protten has much in common with the women who came before her, but she is also an example of a different kind of service, showing us how what we now call evangelicalism changed the way women worked.

Rebecca's story starts and finishes in the Gold Coast of Africa, now known as Ghana. In the early eighteenth century, the coastline was punctuated by forts built by traders who controlled the seas. Between the white sand and the scrubland of the shoreline you can still see white painted walls with high

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battlements. Behind these walls are spacious living apartments and dark holding cells. Today they are empty, with only information boards to tell visitors their violent stories. The forts' names and architecture reveal the successive waves of Europeans who came to dominate the coast: first the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, then the Dutch and the Danish before finally the British in the nineteenth century.

In the eighteenth century, inland from the forts was a huge area of dry plateaus and tropical forests controlled by the Asante Empire. This powerful and highly organised group had gained its power through selling gold to European merchants, but later had begun to supply slaves in return for firearms. Rebecca Proppen's mother was one of these slaves. We don't know anything about her, but we do know a little about the culture she was from and what her journey west must have been like. Nearly all people who were exported like livestock from West Africa had been seized from a village, where huts clustered together, each housing an extended family. The head of the household was the man, and he might have several wives. The women cooked and made pots, they wove, cared for their children and tended crops close to the village. There were hardships – fighting with neighbouring villages, illness and bad weather could destroy lives – but village life had its settled routines.

Christianity has been present in Africa since the earliest days of the church. Great theologians and martyrs from North Africa have blessed generations of believers before Islam arrived from Arabia. Much later, as trade routes opened up, Catholicism brought teaching about Christ into West Africa. Despite this, by the eighteenth century, Christians were a very small minority in the continent; the vast majority of villages followed traditional

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religion, with its many gods and spirits. They believed trees, plants and even inanimate objects had their own spiritual force. Ancestors exerted great power. The gods could be pleased or angered, and needed keeping happy through rituals as well as charms made of shells or leaves, metal or pottery. A male witch could get you access to their blessings; female prophets could bring you their message.

It was from this world that Rebecca's mother was torn. She was marched to a looming stone fort, to the sea she had probably never seen before, and onto a ship where she was kept in the terrifying darkness of the hold. Four hundred or so people from different areas with different languages were thrust together in one ship for up to eight weeks. The men outnumbering women two to one. The women weren't shackled, like the men, but they too only had one meagre meal a day. Though the traders tried to preserve their valuable cargo, allowing the slaves some time on deck and attempting to ventilate the stinking holds, many died of disease and some even succeeded in suicide. There was no wonder that despair so often set in; Rebecca's mother must have had no idea where she was going. She wouldn't have known how long she must be kept prisoner or whether she would ever see her family again. Had she known the truth, any remaining hope would have died.

Born into bondage

When Rebecca's mother emerged from the stinking slave ship she must have been bewildered. Never having seen the sea before this journey, now she was back on land. The white beaches of Antigua may have looked similar to those back in Ghana, but this certainly wasn't home. She went from the captivity of the hold

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to a marketplace. The price for a female slave in the early 1700s was likely to have been about \$2600 in today's money. Back in Britain, a person could buy four horses for the same money. It was less than for a male slave, because women couldn't do some of the more demanding physical labour and weren't going to be trained in a craft, like carpentry or blacksmithing, unlike some of the men.

Rebecca's mother, if she was young and fit, may have been put in the 'first gang' doing the hardest physical work. From a distance, the vibrant green of sugar cane looks lush and healthy, especially against the blue skies and distant mountains of a Caribbean island. But growing sugar cane in the eighteenth century was a cruel process. The sugar cane was closely planted in trenches by hand and needed to be manured, again by hand, so that it would grow high, over ten feet tall, towering over the harvesters who would come with machetes to cut the thick stems at the ground. Then the cane needed to be hauled away to mills which operated twenty-four hours a day. There, cane was crushed and the juices boiled in coppers. The furious heat and machinery made this the most dangerous part of all. With several harvests a year, there was no rest. No wonder people who'd been enslaved died within a few years of arriving.

There were other tasks Rebecca's mother could have done. Perhaps she worked in a plantation house or in the second gang, weeding the cane fields and picking stones. Whatever her role, the work was relentless, lasting from dawn until dusk, and in the midst of this exhausting round, Rebecca's mother became pregnant. Rebecca's father was white, which means that Rebecca's mother could have had no choice in her sexual relationship with him. In 1718, Rebecca began life in a one room

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hut. With no medical care, little time for her mother to recover and born into imprisonment, this was a hard beginning. Her childhood would be very short.

The baby was named Shelly, and it was only later she became Rebecca. For six or seven years, little Rebecca managed to stay with her mother. There was only straw to sleep on and food wasn't plentiful. Perhaps there were other children around to play with while her mother worked, perhaps she had siblings, though the harsh conditions of the enslaved women's lives meant that most children died in their first seven years. Rebecca was one of the hardy ones and so she was marked out for work even when she was small. In an achingly sad repetition of history, Rebecca was stolen away, put on a ship and taken to a different island to be sold. She may have been sold by the plantation owners or taken by some kind of pirates. When Rebecca told the story of her early years to others, she described being kidnapped; the trauma of separation was still fresh in her memory. All the later comfort of the gospel and the close friendships with believers from many different places did not erase memories of betrayal and loss.

Rebecca arrived at an island 220 miles away. It was a journey lasting four or five days, shorter than the journey her mother had endured but still full of terror and loss, wrenched from her mother and her home, travelling to an unknown future. St Thomas, now part of the US Virgin Islands, was at least not too different from Antigua. It was a small Danish colony, with sugar plantations around the perimeter and a mountainous inner terrain. Familiarity with the landscape couldn't have fully prepared Rebecca for the squalor of a slave market and the transition from plantation life to becoming a domestic slave of a prominent family. She was on her own, away from her mother,

the safety of their hut and the company she knew. She was only six or seven years old.

A new name

Her new master, Lucas Van Beverhout, was probably the third or fourth generation of an elite family on the island. Creoles, the long-term white settlers, had a reputation for harshness and laziness but he and his family treated Rebecca well. How strange it must have been to be shunted from the dust and dirt around her mother's cabin to a stone-built house. From a place where she spoke her mother tongue and heard overseers shout in English, to a world where cultivated Dutch was spoken. Rebecca was now serving an outpost where, despite the blistering heat and the brutal labour outside, Creoles clung to European manners and customs. In the house women embroidered and read books. There was music and parties, and a religion very different from the rituals and charms or Folk Catholicism remembered by the Africans. Rebecca had so much to learn. The house with its mahogany panelling and fine furniture, mirrors and curtains had to be kept clean, and strange, imported foods had to be cooked. She would have had to learn how to speak this new language to her owners, how to appear invisible and who to trust, as well as who should be avoided.

Rebecca may have been taken on by the Van Beverhouts because she had dual white European and black African heritage. This growing group were cultivated as a kind of buffer between the slaves and their masters. To those who believed Africans were an inferior race, biracial people seemed more biddable and easily moulded, their European features more presentable inside the house. Being given privileges the plantation slaves didn't get meant that they would prove loyal, an important source of

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security when whites were so vastly outnumbered and news of slave revolts on neighbouring islands stirred real anxiety.

Rebecca was relatively well treated, and even seemed at home with them as the years went on. Someone in the Van Beverhout household taught Rebecca to read and write during those first few years. It wasn't necessary for whatever domestic work she was employed to do; cleaning, laundry and cooking required practical skill but not literacy. She must have been quick about her tasks and quick to pick up the new language to have been noticed among the group of slaves and given teaching. The family must have had some care for their workers to allow this young girl to take time away from her tasks to learn while it was still light or to use a precious candle to study by after dark.

Many children at the time learnt to read by looking at a Bible, painstakingly picking out the letters and piecing them into words. In fact, the Bible could well have been the very reason Rebecca was taught to read. Most employers were very reluctant to let their forced-labourers hear about Christianity, as we'll see, because the logic was clear: if anyone turns to Jesus then they become a sister or brother, a sharer in Christ, a partner in the gospel, and how then can they be enslaved? But the Van Beverhouts were of the Dutch Reformed faith and this church's official stance was that 'the poor and blind pagans' of the Caribbean 'be led to the knowledge of God and their salvation', so in encouraging Rebecca to read and giving her access to the Bible they were following the official line of the church.¹ How

1. Jon Sensbach, 'Slaves to Intolerance', in *The First Prejudice: Religious Tolerance and Intolerance in Early America* ed. Chris Beneke, Christopher S. Grenda (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia: 2011), 203.

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they squared this responsibility with the injustice of owning another human, we can't know.

The Word of God did its work in Rebecca; it became her book. In her teens, she developed a great love for Christ. In one sense, though, little changed. Living as a forgiven person didn't mean living like a European; every night she went back to her hut which she shared with other slaves, her clothes stayed the same, her work was the same, she had to obey commands of her 'superiors' without a murmur. But she did have a new master. She had been bought again, not by gold coins, but by the blood of her Lord. And this purchase was not for work, but for love. Serving the Van Beverhouts would now be secondary. She was under Jesus' loving rule; he was her primary commander; he set her value. And this meant living for him and speaking about him. It was inevitable then that she would want to tell her fellow slaves what she had discovered – that everyone, black or white, was a sinner and needed to be forgiven and be made new.

In the house, Rebecca somehow found a Dutch book of martyr stories and in moments away from work, sat down to read these tales of courage, persecution and pain. Perhaps they resonated with what she witnessed in the slave community, and her own grief at being torn from her mother. Though the martyrs were from a distant time and place, their stories excited and gripped her; these scorned people had found great hope in the face of terrible death and the Lord had brought them comfort. God was using the stories of past work to stir in this young girl a passion to serve those who were already being persecuted, and to prepare her for the pain that her own service would entail. In years to come, her testimony would be added to the story of the

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church and would be passed on, encouraging others to pray and to leave their homes to serve.

We don't know if Rebecca was allowed to accompany her master's family to church worship, but it seems as though she wasn't able to be baptised there, because when a Catholic priest visited the island she sought him out and Shelly became Rebecca as she was baptised. This step marked her out officially as a Christian and changed her status in the house. Those at the time would protest that it made no economic sense to liberate an enslaved person just at the point of adulthood, physically strong and skilled for all kinds of task, but that is what happened to Rebecca when she was about sixteen. The Van Beverhouts were following the custom, ignored by many, that an African who had been baptised was to be given their freedom.

Much stayed the same for Rebecca. She was particularly valuable in the household, now having the responsibility of being housekeeper even though she was so young. This was a good and safe position to have. Despite her new status, outside of a household's protection she would be vulnerable to sexual assault or financial exploitation. Without savings she could do little on her own. Rebecca carried on working for the family, but now she had a few coins in her purse, a bedroom in the house and a pair of shoes on her feet for the first time. Life had become a little bit more comfortable; she was treated 'not as a servant but as a member of the household'.²

Freed people, and these were most often women, were known to be economically ambitious. They worked hard,

2. Christian Oldendorp, *History of the Mission of the Evangelical Brethren on the Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John*, translated (Karoma, Ann Arbor: 1987), 315.

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set up businesses, bought land and even, though it is hard to believe, sometimes owned enslaved people themselves. Women of dual heritage might aim at having relationships with white men, knowing that it would make their position more secure; for a freed person there always remained a fear of returning to the whip and shackles. Any slip might take them back to captivity. This makes Rebecca's choices all the more extraordinary. For rather than social climbing and securing her own future, she left behind her new privilege and gave herself to the enslaved. In the little pockets of free time she now had, she spoke about Christ, 'admonishing' women 'often to love God and the Saviour'.³ Before she had ever heard the word, Rebecca had become a missionary.

3. Oldendorp, *History of the Mission of the Evangelical Brethren*, 314.