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WOMEN IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

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At the present time, both Christians and non-Christians have a 'stake' in the biblical view of women. The temptation for eisegesis is strong for both in this fiery subject of woman and her value. This can be partially overcome by attempting to understand the Scriptures in the light of their original setting. In the Scriptures, ancient Israel claims to be unique in the world of her time, and it is at this uniqueness we must look if we are to really understand the special revelation that comes to us through God's dealing with her. The New Testament claims for Christians a similar uniqueness. We are connected to ancient Israel by a mutual election as God's people. Perhaps we can look again at the implications of that elected relationship for some new light on the subject of woman and her value within God's plan.

Israel's claim to uniqueness rests on her religion in which she is the covenant people of the one Creator, God, not primarily on legal or cultural distinctions, although these are present. Israel is unique, too, in her understanding of creation, wherein both the natural world and man are the special works of a Creator. In both creation and covenant, woman plays an important role.

The specific creative attention given to humanity is unique to the Genesis account, but the central role of woman here is especially unique in ancient Near Eastern literature. Here, unlike other A.N.E. creation epics, she is creation's crown and a morally responsible human being. Her immediate relationship with the man is one of unity. He receives her with joy:

> Now this, at last-/bone from my bones/flesh from my flesh/this shall be called woman/for from man was this taken. (Gen. 2: 23)

The words that follow this response emphasize the unity of man and woman in creation as they link marriage with the creation event. Having originally been one and alone, man is made two. Prior to the Fall, this duo does not mean division. But even subsequent to the Fall, in marriage man in some sense again becomes one. (See Gen. 2: 24) John A. Bailey in an article contrasting the Genesis account with the Gilgamesh Epic emphasizes the real uniqueness of the biblical view of woman in creation:

> Whereas the man's creation is described in one verse (7), the woman's creation (v. 22) comes with man's response to it (vs. 23), as the climax of vss. 18-23, and indeed of the whole account of creation; she is the crown of creation. This is all the more extraordinary when one realizes that this is the only account of the creation of woman as such in A.N.E. literature.[1]

1 John A. Bailey, "Initiation and the Primal Woman", *J.Bib.Lit.* 89 1970, p. 148

Eve is created with independent choice. Prior to the Fall she doesn't function in an inferior position to her husband, quite the contrary. Why does this change when she sins? In sinning she covets the authority of God, and presumes to grasp it. The Serpent tells her that they will "be like God . . ." (or gods). It is therefore appropriate that the curse Eve incurs strikes directly at her position of authority: "You shall be eager for your husband and he shall be your master" (Gen. 3: 16) Yet, even subsequent to the Fall, she retains a position of honour as mother of humanity. It is after the Fall that Adam names her: "The man called his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all who live". (Gen. 3: 20)

Both man and woman are affected by her choice, and the roles that they are to live are significantly altered as a result of her sin. Not only will Eve be mastered by her husband, but she will endure pain in her unique role as mother. So, even in her role of special value, she will feel sin's consequences. Her creation purpose as partner for man will suffer division, and she will know pain. Adam will know trouble and resistance from the land. Having been, prior to this, God's appointed master of the garden, he loses his natural mastery of the earth and must in sweat and work re-establish it in order to live. The substance of the curse on Adam and Eve has to do with children and land (the very substance of life). The substance of the promise and covenant which come later to Abraham and then Israel also have to do with children and land. Both of these in Genesis 3 become the substance of sin's distortion of life. But in Promise and Covenant, both will become again the substance of renewed life. The pain and the work will continue, but if they are obedient to Yahweh, children and land will be Israel's blessings in a special way. In obedience the curse will be changed to blessing, though still considerably altered from the Edenic situation. The promise will be fulfilled in many children, i.e. nations, and consummated as they inherit the land of promise. Creation and covenant are consistent, and woman plays a vital role in each.

The covenant with Israel is based on a promise God makes to Abraham. That promise is a promise first of all of a family. God says to him: "I will make you a great nation". To do this, God will work through the family as established in creation. Not only Abraham, but Sarah, his wife, receives God's promise. God changes Abraham's name in relation to the giving of the promise. He also changes Sarah's name, and it is her child that becomes the child of the promise. (See Gen. 17: 15-17)

Motherhood for Sarah is a blessing both culturally and within the context of covenant. Culturally high value is placed on children throughout the A.N.E. at this time. Within the covenant relationship, to participate in the fulfilment of promise is also to be a recipient of that promise. For both man and woman children are an important source of personal value. Prior to the birth of Ishmael, Abraham laments to God, "I have no standing among men . . . thou hast given me no children". For Abraham this lament is also on two levels, cultural and covenantal. Covenantally it is exclusion from the promise. Besides ritual defilement, is this perhaps implicit in one of the Deuteronomic laws?

> No man whose testicles have been crushed or whose organ has been severed shall become a member of the assembly of the Lord. (Deut. 23: 1)

Many times in the Old Testament, a faithful or a chosen woman is singled out for God's blessing. She is granted a child. As in the cases of Hannah, Leah, or Naomi, God is responsive to a woman's prayers, and the granting of a son is a special blessing. For the woman as for the man, it is through the son that a person continues to have a part in the growing family of Israel. Barrenness is elimination from one's part in the promise. It is removal from the family of Israel. The promise of blessing in the new land, given in Exodus 23: 25f, includes a promise against both miscarriage and barrenness:

> None shall miscarry or be barren in your land. I will grant you full span of life. (Ex. 23: 26)

The horrible antithesis to this blessing and fruitfulness is the grotesque picture of the situation that Israel can expect if she disobeys God. Then not only will she experience barrenness, but the people of Israel will devour their own children. Not only does sin's curse here become painfully explicit in the parent's devouring of the children, but it involves the complete breakdown of the 'family' sense of Israel. It is the utter destruction of Israel, present and future, forever. The Promise is dead:

> Then you will eat your own children, the flesh of your sons and daughters whom the LORD your God has given you, because of the dire straits to which you will be reduced when your enemy besieges you. The pampered, delicate man will not share with his brother, or the wife of his bosom, or his own remaining children, of the meat which he is eating, the flesh of his own children. He is left with nothing else because of the dire straits to which you will be reduced when your enemy besieges you within your cities. The pampered, delicate woman, the woman who has never even tried to put a foot to the ground, so delicate and pampered she is, will not share with her own husband or her sons or her daughter the afterbirth which she expels, or any boy or girl that she may bear. She will herself eat them secretly in her extreme want, because of the dire straits to which you will be reduced when your enemy besieges you within your cities. (Deut. 28: 53-57; NEB).

To be barren is to be cursed or punished. Such is the case with Michal, David's wife. In contrast, a blessed woman, Hannah, in answer to her prayer receives a son who not only insures her participation in the continuing Israel, but as a special blessing becomes particularly important to Israel. So it is with Naomi, whose grandson is the grandfather of David, the great king. (Ruth 4: 15-17)

While important to the fulfilment of promise, women are subordinate to men, not by creation, but by sin. Her subordination, particularly in

a society so vulnerable to disease and natural disaster, on a physical level is secured by the simultaneous curses that she will be mastered by her husband and she will have pain in childbirth. Her physical vulnerability insures her subordination. Emil Brunner, commenting on motherhood and its natural consequences, links this vulnerability with societal subordination:

> The woman, through her natural calling as wife and mother carries a far heavier burden than the man does, as husband and father. The growth of the new human being forms part of the life of the woman far more than it forms part of the life of the man. The wife must give her heart's blood to the new being: she must bear it, she must bring it into the world, not only with pain, but with danger to life itself, and she must nourish at her own breasts that which she has brought into the world. By this natural determination she is far more closely connected with the natural process of life, impregnated with it, restricted but also preserved by it. Far less than her husband can she order her own life as she would like; but this is not her husband's doing; it is simply due to the fact of her motherhood. This difference penetrates into the very depths of her nature.[2]

The promise of the land as well as the promise of children is relevant to the subject of woman and her place within Israel. Barrenness and fruitfulness are results of either curse or blessing and each extends vertically beyond the individual to his descendants as well as horizontally to his own possessions. In terms of personal identity there is not a clear distinction made between a man, his possessions, his wife, his animals. Not only is a woman's identity meshed with her place as wife and mother, but a man's identity, too, is meshed with his place as husband and father and all that 'belongs' to him. When he experiences blessing and cursing it is in relation to these 'belongings'. And that blessing and cursing relates to life in the land:

> A blessing on you in the city, a blessing on you in the country./ A blessing on the fruit of your body, the fruit of your land and of your cattle,/ the offspring of your herds and of your lambing Flocks. (Deut. 28: 3f, NEB)

This interrelatedness of personal identity and 'belongings' may help us to understand the sense in which the woman is classified among a man's 'belongings' in the decalogue, (Ex. 20: 17). The listing of the wife along with an ox says something quite different to us. It carries the connotations of 'possession' with all the overtones of callous misuse. This isn't the meaning here. While there most certainly is cruel misuse of women in Israel, this is never biblically sanctioned. In Israel even a foreign slave with whom an Israelite man has intercourse becomes a part of the circle of familial care. She can no longer be sold as a slave, and if the man does

2 Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, Philadelphia, Westminster, 1964, pp. 352-3

not want her as part of his family, she must be given her freedom, (Deut. 21: 10-14). In a sense, every person within the boundaries of Israel is to be included in the circle of familial care. The Deuteronomic laws are full of this concern.

Closely connected with the land of promise is the demand for holiness. God's demand for holiness having to do with sexual cleanness, among other things, makes a mighty difference for women in Israel. Sexuality in creation is the means for unity between man and woman and fulfilment of God's promise in children. And, the good use of sexuality in the covenant relationship is important to receiving and keeping the land. Leviticus 18: 23-25 makes the connection between sexual cleanness and the land. As in Eden, the land is responsive to them as they obey God. The land of promise, like Eden will cast them out if they sin:

> You shall not have sexual intercourse with a man as with a woman; that is an abomination. You shall not have sexual intercourse with any beast to make yourself unclean with it, nor shall a woman submit herself to intercourse with a beast; that is a violation of nature. You shall not make yourselves unclean in any of these ways; for in these ways the heathen, whom I am driving out before you, made themselves unclean. This is how the land became unclean, and I punished it for its iniquity so that it spewed out its inhabitants (Lev. 18: 22-25).

There are indeed times of idolatry when Israel practices these things, but she is punished. Sexual defilement is a reproach to God as Creator because it corrupts His gift for unity, procreation and promise. It is against Israelite law to exploit the woman as prostitute, in contrast to Israel's neighbours. The fertility rites of other A.N.E. nations are connected with their understanding of the gods and creation. In Israel the concept of holiness and sexual cleanness is connected also with her understanding of God and creation. In other areas of the A.N.E. a father often gives his daughter as a sacred prostitute. In Israel it is an abomination to God on two levels: that she be prostituted in religious worship and that a father should make his own daughter a prostitute. Both are perversions of God's creation and man's part in Promise and Covenant.

While it is generally true that the man in Israel has more freedom than the woman in choosing a spouse (this is not always the case, i.e. Rebekka is chosen for Isaac), the accusation that he is free to use women as he pleases is not quite true. The women with whom he has intercourse are by law to be members of his household, and by definition he cares for them. Sexual promiscuity is never a good thing in Israel, and as we see here, it is associated with defilement of the land of promise. In the rest of the A.N.E. sexual behaviour both in marriage and in sacred prostitution is regulated, but without the connotation of holiness.

In comparing Israel with the rest of the A.N.E., one often finds laws that favour women more than those in Israel. Some quite clearly recognize her as a more distinct person, and some demonstrate greater concern for

her personal welfare. The Lipit-Ishtar Law Code and the Code of Hammurabi, both allow the woman to inherit along with her brothers.[3] In Israel the woman can only inherit if there are no male heirs (Num. 27: 6-8). This may in part be explained by the concept of the 'family of Israel' in which she is not seen in distinctly individual terms, and where the family line is continued through the male. Unlike Israel, in the Laws of Eshnunna a man cannot divorce a wife who has given him children.[4] Not only does the divorce law in Israel not protect the mother, it does not include material provision for her if she is divorced by her husband. The Code of Hammurabi does.[5] This apparent lack of concern for the woman is a problem. Perhaps it finds partial explanation in a hesitation to regulate a practice God considers wrong; yet divorce is regulated here and to the advantage of the man. The grounds for divorce are not limited and explicit as they are in other codes. It is possible that the laws are incomplete here and that other stipulations exist that are not recorded. The book of Malachi is much later than the Torah, of course, but it does have an interesting section on God's attitude toward divorce (See Mal. 2: 9, 14f). Perhaps it is also significant that the divorce law is the law that Jesus changed.

Another difference in the laws of the A.N.E. generally and those of Israel is that elsewhere a woman could operate a business. There are no laws regulating such practice in Israel.

Dr. Jewett, in his paper on man and woman, views the levirate law as a significant example of the lack of freedom of the Israelite woman:

> If the husband of a woman died and had no son, his brother was to take her as his wife and raise up seed to his brother. Though the man could refuse such Levirate marriage, the woman could not (Deut. 25: 5-10). This freedom of refusal on the man's side worked favourably for the Moabitess Ruth who thereby became the wife of the devout and affluent Boaz (Ruth 4: 1-12). But this happy turn does not alter the fact that the law did not consider the woman to have any freedom of choice in the matter, whereas Christian doctrine says that self-determination is the essence of the divine image, and that the woman shares equally with the man in this endowment.[6]

Perhaps Dr. Jewett overstates his case here. Does this one instance give him sufficient grounds for setting up this dichotomy of value between the Old and New Testaments; or give us a basis for saying that the O.T. views woman as less than human; or prove that the kind of freedom of choice that the N.T. talks about is in any way analagous to the freedom he finds missing in the levirate law? Let us remember that it is the New

3 J. B. Pritchard (ed.) *Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament*[3] Princeton 1969, p. 160b, § 24; p. 174b §§ 179-181.
4 ANET, p. 163b, § 59.
5 ANET, p. 172a, §§ 137f.
6 Dr. Jewett, Course Outline for Systematic Theology, (Fuller Seminary): The Doctrine of Man: The Divine Image, Man as Male and Female.

Testament that encourages slaves to submit to their masters. In the passage he cites from Deut. 25, the law is pictured as establishing the rights of the woman, as well as those of the dead man, for the perpetuation of the name. It is she, when he refuses, who has the right to take her next-of-kin to the elders (Deut. 25: 7-10). One must also remember that in this case, the dead man's name is her name as well. Also, in the case Dr. Jewett refers to, the marriage and the birth of the child by levirate marriage are seen as a special blessing to another woman besides Ruth, Naomi. Her name continues in Israel.

One last thing that I would like to discuss is the Bible's empathy for women in difficult circumstances. Sometimes it is only the inclusion of a small detail that reveals the pathos of her difficulty. One excellent example is the raping of Tamar, David's daughter, by her brother. The record of their dialogue shows the injustice and painfulness of his action toward her:

> . . . he caught hold of her and said, 'Come to bed with me, sister'. But she answered, 'No, brother, do not dishonour me, we do not do such things in Israel; do not behave like a beast. Where could I go and hide my disgrace?—and you would sink as low as any beast in Israel. Why not speak to the king for me? He will not refuse you leave to marry me'. He would not listen, but overpowered her and raped her.
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> Then Amnon was filled with utter hatred for her; his hatred was stronger than the love he had felt, and he said to her, 'Get up and go'. She answered, 'No. It is wicked to send me away. This is harder to bear than all you have done to me'. He would not listen to her, but summoned the boy who had attended him and said, 'Get rid of this woman, put her out, and bolt the door after her'. She had on a long, sleeved robe, the usual dress of unmarried princesses; and the boy turned her out and bolted the door. Tamar threw ashes over her head, rent the long, sleeved robe that she was wearing, put her hands on her head and went away, sobbing as she went. (2 S. 13: 11-19, NEB).

The last statement in v. 20 is very powerful, indeed: "So Tamar remained in her brother Absalom's house, desolate".

Another record of the Bible's sensitivity is that of the Shunammite woman in II Kings who helps Elisha and who receives a child as God's blessing in return. Later the child dies and the mother comes seeking Elisha. Both the grief and the persistence of a mother in pain and fear are recorded:

> . . . When she reached the man of God on the hill, she clutched his feet. Gehazi came forward to push her away, but the man of God said, 'Let her alone; she is in great distress, and the LORD has concealed it from me and not told me'. 'My Lord', she said, 'did I ask for a son? Did

> I not beg you not to raise my hopes and then dash them?' Then he turned to Gehazi: 'Hitch up your cloak; take my staff with you and run. If you meet anyone on the way, do not stop to greet him; if anyone greets you, do not answer him. Lay my staff on the boy's face'. But the mother cried, 'As the LORD lives, your life upon it, I will not leave you'. So he got up and followed her . . .
>
> Elisha got up and walked once up and down the room; then, getting on the bed again, he pressed upon him and breathed into him seven times; and the boy opened his eyes. The prophet summoned Gehazi and said, 'Call this Shunammite woman'. She answered his call and the prophet said, 'Take your child'. She came in and fell prostrate before him. Then she took up her son and went out. (2 Kings 4: 27-30, 35-37, NEB).

The Old Testament often recognizes wisdom in the mouth of a woman. David is prevented from a foolish killing of Nabal by the wise words and intercession of Abigail (IS. 25). David not only does not kill Nabal, but he recognizes his debt to Abigail for preventing him, and he expresses his gratefulness to her. Another similar instance is the intervention of the wise woman in the pursuit by Joab of Sheba son of Bichri. (2 S. 20: 16-22). She saves her village from Joab by convincing him to wait while she convinces the people to kill the guilty one: ". . . her wisdom won over the assembled people, and they cut off Sheba's head and threw it to Joab". The wisdom and timely effectiveness of both Deborah and Huldah are well known.

God in the O.T. is responsive to the prayers of women. Hannah in great grief prays to the Lord. A man, Eli the priest, ridicules her, thinking her drunk, but God hears her and responds. Samuel is born and she gives him back to the Lord. A tiny detail is inserted in the text that shows a mother's love and sacrifice; otherwise this detail really has no 'practical' value:

> Every year the woman made him a little cloak and took it to him when she went up with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice. (IS. 2: 19).

Leah, the unloved wife of Jacob, is given children by God in compensation for her lack of her husband's love:

> When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he granted her a child; but Rachel was childless. (Gen. 29: 31).

The Scripture records the detail of Leah's constant hope that with the birth of each new child she would win her husband's love. Again we see the pathos of her situation.

Throughout the Bible, women are not in the forefront, but they are important as persons within the covenant, and the Scriptures never sanction their exploitation. On the contrary, evil done to them is never covered in the telling.

There seems to have been a decline in the position of women during the post-Old Testament period. This shows up in the rabbinic writing, as well as in the prevention of women from full status as worshippers in Herod's temple. This decline seems to happen along with the decline in Israel's religious vitality. As God's covenant people, she has broken the covenant, lost the land, been exiled, and returned. After the last destruction of the temple, her vitality as the vehicle of God's revelation disappears, and the value of women as important members of the covenant community is forgotten. We hear rabbinical prayers thanking God one is not born a woman.

We Christians, like the Israelites of the Old Testament, are God's covenant people. How is the substance of the New Covenant different from the Old? Perhaps we can look again at the substance of this New Covenant that we have in Christ in order to discern the value we all have as persons within the covenant community. Paul tells us that we are all recipients of the Promise. To be recipients of God's promise now, as in the Old Testament, is always more than a passive thing. It is to be able to make active creative contribution to the lives of others. Are we perhaps guilty of limiting the contributions we allow women in our body to make? Are we so sure that we really understand what these contributions can be? We have all been given gifts to contribute to the building up of the body, but do we fully utilize these? Our vitality as a body that is responsive to the Lord is reflected in the value we give to all our members. Do we really count all of our members, both men and women, as equally valuable? What are the implications of the New Covenant in terms of practical contributions? We Christians affirm the human family as divinely instituted, and rightly; but the New Covenant extends beyond the human family of father, mother, and children. We are reminded by Paul that membership in the Christian Family is not a matter of the flesh. In the Old Covenant, woman had unique value as a contributing member of Israel in her role as mother. Many in our communities are single women. Just where does the single woman fit as a creatively contributing member of the Christian 'Family'? Let us look again at the New Covenant, and then at the needs and perhaps silent frustrations of the women in our Family. Both Abraham and Sarah received God's Promise, and both participated in its fulfilment.