

III THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT OUTSIDE THE PENTATEUCH

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General Observations

The task of this study will be to survey the role of women in the OT outside the Pentateuch. Since the Pentateuch reflects the legal more explicitly than the social aspects of this subject, a study of the historical, prophetic, hymnic, and wisdom literature will allow for a wider view of the social context of the role of Hebrew women.

It was felt that since no essential shift in woman's basic societal position occurs within the literature studied, the results would be best arranged topically. This, in turn, allows a more practical perspective from which to evaluate the findings.

The sheer historical and literary immensity of the literature surveyed means that depth had to be relegated a secondary place to breadth (our primary purpose of this study). To compensate, this writer has sought to study contextually and sociologically virtually every occurrence of *ʾiššāh*¹ ("woman") in the books from Joshua to Chronicles (Hebrew canon). Such a procedure gives a fair indication as to the OT place of woman in the community of God. In addition, study has been made of relevant texts which speak of women but do not employ *ʾiššāh*, and consequently some overlap with Pentateuchal sources has been necessary for clarification.

Patriarchal Structure

The patriarchal form of family existence in the OT assumes that a woman "lived in the shadows rather than in the light of life." She was first under the authority of her father, then her husband after marriage; and, in the eventuality of his death, her husband's brother. This subordination of all aspects of a woman's life was somewhat symbolized by the fact that though she was a member of the covenant community, she possessed no sign of it as did the male in circumcision.² This stance of woman under man³ meant that her "essence as a human being is linked with her function as a companion" to him.⁴

¹This word appears 775 times in the OT with the meaning "woman," "wife," "female" (Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Oxford, 1968], p. 61, hereafter abbreviated BDB.) The word appears in a word play in Gen 2:22, 23, but Rainey feels its root goes back to *ʾnt*, used in Old South Arabic (and Ugaritic) and Aramaic. (Anson Rainey, "Women," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* [New York, 1971], 16:623). The plural, *nāšim*, appears to come from the same root (Fritz Maass, "ʿnôsh," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, eds. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, tr. by J. T. Willis [Grand Rapids, 1974], 1:346).

²Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids, 1975), pp. 68-94.

³G. Beer, *Die Soziale und Religiöse Stellung der Frau in Israelitischem Altertum*, Sammlung Gemeinverständliches Vorträge und Schriften aus dem Gebiet der Theologie und Religionsgeschichte, no. 88 (Tübingen, 1919), p. 1.

⁴Rainey; cf. Gen 2:23, 24.

Fundamental Equality

At the same time, the Genesis record clearly portrays woman as equal to men in that both are, together, in the “Image of God.”⁵ Jewett comments, “Man’s creation in the divine image is so related to his creation as male and female that the latter may be looked upon as an exposition of the former.” Sexuality, then, is not just procreative, but is a “part of what it means to be like the Creator.”⁶ It can even be argued that since woman was created last (Gen 2:21-25) she is to be considered the “crowning act” of Creation.

But the record is also clear that the role of woman in the fall of the race somewhat altered this position and put man in the role of master (3:16). The rest of the OT, it would seem, operates on the basis of woman’s subjugation to man after the fall.⁷

Woman in the Ancient Near East

Women generally fared better in Hebrew society than in the rest of the ancient Near East, as is shown by a comparative study of Semitic laws. In the Hebrew codes the “highest ideals of womanhood were being striven for,”⁸ and she generally enjoyed a favorable position in both the family and religious context.⁹

These cursory observations indicate that Hebrew society was a “cut” above that of other ancient nations in OT times, but that it was still short of God’s ideal. Specific examples must now be given indicating more precisely woman’s role in Israelite society.

Socio-Economic Role

Marriage

To the Israelite woman, marriage was necessary for a complete life. The obscure numerical proverb which mentions “an unloved woman when she gets a husband” (Prov 30:23, RSV) seems to imply that apart from the love of a husband a woman is unfulfilled.¹⁰ Yet, even so, marriage arrangements were made by the father, who had almost absolute authority over his children,¹¹ or the groom’s father in conjunction with the bride’s father (Judg 14:1-2). In any case, the girl must have been consulted (Gen 24:5, 8; Num 36:6), so the transaction between father and groom was not just a transfer of chattel; it was more the “surrender of authority over a

⁵The structure of Gen 1:27-28 places emphasis on this plural aspect of the *Imago Dei*. Cf. the discussion in G. F. Hasel’s, “Man and Woman in Genesis 1-3” (chap. 1 in this volume), sec. 1, pp. 11-14.

⁶Jewett, p. 13.

⁷It should be recalled, however, that this subordination is a part of the original curse, as is pain in childbirth, thorns and thistles, etc. Genesis gives us the origin of *why* things are the way they are. The gospel aims to eliminate the curse in all its aspects (Rev 22:3). This is often not taken seriously enough by theologians.

⁸Elizabeth M. MacDonald, *The Position of Women as Reflected in Semitic Codes of Law*, University of Toronto Studies: Oriental Series (Toronto, 1931), p. 73.

⁹Rainey.

¹⁰It is not clear whether this proverb refers to an unmarried woman or a woman in a polygamous marriage who is unloved, though the latter seems most likely (cf. R.B.Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, The Anchor Bible*, 2nd ed. (Garden City, NY, 1973)), 18:181; cf. Deut 21:15.

¹¹Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (New York, 1961) 1:20; cf. Gen 38:24; 24:58.

woman by one man to another.”¹² In the case of two adults who had already been emancipated from parental control, the man seems to have initiated proceedings (2 Sam 11:2-3); though Ruth, by virtue of the levirate law, appears in a modified aggressive role (Ruth 3:8ff.).

Such customs of marriage by parental arrangement did not stifle love between husband and wife, for several passages know of love in marriage (Gen 24:67; 29:20; 1 Sam 1:5), and there is every evidence to indicate that the wife remained a person and had very personal influence on her husband (Gen 16:2; 1 Sam 25; 2 Kgs 4:8-10; Job 2:9-10).¹³ As in all cultures, there were good and bad marriages; but no doubt many Israelite homes experienced a deep love relationship between husband and wife. Malachi implies as much when he laments those who were unfaithful to the wives of their “youth” with whom they had made a covenant (chap. 2:14). The Hebrew terms, *habereth* (“wife, consort”) and *berith* (“covenant”), imply a potential closeness between Hebrew men and their wives.

Marriage meant to the Hebrew woman essentially that she was “possessed” by her husband, who was called both *ʾadn* (Lord; Gen 18:12) and *bl* (“master”; Exod 21:22).¹⁴ This subordination surfaces in many implicit ways in the OT, as, for instance, in Isaiah’s prophecy of “seven women” taking hold of one man for support in the day of Yahweh’s judgment upon Israel (Isa 4: 1), and in Jeremiah’s prediction of the return from Babylonian captivity (Jer 31:22). In the latter case, the prophet predicts that “a woman shall compass a man” (lit. tr.)—an *absolutely new* event in the world which reverses traditional roles.¹⁵ That the practice of polygamy no doubt contributed to such subordination is evidenced by the graphic description of the Persian harem in Esther (cf. especially 2:12-14), where women are regarded as so much property of the king. Judges 19:22-30 reveals the low estate of many such concubines. Besieged by “base” men, pursuing his overnight guest, the host offered them his virgin daughter and his guest’s concubine. When they failed to listen, the guest thrust out his concubine, whom they “knew” and “abused,”¹⁶ and left dead at the door. The very fact that the host did not face the mob himself but rather made his daughter and the concubine confront them shows that women were only expendable property. Judges, of course, condemns this behavior (cf. chap. 21:10-25), and it cannot be supposed that every concubine or wife of a polygamous home was so regarded. But it nonetheless remains certain that polygamy did nothing to relieve the subordination of women.

Just as marriage was essential to the Hebrew woman, so the bearing of children was even more so—as the basic purpose of wedlock. Human beings are referred to as *yeʾūdliššāh* (“one born of woman”; Job 14:1; 15:14; 25:4), an expression in keeping with the original forecast in Gen 3:16. Hebrew women frequently served as midwives (1 Sam 4:20), and children were so highly regarded that childlessness was considered a curse (Gen 29:32–30:1-23; 1 Sam 1:5).¹⁷ Because the wife gave herself so completely to her family, she consequently earned the respect of her

¹²Rainey, p. 624; cf. O. J. Baab, “Woman,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. G. A. Buttrick (Nashville, 1962), 4:805.

¹³Baab.

¹⁴Beer, p. 6.

¹⁵*Neqēbāh tēsōsēbh gāber* (“a woman shall compass a man”) rests upon the MT tradition. The LXX (at 38:22b) has, “men shall go about with deliverance” (en *sōtēria pērielēusontai anthropoid*). This is obviously a passage the exact sense of which has been lost prior to the LXX translation. However, the MT is taken to be preferable on the grounds of its intelligibility in the light of the above discussion. The prophet therefore sees a radical alteration of the social structure by a reversal of roles.

¹⁶Both *yēdū* (“they knew”) and *yithalelū* (“they abused”) carry sexual connotations (BDB, pp. 394, 759).

¹⁷Rainey, pp. 623-24.

children (Prov 31:27-28; Lev 19:3; Deut 5:16). The psalmist sings in contented delight, “Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table” (Ps 128:3), a picture, no doubt, of the ideal Hebrew family blessed of God. Sons, of course, were more highly desired than daughters (Gen 29:34; 30:20; Lev 12:2-5).

The mother saw to it that her children were properly educated and cared for in every way (1 Sam 1:23-24, 2:19; Prov 1:8; 6:20), a function which made her largely responsible for domestic chores such as washing, cooking, making clothing, etc. (Gen 27:9, 14; Prov 31:10-31); also perhaps drawing water from the common well if she did not have daughters old enough to relieve her of that chore (Gen 24:11, 13-16). Sometimes the daughters even took care of the flocks and watered them, like Rachel and Jethro’s seven daughters (Gen 29:9-10; Exod 2:16; 3:1).¹⁸

Woman’s Aesthetic Place in Life

Throughout the OT woman’s beauty is extolled. Tamar, Absalom’s daughter, earned the quaint description, “a woman, beautiful of appearance” (lit. tr. 2 Sam 14:27), while Job’s daughters stood out as more beautiful (*yepheh*, “beautiful, fair”)¹⁹ than all the women of the earth (Job 42:15). Especially interesting in this regard was the Persian harem in the days of Esther. To

Xerxes I (486-465 B.C.) women were clearly “sex Objects,” greatly prized for their beauty. They must “delight” (*ûāphēæ*) the king (Esther 2:14), and win his “favor” (*yātab*; vs. 9). Esther found “grace and favor” (*hēn wāūsed*, probably a hendiadys, meaning “graceful favor”)²⁰ in his eyes (vs. 17). But it is left to the love songs of the OT to ascend the literary and poetic heights in the description of woman’s beauty. Psalm 45, a Maskil celebrating the marriage of a king to a princess, sings, “The Princess is decked in her chamber with gold-woven robes; in many-colored robes she is led to the king, with her virgin companions, her escort, in her train” (vss. 12-14, RSV). The superscription to this piece suggests it is a royal “song of love,” or love song.²¹ However, the most extensive OT love song is the Song of Solomon, a song of ideal eastern love in idyllic poetry.²² Here, in amorous and even sensuous tones, the lovers converse and sing of their love for each other. The beloved woman has eyes like doves, hair like a flock of goats, teeth like shorn ewes, lips like scarlet thread, and cheeks like pomegranate (see Cant 4:1-7). She desires her lover (3:1-5) and he desires her (4:8-15). In one sense, the highest expression of the male-female relationship in the OT is seen here. Physical attraction and sexual consummation appear as normal and beautiful. Man is made for woman and woman for man (ct. Gen 1:26, 27, and discussion above).

Turning to a quite different aesthetic form, women seem to have excelled in singing and dancing on both social and religious occasions in ancient times (cf. Exod 15:20).²³ Singing (and dancing) women were no doubt a regular part of the king’s court, as many passages attest (2 Sam 19:35; 2 Chr 35:25; Eccl 2:8). Both Ezra and Nehemiah mention a large group of cultic singing women who returned from exile (Ezra 2:65; Neh 7:67).

¹⁸M. L. Held, “Woman (in the Bible),” *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* (New York, 1967), 11:997.

¹⁹BDB, p. 421.

²⁰Ronald J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline* (Toronto, 1967), par. 72, p. 17.

²¹*Maōkīl nīr-yēdidōth*, “song of love” (BDB, 391).

²²BC 1110-11.

²³Baab, p. 865.

Thus anciently, as today, women were greatly admired for their beauty and their skill in the fine arts; though, unquestionably, these traits were as abused then as today.

Negative Attitudes Toward Women

Despite adulations of her beauty, woman also has her dark side in the pages of the OT. It was she, Paul reminds us, who introduced disobedience into the world (Gen 3; 1 Tim 2:14-15). And Micah warns his troublous times, “guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your bosom” (Mic 7:5, RSV).²⁴ Ecclesiastes paints her in a most sinister form, “One man among a thousand I found, but a *woman* among all those I have not found” (Eccl 7:28, emphasis supplied). Solomon at this point in his career evidently considered women as the essence of “stupidity and folly in human beings.”²⁵ The contrast is somewhat relieved by the realization that men fare very little better than women, in Solomon’s estimation!

The normative wisdom book, Proverbs, however, frequently reverberates with various negative comments about women. Living with a “contentious” woman (*madon*, “strife,” “contention”)²⁶ is a fate little better than death (Prov 21:9, 19; 25:24). Most feared of all women is the adulteress, a theme woven in and out of the first section of Proverbs (chaps. 1-9) like a dark thread. “The commandment is a lamp . . . to preserve you from the evil woman, from the smooth tongue of the adventuress” (chap. 6:23-24 RSV). Several Hebrew terms are employed in the issuance of these warnings: *šîḥāh zārāh* (“strange woman, harlot”; chap. 2:16; 6:24, RSV);²⁷ *nokrîyyāh* (“foreign woman,” a technical term for “harlot”; chap. 7:5; 20:16; 27:13);²⁸ *šeseth kesîlûth* (“the woman stupidity”; chap. 9:13ff.)²⁹ *zônāh* (“fornicator, harlot”; chap. 23:27);³⁰ and *šîḥāh menālepeth* (“adulterous woman, woman committing adultery”; chap. 30:20). These warnings probably have a double meaning, both literal and symbolic. They caution against loose women, but they also inveigh against the folly and seductive way of life found in pagan religion and against the practice of cultic prostitution associated with Canaanite religion.³¹

Another way the OT uses the feminine image negatively appears in Saul’s vitriolic statement to Jonathan for his friendship with David: “son of a perverse rebellious woman” (1 Sam 20:30)! Like the saying that a foolish son was a dishonor to his mother, not his father (Prov 10:1), Saul’s wrath at Jonathan struck at his mother—a stylized way of reproach at the time. Reviling a man in this manner is known elsewhere in the ancient Near East.³² In similar manner, the Chronicler calls Athaliah “that wicked woman” because she desecrated the house of God (2 Chr 24:7).

Both of these usages may have provided the prophets with choice epithets when they spoke of apostate Israel as a harlot (cr. Ezek 16:28). She had defiled her relationship with Yahweh and was no better off than a common adulteress. A discussion of the intent of these prophetic passages will be dealt with later.

Evidently, non-Israelite women came in for their share of ill-will in the OT also. Solomon, it will be remembered, fell on account of his involvement with “foreign women” from Egypt,

²⁴Ibid., p. 866; cf. Rainey, p. 623.

²⁵Scott, p. 238.

²⁶BDB, p. 193.

²⁷Ibid., p. 266.

²⁸Ibid., p. 649.

²⁹Ibid., p. 493.

³⁰Ibid., pp. 275-76.

³¹Scott, p. 43.

³²G. C. Caird, “1 and 2 Samuel,” *Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick, et al. (Nashville, 1953), 2:994.

Moab, Ammon, Edom, Sidon, and from among the Hittites (1 Kgs 11:1ff.). The writer of Kings quickly points out that such doings were contrary to Torah and could only lead to idolatry (Deut 7:1-4; 17:17; Exod 34:11-16). In Ezra-Nehemiah the problem of Israelite marriage to “foreign women” flares up on a mass scale (Ezra 9-10; Neh 13:23ff.). These wives were finally put away together with their children because they had corrupted the purity of the race (Ezra 9:2; 10:11).

The Ideal Woman

As a contrast to these negative sentiments there are also many passages, besides the love songs, scattered like bright gems throughout, emphasizing women’s fine points. Abigail, wife of Nabal, appears as of “good understanding” (*tôbath-ôekel*, “good-of-understanding”) and “beautiful” (*yepheth tölär*, “beautiful of form”), in 1 Sam 25:3. She must have been in a similar category with the “wise woman” (*hokmah*) who was admired among the Hebrews just as were the wise men (2 Sam 14:2; 20:16). Proverbs speaks of a “gracious woman” (*lêneth ùen*; chap. 11:16) and of a “good wife” (*lêneth hayil*;³³ chap. 12:4); but reserves its finest language for the famous “song of the ideal wife,” found at the conclusion of the book (chap. 31:10-31). Beer calls this a “catechism of women,” or “woman’s catechism” (*Frauenkatechismus*).³⁴ The presence of such a piece only functions to underscore the basic ambiguity of the OT witness since here, even though praised in glowing language, woman is still subordinate to man.³⁵ Yet, in another sense, it serves to balance and close Proverbs on a positive note regarding women, a fact not to be taken lightly in view of some of its negative statements. The poem itself emphasizes domestic, culinary, tailoring, and managerial skills of the ideal wife; and hence provides some indicator of the latitude of an Israelite woman’s freedom in a well-to-do home in her ancient culture. Though subordinate, she thoroughly enjoyed the love of her family and sought to meet their many needs.

Political and Military Role

Women As Members of the Covenantal Community

The Israelite woman had membership in the covenant community though she had no external sign indicating such. The law codes indicate that she was regarded as a complete human being (Exod 21:22-25, 28-31; Lev 20:16);³⁶ and though many laws hold her equal to man (Lev 11; 19:3; 20:10-11, 17-18; Deut 5:16), others seem to stress her subordination. The birth of a daughter required longer ritual purification than a son (Lev 12:1-5), the valuation of a man differed from that of a woman when a special vow was made (Lev 27:1-7); and the *man*, not the *woman*, had the right of divorce (Deut 24:1-4).³⁷ The prophets, however, seem to recognize that Yahweh was concerned about abuse of women. Micah notes His displeasure when women were driven from their homes (chap. 2:9); Amos calls down judgment upon the Ammonites “because

³³The meaning of this phrase is disputed (cf. Ruth 3:11). *Lyh* is applied to various male appellatives suggesting that its use here with “wife” means that she was worthy of a place in the warrior gentry. This evidently does not mean she was warlike, but that she had all the desirable virtues—industriousness, thrift, managerial skill, diligence, etc. (Rainey, p. 624.)

³⁴Beer, p. 12. It no doubt had an educative function in Israelite life.

³⁵Louis Jacobs, “Woman: Attitude to Women,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 16:626; cf. vss. 10-11, 23, 27.

³⁶Rainey, p. 624.

³⁷Baob, p. 866.

they have ripped up women with child in Gilead” (chap. 1:13); Isaiah defends the widow along with other downtrodden people (chap. 10:1-2). So against the apparent unconcern for the equality of women discernible in the OT stands a God calling men to higher and nobler views. The very fact that the prophetic voices spoke in behalf of women indicates that they had *rights* which had gone unnoticed by the apostate elements in society. Perhaps the same principle that implied man’s and woman’s equality in Eden now reappears in prophetic calls to repentance.

By contrast, one should direct attention to the witness of the many genealogies scattered throughout. These genealogies were not provided to make a definitive historical record; but they express actual domestic, political, and religious relationships.³⁸ Consequently, lineage is traced through the male. The female is mentioned only where she is of historical significance (Gen 11:29; 22:23; Num 26:33; 27:1-11).³⁹ Even the Book of Ruth, whose central figure is a woman, ends with a genealogy traced, not through Ruth and Naomi, but through Boaz (Ruth 4:18-22). This male domination is consistent from beginning to end (Gen 10; cf. 1 Chr 1-9). As late as Ben Sira (about 180 B.C.), only men were considered “distinguished” in the history of the Jews (compare his song in praise of famous men, Sirach 44:1-50:29), a view that is neatly contradicted by many heroes who were women (Judg 5; 1 Kgs 1:11ff.; 2 Kgs 2:26).⁴⁰

Such a condition is in keeping with the fundamental patriarchal society of the Hebrews. In a social fabric where women play a more forceful role, the genealogy might be traced through the female line (matriliny).⁴¹

Fortune of Women in War

Women did not serve in the Israelite army (however, cf. Prov 12:4). But because of their beauty and sexual charms they were regarded as great prizes from the spoil of a defeated foe (Isa 30:2). The Hebrews were given instruction to respect the sensitivities of a captured woman (Deut 21:10-14), but it is not so certain that her conquerors went by any such code.

In fact, so far was the woman removed from the din of battle that when she did manage to deal the fateful blow to a soldier, it was considered disgraceful. Accordingly, it is interesting to note Deborah’s *praise* of Jael’s murder of Sisera (Judg 5:24) in comparison with Abimelech’s dying request after he had been struck with a millstone by a woman on the wall of Thebez (“Draw your sword and kill me, lest men say of me, ‘A woman killed him,’” Judg 9:54, RSV; cf. 2 Sam 11:21). Deborah’s song apparently reveals a feminine perspective while the latter narrative betrays a male viewpoint.

Feminine Leadership

The leadership of women appears in various contexts in the OT. Basic and fundamental here was the female prophet, the *nēbīlāh*. Several are mentioned (Miriam, Exod 15:20; Deborah, Judg 4:4; Huldah, 2 Kgs 22:12-20; Isaiah’s wife, Isa 8:3; Noadiah, Neh 6:10-14; false prophetesses, Ezek 13), but little is known about their nature or the function of their office. It seems probable

³⁸Cf. Robert R. Wilson, “The Old Testament Genealogies in Recent Research,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94 (June, 1975): 169-89.

³⁹R. A. Bowman, “Genealogy,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* 2 (Nashville, 1962): 362-63.

⁴⁰Baob, p. 865.

⁴¹As, for example, among the Iroquois Indians of North America (cf. “Matriarchy,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1957), 15:92.

that they served like their male counterparts. The question of cultic prophetesses here is even more moot than the hotly debated role of the so-called “cultic” prophets.⁴²

Also to be considered are the “wise” women who were respected and consulted regarding important matters, and whose roles must have at least included advisory leadership (2 Sam 14:2ff.; 20:16-22). Deborah the prophetess similarly seems to have occupied a double role—that of prophetess and judge (Judg 4:4). It bears repeating that the word “judge” (*sophet*) connotes certain leadership characteristics in the Book of Judges (such as military authority) not found in the English equivalent. This authority may have even approached that of a king in the time of war (cf. Hos 7:7)⁴³

Second Kings 4:8 speaks of a “wealthy woman” (literally, “great woman,”) in the days of Elisha. This could mean she was either rich or of high rank (cf. 1 Sam 25:2; 2 Sam 19:32);⁴⁴ but chap. 8:1-6, which records her flight from the country on account of famine and subsequent return thereto, seems to tilt the intent more toward riches. On her return she was given all the harvest accruing to her (from “*her* house and *her* land,” vs. 3, RSV) for seven years. This incident in the Elisha narrative clearly indicates that a woman could hold property and could rise to heights of greatness and prosperity in a Hebrew world dominated by men.

Religious Role

Cultic Festivals

Women’s role in the religious affairs of Israel was evidently of a secondary nature. There were no priestesses, probably because of woman’s periodic ritual uncleanness (Lev 12), and the abhorrence of cult prostitutes in the Canaanite religious practices.⁴⁵ Women did contribute to the tabernacle (Exod 35:22-29; 38:8), joined David in joyous procession (2 Sam 6:19), and were allowed to participate fully in the activities at the great festivals—Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles (Exod 12:3; Deut 16:14; Ps 68:25).⁴⁶ They could go on pilgrimages to holy places (1 Sam 1:3-5, 24-28; 2:1-11, 19-20; 2 Kgs 4:23),⁴⁷ and apparently served in a special temple choral group (2 Chr 35:25; Ezra 2:65; Neh 7:67).

Numerous passages call attention to the cult prostitutes among the Canaanites (cf. Amos 2:7-8; Hos 4:13-14). The extent to which pagan practices penetrated Israel becomes apparent in the vivid prophetic denunciations of Hebrew women making cakes for the “queen of heaven”—probably a reference to the Assyro-Babylonian deity Ishtar (Canaanite Astarte), whose figurines have been found in Palestine (Jer 7:18; 44:15-19)—weeping for Tammuz, using amulets (Ezek 8:14; 13:18).⁴⁸ In Jeremiah’s account women worshiped Ishtar, no doubt because she was the goddess of fertility, maturity, and sexual love, conditions much valued in Israelite society.

⁴²D. J. McCarthy, “Prophetess,” *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* 11:867; id., “Prophetism,” *ibid.*, pp. 871-72.

⁴³C. U. Wolf, “Judge,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* 2:1013.

⁴⁴2BC 868, comment on 2 Kgs 4:8.

⁴⁵Baob, p. 865.

⁴⁶Rainey, p. 625.

⁴⁷Held, p. 997.

⁴⁸See 4BC 501-2, 604, 620.

Joy and Mourning

The texts also speak of feminine participation in periods of joy and mourning. Women were always present at weddings and funerals, customarily mourning for the dead (2 Sam 1:24; 2 Chr 35:25). But other occasions also became the springboard of feminine emotional expression—probably singing and dancing. David feared the Philistine women would “exult” over the death of Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam 1:24), while Isaiah notes that Yahweh’s judgment upon the land would be so severe that celebration would vanish from among the “complacent daughters” (Isa 32:9-19).

Not all of these occasions were religious, of course, but the Hebrew did not distinguish between religious and secular as do modern Westerners. Yahweh was Lord of all life, and mournful or joyous expressions were often called for by the fortunes of living.

General Religious Influence

Though woman’s role was secondary to men’s, still the “behind-the-scenes” faithful witness of the Hebrew mother must have made itself known across the nation’s spectrum (compare Samuel and Hannah, 1 Sam 1-3). “The hand that rocks the cradle sways the world,” was as true then as now, as the Bible writers make clear in their frequent observations of pious women (Gen 25:22; Judg 13:3-23; 1 Kgs 14:4; Esth 4:16).⁴⁹ Especially dear to the hearts of Jewish people during the Intertestamental period was the touching story of Judith, a pious woman who delivered Bethulia from the Assyrians while remaining true to her God.

Mention should be made here, for completeness’ sake, to the several prophetesses referred to in the OT, who, beyond question, exerted a religious influence over the people. See page 42.

Symbolic Use of the Feminine Image

Negative Symbol

Just as the OT in general sees woman in both a positive and a negative light, so it presents two types of women symbolic imagery. This basic ambiguity should not be surprising, because it shows the important effect that both good and bad women had upon society.

A frequent formula encountered in the prophets is that of a “woman in travail” (Isa 13:8; 21:3; 26:17; Jer 30:6; 49:22, 24; cf. 50:37; Isa 42:14). This idiom is used variously, but generally it connotes both the weakness and panic of a nation under God’s judgment. Its apocalyptic-like tone is even picked up by Paul as a description of the panic engendered by the eschaton (1 Thess 5:3). The depiction of the woman in a time of crisis and agony becomes a symbol of nations stricken with terror.

More obvious in the OT is the use of feminine imagery as a personification of wickedness (compare “Dame Folly,” Prov 9:13ff.). The double *entendre* of the proverbial warnings against the “adulterous woman” should be included here (Prov 6-7) as well as the picturesque vision in Zachariah of “wickedness” (*hārîmâh*, “feminine”) borne away from Israel to Shinar by two other

⁴⁹Held, p. 997.

women with stork's wings (chap. 5:5-11). The vision signified the removal of iniquity from the land to the place where it was apparently worshipped.⁵⁰

As a symbol for apostate Israel, the evil woman was a natural choice. Ezekiel relates two allegories, the first of which tells how Jerusalem was an abandoned infant taken up by Yahweh (chap. 16:1-7). When she became of marriageable age, Yahweh betrothed her to Himself (vss. 8-14), but she proved unfaithful and became like all the other harlots (vss. 15-34). The second allegory concerns both Samaria (Oholah) and Jerusalem (Oholibah), depicted as sisters (chap. 23). The two sisters finally went into harlotry and their deeds descended upon their heads (vss. 11-49).

Hosea, in similar fashion, sees Israel as an unfaithful wife; only here Hosea's own wife (if this be regarded as autobiographical, not allegorical, narrative) confirmed her unfaithfulness and became the symbol of the apostate nation (chaps. 1-3). Especially striking in this prophetic account is Yahweh's love for his estranged wife (Israel) in spite of her sin (chap. 3:15).

Positive Symbol

That the prophetic symbolic use of woman also took a positive turn is well-known. For Isaiah, Zion was a desolate and forsaken woman whose fear was allayed by Yahweh her husband (chap. 54:5-6). Jeremiah's feminine imagery—Jerusalem as the “daughter of Zion,” a “comely and delicately bred” woman—is preserved even in the modern versions that translate the verb as “destroy” rather than “liken” (chap. 6:2, RSV).

Micah likewise tells of Zion as a daughter in travail facing exile in Babylon. But Yahweh will soon rescue her (chap. 4:9-10). Especially noteworthy is the imagery found in Lamentations. At least five separate, symbolic “voices” are heard in this book lamenting the fate of the fallen city of Jerusalem.⁵¹ Zion appears here as a desolate woman mourning her fate (chap. 1:17).

Wisdom literature, too, makes use of this positive feminine image (Prov 1:20-21; 4:5ff.; 7:4; 8:1-3; 9:1-6; 14:1). In Prov 1:20ff. wisdom emerges in the feminine guise, pleading with the simple to learn instruction from her. She speaks with prophetic urgency, the only difference being the lack of the messenger formula—“Thus saith the Lord.”⁵²

The very notion which led to the use of feminine imagery such as this belongs to a society in which “women were respected and occupied an important place.”⁵³ The plus and minus uses of the image merely reflect the realities of life itself, but that reality was so forceful that it became an integral part of the literature.

Many students of the Bible who are sensitive to the role of women in modern life have been troubled by the apparent masculinity of the Deity. In a women's religious meeting, it is told, the traditional terms God, He, Him, and Father, were replaced by “She,” “Her,” and “Mother.” Perhaps this was extreme, but the point seems well taken. Undeniably, Scripture utilizes male imagery for the Deity. However, the situation is not quite so bleak as one might imagine. It is more in line with the facts to say that though male imagery predominates, feminine imagery also occurs. Isaiah 49:14-16 speaks of Yahweh's love for Israel in terms of a maternal affection: “Can

⁵⁰P. R. Ackroyd, “Zechariah,” *Peake's Commentary on the bible*, eds. Matthew Black and H. H. Rowley (London, 1962), p. 649.

⁵¹W. F. Lanahan detects the “voice” of the city, a desolate woman (chaps. 1-2), a defeated soldier, a detached reporter (chaps. 3-4), and the community of Israel (chap. 5). “The Speaking Voice in the Book of Lamentations,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (March, 1974): 41-49.

⁵²Scott, p. 39.

⁵³Jacobs, p. 626.

a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?" (vs. 15). The word rendered "compassion" actually springs from the term for womb (*re'um*), thus reinforcing the feminine symbol. Deuteronomy 32:18 puts into poetry the sentiment, "You were unmindful of the Rock that *begot* you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth." Paul Jewett points out that the symbol of God as male or female is not to be taken literally. It is rather to be understood analogically;⁵⁴ and since the OT was bequeathed to a patriarchal society it is easy to grasp why the masculine imagery predominates. Moderns should thus not become offended at such language but recognize it as a necessary part of the ancient communicative process. Because both male and female characteristics are needed to express the *Imago Dei*, it is also obvious that both are ultimately inadequate to fully disclose the hidden nature of God. This can be readily seen in the use of other OT symbols of God (compare "light," Ps 27:1; "fortress," Ps 91:2; "Rock," Deut 32:4; etc.). In the final analysis, *all* symbols of whatever nature fail to completely reveal God; hence, "in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son" (Reb 1:2, RSV). Nor can a masculine incarnation be viewed as discriminatory, either, since society at the time was masculinity oriented (that is, in view of the male cast of Near Eastern human social structure, the idea of a feminine messiah does not seem cogent).

Conclusions

Summary of the Old Testament Evidence

Most references to woman in the OT are but incidental to the main point in the text, except in instances where she plays a vital role in the action being described (compare Ruth, Esther, Sarah, etc.). This fact, together with specific examination of woman's place in Israelite society, has shown that she was regarded as subordinate to man. This subordination of women, however, is to be placed alongside the Creation narrative, which portrays Eve's equality at the beginning and then her subsequent fall. Thereafter woman, though regarded as of lesser importance, was prized by men for her beauty, virtue, and procreative abilities.

The polarities of feminine position are acutely apparent in the wisdom texts, particularly Proverbs. There woman is described as both virtuous and industrious, as well as sinful and evil. Prophetic literature likewise demonstrates this feminine ambiguity in its symbolic portrayals of women, as both the faithful people and the apostate people of God.

Woman's role everywhere is secondary. She stands *behind* her husband, *assists* in worship, handles the domestic chores. Only rarely, as in the case of Deborah, does she come to national prominence. Yet she is also highly valued, extolled, and counted as the equal partner of man. The OT record, therefore, is somewhat equivocal in its description of woman.

The Old Testament and Women Today

The present women's liberation issue has forced the church, which claims the OT as a part of its doctrinal base, to try to more carefully define woman's place in its activity. With women becoming qualified for leadership responsibility in both ministerial and other lines,⁵⁵ it now

⁵⁴Jewett, p. 167.

⁵⁵Franz J. Leenhardt, *La Place de la Femme dans L'Eglise d'Après le Nouveau Testament*, Etudes Theologiques et Religieuses (Montpellier: Faculte de Theologie Protestante, 1948), p. 3. At the end of 1975 the United Methodist Church had 576 ordained women; the United Presbyterian, more than 200; and the Lutheran

becomes imperative for the church to face squarely what the OT says regarding the role of women. Since the NT concept of the role of woman does not differ markedly from that of the OT,⁵⁶ the sacred witness to be accounted for seems to span the whole of the biblical canon. Is woman thus so be regarded as subordinate to man today because she was so in biblical times? Is she now to occupy a secondary place in the leadership and administration of the church because such was her place anciently?

Answers to these questions are not easy, and the judgments expressed here are only to stimulate thought. A distinction must be maintained, it seems, between the specific counsel to ancients, and the application of the principles upon which that counsel was based to Christians today. That is, the historical, grammatical, syntactical, literary, and sociological backgrounds into which a given text was directed must be examined before adequate description can be provided as to what the passage “meant” to its original audience. Then the principles of the text must be enunciated in such a way as to be applicable to this contemporary generation. Once this is done the ancient passage can speak with force and meaning to the church today. Both the implied and the explicit features of the text in question must be considered in this hermeneutical process so that no piece of evidence is overlooked. The divinity of Scripture will also have to be maintained as an integral part of the whole (a fact frequently overlooked by contemporary historio-critical approaches).

The OT was addressed to those living in a patriarchal society. It was thus written in such a way so as to be heard by those living in this sociological setting. This does not mean that the message of the OT has in any way been compromised. But it does mean that the exact social fabric of those living in OT times cannot be taken over without adaptation into the modern community. Scripture itself must be the guide to that adaptation.

Perhaps a good example of an incorrect hermeneutic which attempts to take over the sociological setting of OT times can be seen in the use of the Bible to defend slavery in the past century. It was argued that blacks were naturally inferior to whites because of the curse placed supposedly on Ham (really on Canaan); and that therefore the Bible approved slavery. Did not Paul himself say, “Bid slaves to be submissive to their masters” (Titus 2:9, RSV)?⁵⁷ Correspondingly, present-day Mormons sometimes use OT precedents to justify polygamous beliefs. In neither of these cases is the contemporary Christian convinced. He quickly points out that God spoke to people where they were and He attempted to raise them from that level to His ideal. It would seem that the same reasoning would apply to the biblical role of woman as contrasted with that today.

Indeed, if one listens, he hears higher, nobler principles regarding woman, even in the OT. Eichrodt has called attention to the original equality between man and woman as the *Imago Dei* in Genesis. Here “all ambiguity as to the relationship between the sexes is removed,” he comments. “At the same time the verse (Genesis 1:26-27) does away with any justification for holding the female half of the race in contempt as inferior, or in some way closer to the animals.”⁵⁸ Beer, too, feels that though the subjection of woman has been broken down by Christ (Gal 3:28), the “advance word” has already been sounded in the OT in Joel 2:28ff. Additionally, the new covenant promise of Jeremiah talks of a new freedom for all (from least to greatest)

church of America, 27. (“Women of the Year: Great Changes, New Changes, Tough Choices,” *Time* 107 [January 5, 1976]: 13).

⁵⁶Baob, p. 867.

⁵⁷Jerome Leslie Clark, *1844: Social Movements* (Nashville, 1968) 2:130.

⁵⁸Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, tr. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia, 1967), 2:121-27.

including women.⁵⁹ He states that Christianity, distinct from OT mores, offers the best guide for “today’s polymorphic questions about women.”

Little has been said to this point about the books of Ruth and Esther. This has been deliberate, because this author believes the presence of these books in the OT canon helped to speak this “advance word” about women. Significantly, Ruth concerns itself with a figure who is both female and Gentile. Had the Hebrew people heeded the message of this book, they no doubt would have avoided the national exclusivism that marked their later history. The book also suggests that Yahweh is concerned about *woman*, about her place, regardless of nationality, in His community. That says something to the present issue. In Esther, likewise, the main character is a woman. Here Esther is both a part of the traditional image of woman (beautiful, subordinate, a “sex object”), and transcendent above it. Through her very subordination to the king she effects deliverance for the Jewish nation. Esther thus emerges, in a way, as a “total woman.”

Other questions persist (complementarity in diversified ministries, equality of assignment, response of the laity, etc.)⁶⁰ but these, it appears, should not prevent the church from following the “advance word” of the OT and the Christ of the NT in the full utilization of feminine talent in the community of God.

⁵⁹Beer, p. 45.

⁶⁰A. Cunningham, “Women as Priests,” *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, supp. (1967-1974), 16:470.