

Women in ancient Israel

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The upsurge of feminism in recent years and the current interest in feminist hermeneutics (cf. Tolbert: 1983, 113–26) have stimulated fresh, sometimes impassioned, discussion of the biblical view of women. As an aspect of this, the status and role of women in ancient Israel have assumed new relevance in the light of contemporary issues. We have moved a long way from the attitude exemplified in the work of Köhler (1953) on Hebrew man which was content to devote scarcely two pages to Hebrew woman!

The Old Testament, born out of the patriarchal society of ancient Israel, has sometimes been accused of contributing to the subordination of women over the centuries. We must question whether this negative view is inherent in the Old Testament, or is consequent upon misinterpreting it. Again, we must ask whether there are conflicting attitudes within the Old Testament, and signs that within the patriarchal culture there was a 'depatriarchalising principle' (Trible: 1973, 48) at work, challenging the structures of society.

In approaching the material we face problems on two fronts: first, regarding the nature of the material itself, and second over the difficulty of interpreting such ancient texts. The limited material available to us has been transmitted mainly, if not entirely, by men. Inevitably it has a male perspective. Does it give a balanced view of Israelite society as it was in reality? Was female leadership, for example, as rare as the Old Testament implies? Is this impression, in part at least, due to the silence of the documents?

If perspective is significant, so also is literary genre. Legal texts and narrative cannot be treated alike as evidence. McKeating (1979, 65) warns that 'we cannot simply read off our assessment of a society's ethical values from the laws which it produced (or rather, from the laws which happen to have been preserved for us).' We need to know to what extent the law was rigidly applied. Narrative literature, he notes, offers examples of actual behaviour, and the acceptability or otherwise of that behaviour is shown by the reaction of characters in the story and by the comments of the narrator.

But here caution is needed for stories tend to be told about the extraordinary rather than the typical, and it is dangerous to generalise on the basis of individual narratives. It is at this point that conflicting assessments arise. Uncertainty as to the date of some material further compounds the problem. Sakenfeld warns that we need to avoid 'generalizations about one thousand years of culture that are based on fragments of indeterminate origin' (Sakenfeld: 1982, 14).

Not all the difficulties encountered in attempting to reach a balanced assessment of the subject are, however, inherent in the material. Hermeneutical theory has made us increasingly aware of the influence on interpretation of our own preconceptions (cf. Tolbert: 1983, 114). There are undoubtedly some who, for one reason or another, have overemphasised the subordination of women in the Old Testament. Others, in attempting to restore the balance and to rehabilitate the Old Testament, have minimised the unequivocal evidence of inequality between the sexes (as Otwell: 1977, 151 and 193f.).

1. Women in leadership roles

Without doubt women of distinction influenced the course of Israel's history by their role in the community. Few of them appear in the Old Testament, but, when they do, the fact that their female sex is apparently considered unremarkable suggests that their contribution, even in leadership roles, was not infrequent. The reference in Neh. 3.8 to women engaged in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem may seem to us noteworthy.¹ The fact that it passes without comment suggests that this was not uncommon. At an even more momentous crisis in Israel's history we find women contributing significantly to the turn of events. Israel's liberation from Egypt began with the refusal of a few women to cooperate with oppression. Tribe comments whimsically that 'if Pharaoh had realized the power of these women, he might have reversed his decree (Exod. 1.16, 22) and had females killed rather than males' (Trible: 1973, 34). Not only so, but as the exodus account continues 'Moses, as well as the deity, takes on female attributes, providing for the people on their journey from Egypt to Canaan (see especially Num. 11.1-14 for explicit feminine metaphors) (Exum: 1983, 82). Reassessment of our traditional assumptions about women's roles in the biblical story is in order', she comments. This, however, would take us far beyond the scope of the present essay. Nevertheless, it is for this reason that we may begin, not with women in the domestic sphere, but with the role of women in the community in relation to monarchy, prophecy and wisdom, even though the evidence is sparse. It is,

however, unwise to assume that only those few women whose stories are preserved in the Old Testament rose to leadership in ancient Israel. This is unlikely to be true either for women or for men.

2. Women and monarchy

For women to rule is seen as a symptom of a disordered society. (Isa. 3.12).² It is perhaps significant that, in contrast to the many occurrences of the word 'king', the title of queen is nowhere used of any female member of the royal house of either Israel or Judah, not even of Athaliah, a reigning monarch (2 Kings 11.1-16; 2 Chron. 22.10-23.15). Apart from a poetic reference in the plural to Solomon's many wives (Song. 6.8f.), the title relates only to the royal ladies at foreign courts, such as the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10.1; 2 Chron. 9.1), and Vashti and Esther (Est. 1.11f.; 2.18). In three instances, however, the queen mother is called *g'birāh*.³ Of these, Jezebel (1 Kings 15.13; 2 Chron. 15.16) and Nehushtah, Jehoiachin's mother (Jer. 13.18; 29.2) to Judah. That this is a title signifying an official mother (Jer. 13.18; 29.2), to Judah. That this is a title signifying an official position is evident from the fact that Asa was able to remove his mother 'from being queen mother (*g'birāh*) because she had an abominable image made for Asherah' (1 Kings 15.13; 2 Chron. 15.16). In investigating the precise significance of the title we have to face the question whether these rare occurrences reflect the reality of the situation, or whether its omission elsewhere is merely fortuitous.

In an attempt to uncover the existence of specifically female institutions which were later forgotten or suppressed through the long transmission of ancient Hebrew literature within a patriarchal society, Brenner (1985, 9) starts from the premiss that the title was as rare as the Old Testament indicates. She then attempts to isolate as the clue to its use a factor common to the three instances cited. She concludes that the title *g'birāh* was conferred when an interruption occurred in the normal transfer of power from a monarch to his heir and the queen mother acted as regent (1985). Her argument rests on the view that Asa and Jehoiachin, who both came to the throne after an elder brother's death, were minors at the time, thus requiring a regency.⁴ In Jezebel's case the sudden death of her son Jehoram created a break in the succession (2 Kings 9.24). Brenner notes, however, that the title *g'birāh* is not given to Athaliah, though she assumed power after the death of her son Ahaziah in much the same circumstances as Jezebel (2 Kings 11.1; 2 Chron. 22.10). For Athaliah this was not a temporary measure, and Brenner argues that in this instance the title has been suppressed out of hostility to a woman who established herself as

monarch. The argument from silence is somewhat dangerous, for if we conjecture that the title was omitted in Athaliah's case, we cannot be sure that this was not so elsewhere. Its meaning would then have to be sought on broader evidence.

The title part, when we question what role or influence belonged to the mother of a reigning king, the evidence is scanty. Bathsheba, personally treated with great courtesy by her son Solomon, is devoid of any authority, as his stern rejection of her request testifies (1 Kings 2.19–25). Maacah's position as *g'birah* is dependent on her son's goodwill (1 Kings 15.13). Athaliah, undoubtedly a woman of personal influence, is described as Ahaziah's counsellor, yet, since this is qualified by 'in doing wickedness' (*fi'har'at*) (2 Chron. 22.3), it may not refer to an official position.⁵

One royal consort, however, stands out, not merely as a power behind the throne, but as a woman of public authority and of considerable personal wealth (1 Kings 18.19). Jezebel, a foreign princess, alone seems to have achieved so powerful a position. Brenner describes her as 'a real queen, assistant and partner in government to her husband Ahab' (1985, 20). She it was, not Ahab, who persecuted the prophets of Yahweh (1 Kings 18.4), and whose threat led Elijah to flee for his life (1 Kings 19.2f.). In the Naboth story she is represented as writing letters in Ahab's name and sealing them with his seal (v. 8). Yet when Naboth is dead the messengers return not to Ahab but to Jezebel (v. 14). On these grounds Brenner surmises that here, too, out of opposition to a woman ruler the Old Testament has distorted the evidence. Jezebel, she argues, acted on her own authority, using her own seal, 'the symbol of the permanent institutional authority Ahab delegated to her' (1985, 27). She notes with due reservation the discovery of a seal inscribed *yzbl* belonging broadly to this period.⁶

The Old Testament's refusal to recognise Jezebel's position as co-ruler with her husband is reflected also, Brenner suggests, in 2 Kings 9.34 where Jehu justifies her burial by reference, not to her status in Israel's royal house, but to her origin as a foreign princess. Was it by virtue of personality alone that Jezebel achieved such a uniquely powerful position? Brenner's hypothesis is that Jezebel was a Baal priestess, and on this basis her active fanaticism and special status at her husband's court are to be explained.

3. Women and prophecy

Of the many prophetic figures in the Old Testament only four are women, and these belong to widely different periods from the exodus to

the fifth century BC. Each is named: Miriam, Deborah, Huldah and the false prophetess Noadiah. Apart from the last, who has only a passing mention (Neh. 6.14),⁷ each is identified by reference to a male relative, despite her obvious importance in the community.⁸

Miriam's involvement with music and dancing led Noth (1962 [1959], 121) to categorise her as an ecstatic (Ex. 15.20). The imbalance between her song (15.21) and Moses' Song of the Sea (15.1–18) is striking. Is this perhaps an example of the instinctive relegation of a woman to a secondary role? The precise relation of the two songs remains a problem though their attribution of the songs to different sources has been largely abandoned. In discussing the redactional framework of the Song of the Sea, Childs (1974, 248) comments that 'the tendency to ascribe an ancient poem to Moses would have taken precedence over Miriam's authorship'. The dispute of Miriam and Aaron with Moses (Num. 12.1–15) results in a reaffirmation of Moses as uniquely bearer of the word of the Lord (vv. 6ff.), but this is clearly not a male versus female conflict (cf. Burns: 1985, 48–79). God's wrath is turned against Aaron as well as Miriam, and Aaron acknowledges joint sin (v. 11), though only Miriam suffers punishment. Yet there is no hint anywhere of anti-female motivation which judges Miriam for having stepped outside a woman's traditional role. A more likely explanation is that Miriam initiated the rebellion, since her name occurs first in v. 1. The story bespeaks both compassion (vv. 12f.) and respect for Miriam (v. 15). She is included on equal terms with Moses and Aaron as God's agent in Israel's deliverance (Mic. 6.4).

Deborah is both prophetess and judge in the community (Jud. 4.4), and possibly, though this is not capable of proof, author of the song preserved in Jud. 5.2–31.⁹ There is no hint in the text that her authority is suspect because of her sex. Taking the initiative in a crisis, she summons Barak (v. 6). His response is immediate, his *only* reservation being his need for Deborah's personal support in the military engagement envisaged. Deborah's involvement, equally with Miriam's, is not related to traditional female roles, but is concerned with the survival of the tribes of Israel (5.7).¹⁰

Huldah's name bursts suddenly upon the scene (2 Kings 22.14) and as quickly disappears. Only one short oracle of hers is preserved in contrast to the sayings of Jeremiah and Zephaniah her contemporaries, yet her reputation is obviously already known, and her status high. Why else would Josiah's emissaries have sought her assistance at a time of such unease? Her involvement with matters of the utmost consequence for king and people is no different in essence from the prophetic activity of Amos or Isaiah, and her courage in delivering an unpalatable message is equal to

theirs. Hers is genuine prediction, as is evident from v. 20. Why Huldah, not Jeremiah, is often asked. The Old Testament shows no prejudice against women in prophetic roles. They are not considered stop-gaps in the absence of prophets. The prophetess is as much respected as the prophet. C. J. Vos (1968, 184) suggests that the link which already existed with the temple through the occupation of Huldah's husband (2 Kings 22.14) may have been the reason.¹¹

We conclude that the Old Testament affords no evidence that female sex was a disadvantage in the exercise of prophetic gifts, though it may have a bearing on the extent to which a woman's prophetic oracles were preserved. It is reasonable to suppose that the few mentioned by name are representative of others. Certainly their female sex seems to have occasioned no surprise. The future expectation of Joel 2.28f. includes both women and men. The only condemnatory note appears in Ezek. 13.17–23 against a group of women described as prophesying, though the nature of their activities suggests that they are engaged in magic. It is clear from the way they are addressed that they are Israelite women, but their magical arts, reminiscent of Babylonian practices, are carried out in exile, and fall outside the scope of this essay. It is evident, however, from the need to prohibit such activities by imposing the death penalty for both women and men (Lev. 20.27) that this was not unknown in Israel. The narrative of 1 Sam. 28.1–25 shows a witch in action. The king specifically requests a woman practitioner, having expelled the male representatives of the art (v. 3). She remains anonymous throughout, but is clearly a woman of repute, selected for the king, and visited by him at her home. Her pastoral care for her royal client in his consequent distress should be noted (vv. 21ff.). The narrative is unique in the Old Testament.

4. Women and wisdom

The Old Testament knows of other influential women, besides those with prophetic gifts, who were involved in matters of consequence for the state. Such are the women of Tekoa (2 Sam. 14.2) and of Abel (2 Sam. 20.16), both designated simply as 'a wise woman' (*ʾiṣṣāh ḥ'kāmāh*). 'The wise' in the Old Testament, unlike the prophets, are a rather nebulous group, rarely identified by name. So it is that these two women, unlike the women prophets, remain anonymous.

The epithet 'wise' is here not merely descriptive, as it is in Exod. 35.25; Jer. 9.17., but signifies a recognised role in the community in the time of judges and early monarchy, though there is no evidence for its existence

later. Such is Camp's thesis (1981, 16) based on elements implicit in both 2 Sam. 14 and 20. She describes this role as 'a regularised set of functions rather than an official position'. The two women are identified only by the adjective 'wise' and by the name of their respective town. This by itself was evidently sufficient, Camp argues, to evoke 'features of a culturally stereotyped character' in the hearers' minds. Both speak with authority. The woman of Tekoa, assuming the part of a widow, naturally presents her story humbly to the king, but in her accusing rhetorical question (14.13) we see one 'accustomed to making and delivering such judgments' (1981, 17). Though Joab put the words in her mouth' (v. 3) she is not in any sense a passive figure and Camp compares Ex. 4.14f. where Yahweh instructs Moses to put his words in Aaron's mouth precisely because he has already shown himself to be eloquent. As for the woman of Abel, only a defined role in the community can account for the fact that she has sufficient authority not only to summon Joab but to ensure that he treats her advice with respect, though they have not previously met (20.17). Similarly, when she 'went to all the people in her wisdom' (v. 22), her words were put into effect immediately. The use of proverbial language by the women (2 Sam. 14.7; 20.18f.) Camp also finds significant, comparing it with a similar use of proverbs by the royal advisers, Ahithophel and Hushai (2 Sam. 17.3, 8, 10, 12).

The manner in which the wise woman of Tekoa approaches the king has certain similarities to the approach to Ahab by an anonymous prophet (1 Kings 20.35–43) and to Nathan's approach to David (2 Sam. 12.1ff.). There is, however, a significant difference in that the prophets are conscious of receiving direct communication from Yahweh, whereas the woman is commissioned by Joab. Hofstijzer (1970, 444) comments that the woman appears to proceed more humbly and circumspectly than the prophets, for as an 'ordinary person' she has 'to excuse her behaviour in order not to fall into disgrace' with the king, whereas a prophet has a status others do not have. He notes that, unlike the prophets mentioned, she prostrates herself before the king (v. 4), ensures that the king confirms his ruling by an oath (v. 11), and, before she confronts David with the consequences of his ruling, asks his permission to proceed (v. 12). The first of these, at least, can be accounted for, however, by her assumed role of widow. The woman of Abel, in contrast, acts rather in the manner of a military leader. Camp (1981, 22) draws a comparison with the Rab-shakeh of the Assyrian army in his confrontation with Hezekiah's men (2 Kings 18.28ff.) and Abner's confrontation with Joab (2 Sam. 2.24–28).

Camp suggests that this role of the wise woman was based on a mother's role in instructing her children. By extension the village wise woman was concerned not only with education but with political decisions. This she

considers to be an example of the egalitarian attitude of early Yahwism in a functional, if not always explicit, sense.¹² She concludes her study with the suggestion that, although 'female images, either in the form of significant "historical" persons or of symbolic figures, are relatively rare in the Old Testament', the emphasis both here and in Proverbs on female imagery associated with wisdom 'reveals a latent tendency in Israel's theological reflection, underdeveloped because of the male-dominated priesthood and generally patriarchal milieu, but not insignificant in Israel's understanding of the relationships between persons in community and between the community and Yahweh' (1981, 29).

5. Women in the covenant community

It is commonplace to remark that male members only of the community were required to attend the three major annual festivals (Exod. 23.17; Deut. 16.16). But difference of obligation does not necessarily imply inequality, and in this case probably arose from practical considerations attendant on the birth and care of children. Certainly Deuteronomy makes it clear that women were present at the festivals, sharing in the rejoicing (Deut. 12.12), and participating in the sacrifices (Deut. 12.18).¹³ The feasts of weeks and booths are specifically mentioned (Deut. 16.10f., 13f.). This may well represent an advance on earlier law in the direction of equality, a feature which seems to be characteristic of Deuteronomy. This book presents women as participants in the covenant ceremony (Deut. 29.10-13), and consequently under full obligation to observe Yahweh's law (Deut. 31.12).¹⁴ Equally with men they could be held guilty of transgressing the covenant, for which the penalty was death (Deut. 13.6-11; 17.2-5). The evidence suggests that it was deuteronomic law which first explicitly brought them within the covenant. The view that women are fully accountable before Yahweh continues in the post-exilic period (2 Chron. 15.12f.; Neh. 8.2).

Was there discrimination against women within the covenant community? It seems not. Although in general the male head of the household represented the family in the offering of sacrifice, where an individual offering was stipulated a woman was expected personally to fulfil the requirement (Lev. 12.6; 1 Sam. 1.24) (cf. Vos: 1968, 130). The exceptional consecration entailed under the Nazirite vow was open to women (Num. 6.2-21). Indeed, this passage with its single feminine reference (v. 2) is a timely reminder that grammatically masculine forms may be intended in an inclusive sense, and the linguistic convention must not be misunderstood. We may compare also Deut. 29.18ff. where women are

specified in v. 18, but masculine forms are used thereafter in vv. 19f.

The one role in worship from which women were certainly excluded was the priesthood, as also were the majority of men. The reasons behind the exclusion of women are probably complex, though 'since "physical wholeness" and ritual purity were the essential conditions for sacred service (Lev. 21.1ff.; Ezek. 44.15ff.), woman's periodic uncleanness as menstruant and mother must have played no small part in excluding her from priestly office' (Hayter: 1987, 70; cf. Vos: 1968, 194f.). Female members of priestly families were permitted, however, to eat of the 'holy things' set aside for the priests (Lev. 22.13). It is open to debate whether there were women who had an official place in worship. Exod. 38.8 speaks of 'women who ministered at the door of the tent of meeting'. Although the nature of their service is not clear, Childs comments that the verb *šb'* used here denotes an organised service like the professional Levites (Childs: 1974, 636; contra de Vaux, 1961, 383f.). Whether officially¹⁵ or not, women shared in cultic worship, dancing, singing and playing musical instruments (Exod. 15.20; Jud. 21.21; Ps. 68.26).

The regular involvement of women in the cult is implied by the strict regulations concerning their ritual purity. An interesting aspect of this is the law relating to uncleanness after childbirth (Lev. 12). An identical offering was to be brought whether the newborn child was male or female (v. 6), but the period of uncleanness after the birth of a daughter was twice that after the birth of a son. The legal requirement is unambiguous; its motivation is not. Thus Noth (1962 [1959]) comments that 'the cultic inferiority of the female sex is expressed in giving the female birth a double "uncleanness" effect, shown also in the double period required in this case before the mother is once more clean'. In contrast, on the grounds that Israel believed that God was 'intimately active in all stages of birth from conception to delivery', Otwell (1977, 176f.) suggests that this uncleanness after childbirth was due to the woman's involvement with 'the work of deity', an idea of holiness as in the expression "books which defile the hands" used of the canonical scriptures. It is, Otwell argues, for this reason that the period of being 'de-energised' would need to be twice as long for the birth of a child which might become capable in its turn of bearing children as for a male child. He supports this argument by noting that when, in preparation for the theophany at Sinai (Exod. 19.15), and likewise as a condition for eating the holy bread (1 Sam. 21.4), the men are to keep from women, these are illustrations of the law of Lev. 15.18 concerning male uncleanness, not indications of the intrinsic uncleanness of women.

Though the examples are few, there are several instances in the Old Testament of women in encounter with God. The angel of the Lord

addresses Hagar (Gen. 21.17) and the wife of Manoah (Jud. 13.3), in both instances concerning children. When Manoah requests a further theophany, it is to his wife that the angel again appears (13.9). Women independently approach the prophets to enquire of the Lord (1 Kings 14.1; 2 Kings 4.22ff.), and on their own account seek him in prayer (Gen. 25.22f.; 30.6), again for family reasons. Hannah's prayer, too, has this motivation (1 Sam. 1.10-17), and its answer elicits a psalm of praise (1 Sam. 2.1-10),¹⁶ a reminder that a feminine perspective should not be overlooked in the psalms in general.

6. The position of women within the family

(i) Their legal status

As regards legal status, a woman was clearly at a disadvantage. Throughout her life she was regarded as under the authority first of her father, then of her husband. As head of the household he, not the courts, was responsible for all matters of family law (Phillips: 1973, 351). Phillips cites two illuminating instances in evidence of a woman's lack of independent legal status. In cases of the seduction of an unmarried girl, Exod. 22.16f. stipulates that the man who seduced her shall marry her, giving the customary marriage present. If her father should decide otherwise, an equal sum is to be paid as compensation to him, and he suffers no financial loss either way. The law belongs to the section on damage to property, and Phillips (Phillips: 1973, 350) does not hesitate to describe the girl as the personal property of her father. On the other hand, Childs comments that, although this appears to be a traditional sequence, 'the content of the Hebrew law shows remarkable transformation in respect to other ancient Near Eastern codes', for 'the seduction of an unengaged maiden was no longer simply viewed as property damage' (Childs: 1974, 476). The seducer has to take full responsibility for his action and marry the girl. Monetary compensation was not an option open to the seducer, but to the girl's father. What of the girl herself? In theory, v. 17a could be said to allow opportunity for the girl's wishes to be consulted, but this was not safeguarded in law and would depend on the quality of the individual relationship of father and daughter. As a second example Phillips adduces Exod. 21.22 where, if a man injures a pregnant wife and a miscarriage ensues, he is to compensate the husband.¹⁷

Widows and orphans, without normal family protection, were regarded as under Yahweh's special care (Deut. 10.18), though, as Sakenfeld

comments, a widow was not better off, sociologically speaking, because the religion claims that God values and defends her (Sakenfeld: 1979, 423).¹⁸ However, the community, if true to its obligations, would ensure the wellbeing of such (Exod. 22.22; Deut. 24.17ff.). There was also the possibility, if not the absolute right, of direct appeal to the king for justice, not only by the widowed (2 Sam. 14.1ff.; 2 Kings 8.3-6) but by others lacking family protection, such as the prostitutes of 1 Kings 3.16ff.

The idea of a man's legal responsibility for his household also lies behind the regulation that vows made by a woman must be ratified by father or husband as the case may be (Num. 30.3-16). That this was not due to doubts about a woman's inherent sense of responsibility is shown by the fact that the widowed and the divorced were entitled to make legally binding commitments (v. 9). Otwell considers that it 'reflects more the primacy of the family in ancient Israel than an inferior status of woman before the Lord' (Otwell: 1977, 170). Since 1 Sam. 1.11 shows Hannah making a vow of considerable consequence to the family independently of her husband, it may be that the law of Num. 30 is a later restriction. Undoubtedly the laws of inheritance put women at a disadvantage. A wife did not inherit her husband's property, nor daughters their father's, unless there was no male heir (Num. 27.6-11). Naomi's case seems to be somewhat exceptional (Ruth 4.3), though to be compared with Jud. 17.2ff.; Job. 42.15 (cf. Neufeld: 1944, 240ff.). Phillips (1973, 356) suggests that it may have been the abandonment of the practice of levirate marriage which led to this innovation by the priestly legislator whereby daughters could inherit property and so continue the name of their father.¹⁹

For the above reasons de Vaux compares adversely the social and legal position of an Israelite wife with the position of women in Egypt and Babylon. In the former the wife was often the head of the family; in the latter 'she could acquire property, take legal action, be a party to contracts, and she even had a certain share in her husband's inheritance' (de Vaux: 1961, 40).

The legal dependence of women, despite the restrictive inequalities it inevitably imposed, is not, however, to be confused with personal oppression. The Old Testament does not play down the initiative and resourcefulness of women. Abigail is consulted by a manservant in a dilemma (1 Sam. 25.17), and in response acts resourcefully (v. 18ff.). The implication of v. 25 is that, had she known of the arrival of David's men, it would have been quite within her power to deal with them without consulting her husband. The efficient wife of Prov. 31.10-31 is no downtrodden creature, but self-confident and outgoing, and this not merely an individual but an ideal to be followed. M. B. Crook describes

the passage as 'instruction for a marriageable maiden on a par with that given to young men as a part of their preparation' (Crook, 1954, 139). She contrasts it with the marriage preparation a girl might expect to receive from her mother, describing this poem as 'a memorandum from a school answering to the needs of young women who will shortly be assuming positions of wealth and importance in their communities'.

(ii) The marriage relationship

How appropriate is it to describe a wife in ancient Israel as her husband's possession? Two factors in particular seem to have contributed to this impression: the use of the word *ba'al* for 'husband', and the practice of giving *môliār*, commonly translated as 'brideprice'. It is not infrequently pointed out that, when applied to a house (Exod. 22.8) or a domestic animal (Exod. 21.28), *ba'al* means 'owner'. It is however the word in its context which determines meaning, and the transfer of crude ideas of ownership from one context to another is inadmissible. The word 'is also frequently used to mean 'husband'.²⁰ Still more significantly, the imagery of marriage is considered appropriate to describe both Yahweh's love relationship with Israel (Hos. 1-3; Jer. 2.2), and Israel's joy when redeemed by the Lord (Isa. 62.4f.). Here is the Israelite ideal of marriage, from which in practice many no doubt fell short. The crude idea of ownership is entirely inappropriate here, as it is also in Jer. 31.32. To suggest that a wife was little better than a slave is certainly incorrect. Slaves, and in extreme necessity even a daughter (Exod. 21.7), might be sold. We may note the distinction drawn by Phillips (1981, 7) between a wife's position as an "extension" of the husband himself (Gen. 2.24) and a daughter's. Sons, too, could be sold (Neh. 5.5). Not so a wife, even a slave wife (Exod. 21.8-11) or one captured in battle (Deut. 21.14). The instructions of wisdom literature concerning obedience are addressed to children, not to wives.²¹ Indeed, in the law concerning the rebellious son, the mother equally with the father is to see him brought to justice (Deut. 21.18-21).

Concerning the practice of giving *môliār*, the translation 'marriage present' represents it more adequately than does 'brideprice' (de Vaux: 1961, 26f.; Neufeld, 1944, 95ff.). The term occurs only three times in the Old Testament: in Gen. 34.12 in conjunction with *matān* 'gift'; in Exod. 22.17, with the cognate verb in v. 16, and in 1 Sam. 18.25 where Saul makes a bizarre request in place of the normal marriage present. The only instances where the language of buying and selling is used in connection with marriage are the requirement that the seducer should pay money (*šāqal kesep*) equivalent to the marriage present if he is *not* permitted to

marry the girl (Exod. 22.17), the angry words of Leah and Rachel who accuse their father of having sold them and 'used up our money' (Gen. 31.15), and Boaz' statement that he has bought (*qānītš*) Ruth as his wife (Ruth 4.10), although Ruth was clearly no unwilling, passive partner in the arrangement, but had largely taken the initiative. What is in fact purchased is the inheritance on which Ruth has a claim for a potential heir. Thereby the inheritance and the marriage are linked together. Hos. 3.2 is a different matter for the woman in this case was bought from prostitution or slavery. She, too, is anything but a chattel; she is to be loved 'as the Lord loves'.

The marriage-present was given by the bridegroom to the bride's father, probably as compensation for the work which otherwise the daughter would have continued to contribute to her parents' household (Meyers: 1978, 98). Women 'looked after the flocks, worked in the fields, cooked the food, did the spinning' (de Vaux: 1961, 39). The amount paid may have been regulated according to the status of the bride's family (1 Sam. 18.23ff.), though the implication of Shechem's open offer (Gen. 34.12) is that this was exceptional to meet unusual circumstances. Deut. 22.29 stipulates fifty shekels of silver, but if this is taken as a penalty for rape of a virgin, the usual amount may have been less (de Vaux, *ibid.*, 26; but cf. Phillips: 1981, 12). R. de Vaux considers that, although the marriage present was given to the bride's father, it probably belonged to the girl in fact, hence Leah's and Rachel's description of it as 'our money' (Gen. 31.15). The bride's father would be entitled to interest accruing from it, but the capital would revert to the girl when her father died, or earlier if her husband died, as provision against penury. He finds support for this view in Assyrian and Babylonian custom, and in the marriage contracts from Elephantine. The giving of a dowry by the bride's father was not practised in Israel, the only exception being Pharaoh's gift (*šillūlīm*) on the occasion of his daughter's marriage to Solomon (1 Kings 9.16). Meyers (1978, 98; but cf. Mace: 1953, 175) considers this an indication of the relative shortage of women, in that fathers had no need to entice husbands for their daughters.

Certainly marriage was the norm, and for a woman to have to remain unmarried was considered a disgrace (Isa. 4.1; Prov. 30.23²²). Although practice varied at different periods in Israel's history, monogamy was far more common than polygamy. Apart from the patriarchal narratives and the stories of Gideon and Samson, there is little reference to anything other than monogamy. With the exception of royal harems, Samuel's father Elkanah alone in the books of Samuel and Kings is the husband of more than one wife. The law of Deut. 21.15ff., however, regards bigamy as lawful, and the implication is that it was not altogether uncommon. The problems to which bigamy could give rise in a household are evident in the

Old Testament. The cause of jealousy on the part of a childless wife (Gen. 30.1) and of provocation by her rival (1 Sam. 1.6) was often the question of children. Such was the prestige of motherhood, particularly when sons were born, that even a slave wife might begin to lord it over her mistress (Gen. 16.4f.). But if Gen. 30.15f. indicates the humiliating rivalry for a husband's favours which could develop, it also shows women taking the initiative in sexual relationships. The quaint blessing with which Rebekah's family bid her farewell (Gen. 24.60), and the celebration of children in Ps. 127 and 128, highlight their importance as guarantee for the future. It was, to some extent, for practical reasons that sons were valued above daughters,²³ for a daughter upon marriage would join her husband's family, thus relatively weakening her own. Female relatives, however, were respected, and a priest was permitted to defile himself for the burial of female relatives as well as male (Lev. 21.2).

It is a misrepresentation of marriage in ancient Israel to speak as if a wife was valued only for the sons she bore. The wife who gave birth to sons was not necessarily the favourite (Gen. 29.32, 34; 1 Sam. 1.4), and Elkanah's sentiments (1 Sam. 1.8) need not have been unique. It is interesting to note that here, as in Gen. 30.1, it is the wife rather than the husband who frets at the lack of sons. The value set on sons was not absolute. For a widow, however, bereft of the support of male relatives, a grandson seemed nothing short of 'a restorer of life' (*ḥayyān* *nepeš*, Ruth 4.15). This passage is instructive for what it reveals of the close and satisfying relationships which could exist between women.

What freedom did a woman have to marry the man of her choice? Phillips comments that, since matters of family law were solely under the control of the head of the household, 'a man had an unfettered right to dispose of the women under his protection as he liked, whether as a father making a marriage for his daughter, or as a husband divorcing his wife. Neither the daughter nor the wife had any ultimate say in the matter, nor could they appeal to the courts' (Phillips: 1981, 351). He notes, however, that the story of Jephthah's daughter is not so much an illustration of a father's authority, as of the power of an oath. The full extent of a father's authority is seen in Caleb's offer to give his daughter as a reward for military success (Jos. 15.16; Jud. 1.12), and in Tamar's attempt to avoid rape by her brother Amnon (2 Sam. 13.13). Rebekah was not consulted about her marriage, only about the time of her departure from home (Gen. 24.57f.). Nor was Isaac, yet the narrative shows that a love relationship developed. Ruth (Ruth 3.7ff.) and Abigail (1 Sam. 15.40ff.), both widows, made their own choice. On occasion the mother as well as the father took responsibility in arranging a marriage. In Rebekah's case, her mother acted in conjunction with her

brother Laban, the implication being that her father was dead.²⁴ It is interesting to note that the only point at which Laban acts independently of his mother is in his care of the servant's camels (Gen. 24.29–31).²⁵ Samson's mother was equally involved with her husband in their son's marriage plans (Jud. 14.2ff.). R. de Vaux considers that 'young people had ample opportunity for falling in love, and for expressing their feelings, for they were very free' (de Vaux: 1961, 30). Michal's love for David was both known and taken account of, though primarily, it seems, because it suited Saul's schemes (1 Sam. 18.20f.).

Certainly for some women there seems to have been rather less freedom or dignity. Particularly was this true of the women of the royal harem. David's treatment of his concubines (2 Sam. 20.3) illustrates the total lack of control some unfortunate women had over their own lives. It is in such situations that they do seem to be regarded as little better than chattels. Solomon's harem may have been for him a sign of wealth and status; for the women concerned it was demeaning. In the early days of the monarchy a king's harem seems to have passed to his successor (2 Sam. 12.8). Absalom is depicted as publicly approaching his father's concubines for political reasons, apparently in this way asserting his right to the throne.

In marked contrast can be set the respect which was accorded the mother in the family. A mother's instruction was to be observed by her son (Prov. 1.8f.; 6.20), and in one instance was considered sufficiently important to be passed on (Prov. 31.1).²⁶ Both parents are spoken of with like affection (2 Sam. 19.37). Indeed the obligation to treat mother and father with equal respect is emphasised frequently, from the Decalogue to the many instances in Proverbs (Prov. 15.20; 19.26; 23.22, 25; 28.24).²⁷ One particularly dramatic expression of this obligation deserves to be noted:

The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be picked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures.

(Prov. 30.17 RSV, but cf. McKane: 1970, 657)

(iii) Divorce

Nowhere do the inequality of the sexes and the limitations on a woman's freedom appear more starkly than in the matter of divorce. There was no circumstance in which a wife might divorce her husband, whereas a husband's right to divorce his wife at any time and for any reason was absolute. How much this freedom was exercised in practice it is impossible to tell, but the strong opposition to divorce expressed in Mal. 2.14–16, and the praise of marriage in Prov. 5.15–19 and Eccles. 9.9 must be set against it.

The law of Deut. 24.1 has sometimes been regarded as an attempt to restrict a husband's absolute right to divorce his wife, making adultery the sole ground for such action. Phillips (1981, 355) takes issue with this view on the grounds that the Deuteronomist law stipulates in Deut. 22.22 that execution not divorce is the penalty for adultery. He argues that the expression *erwat dāḡār* has no moral connotation (cf. Deut. 23.14) but applies to anything a husband found objectionable in his wife, other than adultery. It should be translated as 'something distasteful' rather than 'indecent' (cf. Neufeld: 1946, 176, who sees this as an advance in the position of women in that divorce cannot take place gratuitously. In Deuteronomist legislation, however, a husband's right to divorce is withdrawn in two circumstances, namely as the penalty for false accusation concerning his bride's virginity²⁸ at the time of marriage (22.19), and in a compulsory marriage consequent upon the rape of an unbetrothed girl (22.28).

In earlier law the punishment for a woman's adultery was divorce, not execution (Hos. 2.4; Jer. 3.8), for the man concerned was held the more accountable. Phillips (1973, 353) notes that Abimelech not Sarah, and David rather than Bathsheba, are held to be accountable. Deuteronomist legislation in contrast, as noted above, imposed the death penalty on both offenders alike where collusion might reasonably be presumed (Deut. 22.22-7). In spite of this move towards equality women continued to be regarded as under the authority of a male relative, as is evident from the fact that in cases of rape compensation was still paid to the girl's father (Deut. 22.29).

The significant contrast in legal procedure between cases of divorce and of adultery is discussed by Phillips. The former, since it was unlikely to be the cause of disorder in the community, was regarded as a private matter and belonged to family law (1973, 350). The husband had the right to act independently of the community and the ceremony to terminate a marriage took place privately in the home (Hos. 2.4f.) not in court, as is often supposed. It was effected by the husband's pronouncement of the divorce formula. The divorced wife would normally return to her father's house. Where adultery was the ground for divorce, a ritual of stripping may have preceded expulsion from the home, as a sign not merely that the husband's responsibilities for her maintenance were withdrawn but chiefly of her shamelessness (Hos. 2.12; Jer. 13.26f.; Ezek. 16.37f.; 23.10.29). (cf. Neufeld, 1944, 166; Gordon, 1936, 277ff.). As proof that the marriage had been terminated a document of divorce (*šāḡer k'ḥitit*) was given so that the woman might remarry without incurring the charge of adultery (Deut. 24.1, 3; Jer. 3.8; Isa. 50.1).

In contrast to divorce procedure, adultery was regarded as a crime and

not a private matter. Its prosecution was undertaken by the state, not by the injured husband. Phillips argues that the latter was not entitled to take matters into his own hands either for vengeance, for settlement, or for forgiveness. In this respect, he maintains, Israel differed from other countries of the ancient Near East where adultery was considered simply an injury to the husband, who could, therefore, determine the punishment of the offenders, or if he wished forgive them (Phillips: 1973, 353f.; 1981, 36f.).

On this point McKee (1979, 58) is in disagreement. Noting that there is no instance in the Old Testament (apart from Susanna in the Greek version of Daniel) where the biblical law of adultery is put into effect, he raises the question, 'Are the laws, taken, by themselves, a sufficient indication of how adultery was dealt with?' He argues that in Proverbs damage to reputation, and the risk of the injured husband's anger figure prominently as sanctions against adultery (Prov. 6.27-35). This would hardly be so if the death penalty were the normal consequence. References to death in the condemnations of adultery (Prov. 7.22f.; 9.18; Eccles. 9.9) appear to be metaphorical. He concludes that 'adultery was not infrequently dealt with outside the framework of the law'. He also raises the question of how far proceedings in cases of adultery can safely be reconstructed from prophetic language. Certainly in the reference to mutilation in Ezek. 23.25 the metaphor of adultery has receded behind the reality of conquest.

Since adultery is not included among the ancient curses of Deut. 27, or mentioned in the book of the Covenant, McKee contends that it was the lawmakers of Deuteronomy and of the Holiness Code who attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to make the death penalty mandatory for adultery (1979, 64)²⁹ thus removing the matter from the sphere of family law where the husband had discretion.

7. Prostitution

Whereas adultery was a crime, prostitution was tolerated in Israelite society. The warnings against seductive women in Proverbs concern adultery rather than prostitution (Prov. 6.26; 7.19). The picture emerges of prostitutes touting for business in public places (Gen. 38.14; Ezek. 16.25), recognisable by their dress (Gen. 38.15; Prov. 7.10), and negotiating terms with their clients (Gen. 38.16; Ezek. 16.31). In certain circumstances some embarrassment attached to the practice (Gen. 38.23), and strong disapproval is expressed in the laws of Lev. 19.29 and 21.9.

In discussing ancient Israelite society a distinction is generally made between common or secular prostitution and cultic prostitution, to which,

broadly speaking, the terms *zōnālī* and *q'dēšālī*, with the corresponding masculine *qādāš*, are held respectively to correspond. Secular prostitution, provided that the woman was unmarried, was not an offence but 'a recognised social institution with few moral inhibitions attached to it despite its being looked upon with mixed feelings'.³⁰ Cultic prostitution, on the other hand, involving persons of both sexes, was forbidden absolutely (Deut. 23.18), though not uncommonly practised, to judge from the prophetic polemic against it. In fact, the distinction in usage of *zōnālī* and *q'dēšālī* is by no means absolute. Both terms are used of Tamar (Gen. 38.15, 21f.), and appear to be synonymous in Hos. 4.14 and Deut. 23.18f.

This distinction between secular and religious prostitution has long been taken as axiomatic. The evidence ought, however, to be reviewed. Barstad (1984, 22ff.) has queried the existence of cultic prostitution as a widespread phenomenon in the ancient Near East, since explicit references occur only in late texts. Its existence in Israel must, therefore, be re-examined. From a survey of the textual evidence Barstad argues that *q'dšl/qdš* is a designation for female and male members of the non-Yahwistic or syncretistic priesthood. The references to *q'dēšālī* and *zōnālī* in Deut. 23.18f. and Hos. 4.14 are not intended as synonyms, but represent two separate prohibitions and accusations respectively (1984, 29). He notes that Deut. 23.18 does not speak against the occupation of the *q'dšl* and *qdš* in general, but prohibits Israelites from holding these positions. The weakest point in Barstad's argument, as he himself recognises, is the Tamar story with its unexplained shift from *zōnālī* to *q'dēšālī*. Nevertheless it is significant that the story is without any cultic context which would suggest reference to ritual prostitution (contra, G. von Rad: 1961, 359f.).

8. Women and slavery

There are in the Old Testament two categories of female slave to which the terms *šiphālī* and *'āmālī* broadly relate, though the distinction in usage is not always maintained. The former applies, generally speaking, to the virgin bondmaid whose task it was to serve the mistress of the house (Gen. 29.24, 29; Isa. 24.2; Ps. 123.2; Prov. 30.23), the latter to the maidservant who belonged to her master,³¹ sometimes as a concubine (Jud. 9.18; 19.19; Ezek. 23.12). Thus in Gen. 16 Hagar is described as Sarah's maid (*šiphālī*: vv. 1, 2, 6) whom she gives to Abraham to bear children.³² In Gen. 21, as his slave wife, she is described as *'āmālī* (vv. 10, 12, 13). In the first instance Sarah has the authority to expel Hagar (Gen. 16.6),

in the second it is Abraham's responsibility (21.10). Of the two, the *šiphālī* seems to have undertaken the more menial tasks (1 Sam. 25.41).

In general, male and female slaves were treated alike in law (Exod. 21.20, 26f.), with one major exception. In the Book of the Covenant no provision is made for the release of a female slave after six years along with her male counterpart (Exod. 21.7–11), for as an *'āmālī* she was her master's concubine and continued as part of the larger family. It should not, however, be assumed that this was due to the inferior status of the female slave, or to the fact that she, in particular, was regarded as her master's personal property, but rather, as Wolff comments, that 'the man and wife relationship is thought of primarily as a lasting one, even with the slave' (Wolff: 1974, 201).³³ Her rights were protected by law. In the event of her master's tiring of her, she was not to be resold (Exod. 21.8). Her family was entitled to buy her freedom. If designated for her master's son, she was to be treated as a daughter (v. 9). If her master took another wife, her marital rights were not to be diminished (v. 10). Otherwise she must go free. 'If the relationship comes to an end, then it always ends in freedom. The regulations which govern the exceptions all have the interests of the slave in mind, not those of her master' (Wolff: 1974, 201). For this reason Wolff feels justified in describing the relationship between master and female slave as 'by no means a loveless relationship'. Indeed he characterises it as 'full of solicitous concern'. The corresponding law of Deut. 15.12–18 does not differentiate between male and female slaves, but gives them equal rights of release after six years. On the grounds that Jer. 34.9–11 similarly makes no distinction between male and female slaves (Heb. *šiphālī*). de Vaux (1961, 86) concludes that by this period there were no longer slave-concubines. The later law of Lev. 25 makes no mention of female slaves.

Wolff (1974, 202) sees in Job 31.13 the possibility that slaves, male and female, might bring a lawsuit against their master. *Rīb* may, however, be intended in a less formal sense of 'complaint' (cf. NEB). However the reason for a slave's right to justice is unambiguous:

Did not he who made me in the womb make him?
and did not one fashion us in the womb? (v. 15)³⁴

9. The ideal of equality

It is appropriate that discussion of women and slavery should be followed by the counterbalance to all that was oppressive of women in ancient Israelite society, in what has been described as 'a latent potentiality for liberation'.³⁵ This is to be found in the creation narratives of Genesis

without which our assessment of the material would be incomplete. In contrast to the prevailing patriarchal culture of ancient Israel, there is in the Old Testament evidence of what Tribe terms a counter culture, a 'depatriarchalising principle' at work. This, she affirms, 'is not an operation which the exegete performs on the text. It is a hermeneutic operating within Scripture itself' (1973, 48).

Man and woman are created in God's image (Gen. 1.27). Both share the commission to subdue the earth and have dominion. There is no hint here of subordination. Man and woman, created together and blessed together, are named Adam (Gen. 5.2). It is in Gen. 2-3 that justification for woman's subservience has traditionally been found. Several misconceptions need to be corrected. Woman, equally with man, is created solely by God. Man is not participant, not even onlooker at the divine activity which builds³⁶ a rib into woman. Her creation is no afterthought. The structure of Gen. 2 is an example of *inclusio*. 'The creation of man first and of woman last constitutes a ring composition whereby the two creatures are parallel. In no way does the order disparage woman' (Trible, 1973, 36). She is designed by God to be man's helper ('*ēzer*'), a helper appropriate, equal and adequate for him (*k'neqda*). The word '*ēzer*' is, as Tribe notes, a relational term and does not specify position within the relationship. Overwhelmingly the word relates to Yahweh as helper of his people (Exod. 18.4; Deut. 33.20, 26; Ps. 33.20; 70.6; 115.9ff.; 146.5).³⁷ 'God is the helper superior to man; the animals are helpers inferior to man; woman is the helper equal to man' (Trible: 1973, 36).³⁸

Why is the woman tempted by the serpent? Not because of some inherent weakness. The narrative gives no hint of this. The man is portrayed as passive, following his wife without question, though God's prohibition came direct to him (2.17). But the woman is 'intelligent, independent and decisive, fully aware as theologian when she takes the fruit and eats', writes Tribie (1976, 965). In writing thus, her aim is 'not to promote female chauvinism but to undercut patriarchal interpretations alien to the text' (1973, 40).

Lastly, Gen. 3.16 is not a licence for male supremacy. It is a symptom of the disorder of creation, of the rupture of the relationship with God which brings in its train a rupture of the human relationship. Along with pain and oppressive toil the subservience of women is to be overcome, and the ideal restored (Evans: 1983, 19f.).

A similar ideal of equality appears in the Song of Songs, which Tribie describes as a midrash on Gen. 1-3. Discerning in the woman's joyful confidence, 'I am my beloved's and his desire is for me' (Song. 7.10), a reversal of Gen. 3.16, she sees here that description of sin transformed into an affirmation of mutuality and delight (1973, 46). In the Song there is no

subservience of woman. With her the Song begins as she initiates the love-making (1.2), and with her it ends as she calls to her beloved (8.13). May it be that a woman was its author? (cf. Brenner: 1985, 46ff.).

Sadly there is another strand in the Old Testament, a deterioration in the view of women which becomes evident in the post-exilic period (cf. Terrien: 1985, 85f.). Tribie contrasts the female imagery used by Deuterocanonical Isaiah to depict God's love for his people in exile (Isa. 49.15; 66.13) with Ezekiel's use of sexual metaphors demeaning to women. In this, and in the striving for racial purity in the time of Ezra (Ezra 10.2f., 44), she traces the development of misogyny which sees woman as inferior and impure. 'Nevertheless, that view did not replace altogether the dynamic thrust of OT faith . . . that thrust challenged, corrected, and transcended the culture. Accordingly, OT faith undercuts all manmade structures and ideas to place both man and woman *sub specie aeternitatis*' (Tribie: 1976, 966).

Notes

- 1 For a woman's authority to commission building works see 1 Chron. 7.24.
- 2 So RSV. Whether the revocalisation as *nāšim* ('usurers' cf. LXX) is more appropriate is not our concern here. The MT *nāšim* indicates that traditionally it was understood to refer to women.
- 3 The only other occurrence of the word in the OT refers to the Egyptian queen Tahpenes (1 Kings 11.19) which lies outside the scope of this essay.
- 4 There is some confusion about the relationship of Asa to Abijam; cf. 1 Kings 15.2, 10 with 15.8. In Asa's case the evidence is circumstantial, namely that Abijam had reigned for only three years (1 Kings 15.2). The evidence about Jehoiachin varies; 2 Chron. 36.9 puts his age at eight years, whereas 2 Kings 24.8 has eighteen.
- 5 P. A. H. de Boer, *Fatherhood and Motherhood*, 1974, 4 considers it to have been an official position.
- 6 cf. N. Avigad, *IEJ* 14, 1964, 274ff.
- 7 The mention of Noadiah by name may reflect her status, or possibly the fact that as time went on women in leadership roles became less common and she was consequently the more noteworthy.
- 8 The unnamed woman of Isa. 8.3, generally presumed to be the prophet's wife, is also called *nāšāh*, but there is no evidence of any independent prophetic activity.
- 9 See especially v. 7, 'until I, Deborah, arose' ('*ad šaqamti*'), unless this is to be taken as an archaic 2nd-person ending (GK 44h).
- 10 P. A. H. de Boer, *Fatherhood and Motherhood*, 1974, 31, associates the description of Deborah as 'a mother in Israel' with the idea of a mother-goddess: 'there is nothing of a motherly character in the picture of Deborah. In the song she is the bellicose leader of the united tribes'.
- 11 Contrast J. Gray, *Kings*, 1964, 660. His suggestion that Huldah was likely to cause less embarrassment than a male prophet reflects the writer's view of women rather than the Old Testament's!
- 12 cf. Meyers, *BA* 41, 1978, 101, for reasons why women's importance to society gradually diminished.

- 13 The omission of 'wife' is due to the fact that both men and women are addressed here. cf. Exod. 20.8; Deut. 5.14.
- 14 In this connection see Evans, *Woman*, 1983, 27, who notes that in Gen. 17, when circumcision is introduced as a covenant sign, reference to Sarah's special blessing (vv. 15-19) is incorporated into it.
- 15 cf. also Ezra 2.65, and especially 1 Chron. 25.5f. which may imply that Heman's daughters held an official position as temple musicians alongside his sons.
- 16 The sudden intrusion of the masculine singular 'and he worshipped' (v. 28b) is strange, and perhaps significant of attitudes.
- 17 Note in contrast the ruthless treatment of the wife in Deut. 25.11f., which constitutes the only instance of mutilation in Israelite legislation.
- On the definition of 'widow', see Fensham, *JNES* 21, 1962, 136f.
- 18 For levirate marriage, cf. Neufeld, *Marriage*, 1944, 23ff.; T. and D. Thompson, *V/T* 18, 1968, 79ff.
- 19 The two are used in parallel with no significant difference of meaning in 2 Sam. 11.26.
- The contrast between them in Hos. 2.16 is due to the particular theological context.
- 21 Contrast the late saying of Ecclus. 25.26. It is tempting to note that in one instance Abraham is instructed to 'obey' (*šama' b'qol*) Sarah (Gen. 21.12)!
- 22 The meaning is uncertain. McKane, *Proverbs*, 1970, *ad loc.*
- 23 The valuation of shekel (Lev. 27.1-8) need not be understood to refer to the intrinsic worth of persons, but to their contribution to the family, as in present day compensation settlements. cf. Wolff, *Anthropology*, 1974, 121.
- 24 The reference to Bethuel in Gen. 24.50 may be secondary. Against this see Selman, 'Patriarchal Age', 1980, 116.
- 25 cf. T. L. Thompson, *Historicity*, 1974, 249, who comments that none the less this is not evidence of patriarchy.
- 26 Wolff, *Anthropology*, 1974, 178, notes that the same verb (*yv* in Piel) is used of both mother's (Prov. 21.1) and father's (Deut. 8.5) training of children. A mother also often named the child, though de Boer, *Fatherhood and Motherhood* 7, notes that this is not so in late texts assigned to priestly writers.
- 27 cf. also Ex. 21.15, 17; Lev. 20.9; Deut. 27.16. On the unusual precedence of mother over father in Lev. 20.9, Noth, *Leviticus*, 1965, 140, asks whether some loosening of kinship and family arrangements in connection with the end of pre-exilic Israel gave special prominence to respect for parents, particularly the mother.
- 28 For the view that *b'talm* refers to the age and marks of adolescence and not to virginity, see Wenham, *V/T* 22, 1972, 330ff., followed by Phillips, *JSO T* 20, 1981, 6f. A full discussion of the passage is given in Locher, *Die Elire*, 1986.
- 29 For criticism of this view, see Phillips, *JSO T* 20, 1981, 6-15 and *JSO T* 22, 1982, 142f., and for McKee's response, *JSO T* 20, 1981, 25f.
- 30 Barstad, *Religious Polemics*, 1984, 19, who points out that the seriousness of the offence in Hos. 2, Ezek. 16.32, 23.5, lies in the fact that it is adultery. Mace, *Marriage*, 1944, 241, notes that one can speak of a man's adultery only in so far as this interferes with another's marriage; cf. also Phillips, *JSO T* 20, 1981, 7.
- 31 cf. Wolff, *Anthropology*, 1974, 199. The terms seem to be used interchangeably, however, in Gen. 30.3, 31.33; 2 Sam. 14.15f. In an Egyptian context Pharaoh's daughter's attendant is called *ḥmāh* (Ex. 2.5), whereas Ex. 11.5 refers to the firstborn of the *špīlāh*

- working at the mill. Jepsen, *V/T* 8, 1958, 425, has demonstrated that the difference in terminology is 'für eine Quellenscheidung unbrauchbar'.
- 32 cf. van Seters, *JBL* 87, 1968, 403, who notes that this is primarily for the wife's sake, not the husband's. See also Selman, 'Patriarchal Age', 1980, 127.
- 33 We may compare the Silwan tomb inscription where the relationship continues in death; Gibson, *Inscriptions*, 1971, 24.
- 34 cf. the sense of fundamental equality in Deut. 5.14f.
- 35 P. D. Hanson, *Ecumenical Review*, 27, 1975, 318.
- 36 For a delightful play on the verb *bānāh* associating it with *bīnāh* 'understanding, discernment', see Bab. Talmud, *Niddah*, 45.2.
- 37 cf. also Vos, *Woman*, 1968, 16, who notes that out of nineteen occurrences of the word, fifteen are used of God's activity in bringing help to his people.
- 38 cf. Terrien, *Heart Songs*, 1985, 10f., who describes woman as man's saviour who 'brings out of the man and to the man the totality of existence. She comes as if he had cried out, "Help! Help!"'

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Life and death in the Old Testament

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Beliefs about life and death, whether consciously articulated or not, form part of the make-up of all human beings, and the people of the Old Testament provide no exception in this respect. There are approximately eight hundred occurrences of the root *ḥāyāh* ('to live') in the Old Testament and one thousand occurrences of the root *mūt* ('to die'; for the statistics see Gerleman, 1971a, 1971b), and in addition there are numerous references to one or other aspect of the themes of life and death that do not make use of either of these roots; the sheer wealth of the material is an indication of the importance of these themes within the Old Testament. The occurrences of the roots *ḥāyāh* and *mūt* are discussed by Ringgren (1980 [1977]) and by Ringgren, Illmann and Fabry (1984), in both cases with some consideration of relevant material from the ancient Near East, while a comprehensive treatment of life and, particularly, of death and resurrection in the Old Testament was provided by Martin-Achard (1960 [1956]) in a work which contains very full references both to the relevant biblical material and to the older secondary literature.

1. Basic beliefs about life

Basic to the Old Testament is the belief that Yahweh has power over both life and death (cf. e.g. Deut. 32.39; 1 Sam. 2.6), and it is in accordance with this belief that life is frequently depicted in the Old Testament as the gift of God. This is of course the view of the creation narratives (Gen. 1.1–2.4a; 2.4b–3.24), as is expressed above all in Gen. 2.7: 'then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being'. But this idea is also reflected in a number of passages in which God is mentioned as the subject, and 'life' as the object, and God is said, for example to 'make' (Job 10.12), or 'give' (Mal. 2.5), or 'command' (Ps. 133.3) life (cf. Gerleman: 1971a, 554–5). It is also reflected in the thought that God is the 'fountain of life' (Ps. 36.9 (Hebr. 10)) and is implied in the description of Yahweh as the 'living God' (cf. Johnson: 1964, 106–7).

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