

THE
ISRAELITE
WOMAN

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SOCIAL ROLE AND LITERARY TYPE IN BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

Jot
1985
Jot press

By the same author:
Colour Terms in the Old Testament
(*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*, 21)

above her own she was accepted without further reference to her

origins.

Most of the stories about women of foreign descent focus on these

women's sexuality, or powers of seduction. This places the description

of most of them within literary paradigms which have been discussed

earlier. Thus Tamar and Ruth are temptresses; Rahab a prostitute;

the Foreign Woman of Proverbs a prostitute, sacred prostitute or

simply an adulterous woman; and so forth. Therefore, it is impossible

to delineate a stereotype which would efficiently define all or most

members of this group. In most cases, the foreign origin of these

women was judged to be secondary to the more important features

which make up each character, or which determine what literary

type it belongs to.

THE ANCESTRY—AN EXTENDED FEMALE METAPHOR

(Genesis 2:4b-3:24)

a. The story of the First Man

I find the story of the Garden an extremely difficult and frightening topic to discuss. It is one of the best known and most written about passages of the Old Testament. Most readers either view it as a cliché of male chauvinistic attitude, or as a justification for these same attitudes. It is well-nigh impossible to contemplate such an important literary opus objectively. One tends to read into it ideological conceptions and biased opinions. So much has been written about it, in ancient as well as in modern times, that an attempt to approach it afresh is doomed to failure almost from the outset. With these reservations in mind, I would like to advance a few tentative remarks concerning the contents and meaning of the passage.

Many people interpret the Garden story as a tale of human disgrace, of the fall of mankind from divine grace through the initiative taken by the first woman. If this is really the main theme or *leitmotif* of the story, it should contain a strong, one-dimensional, single-minded condemnation of the female species. As we shall presently see, this is not exactly the case. Although the first woman, spiritual mother of her sex and prototype of her daughters and sisters in successive generations, is roundly blamed for the expulsion from the Garden, she is not simply typecast as a foolish and villainous person, but characterized as a complex figure. The expulsion itself, although it entails a loss of comfort and deprivation of contact with the divine cosmic principle, is inevitable in terms of other details in the narrative, which are not directly linked to the woman's conduct. These details are built into the narrative from its very beginning, so that the woman's action—although it is of crucial importance for the outcome—does not generate this outcome exclusively. Furthermore, the rift between Creator and created is not only unavoidable, but also beneficial for mankind. The concept that man is a combination of earthly and divine elements is extremely important. Hence, the critic

must trace this important theme throughout the story, and attempt to understand how the typification of the first female is related to it. A cautionary note seems to be in order at this point. The present biblical narrative (the text of Genesis 2.4b-3.24) has a complex history. Partial parallels and corresponding motifs in other ancient Near Eastern literatures bear evidence of the fact that the questions—and some of the answers—the story deals with were treated in a similar fashion before the Genesis narrative was formed. Therefore, a certain amount of literary borrowing on the part of the Hebrew writers is to be expected. Several inner inconsistencies or redundancies (like, for instance, the two names *ḥavva* and *ḥava*—of the first woman, each with its own folk etymology) are probably the result of the composite nature of the text. A lengthy and complex process of composition and transmission provides a fairly adequate explanation for apparent contradictions and discrepancies. However, once we choose to deal with the end product of the transmission process (the present text), historical considerations should be relegated to a secondary position while literary ones are given precedence over all others. The following remarks are limited to the literary aspect of the present text which—regardless of its composite nature and complex history—is treated as a unified work of literature, whose contents is motivated by a well-defined didactic-theological system.

According to Genesis 1 man and woman were created as a pair after all other creatures had come into existence. In Genesis 2.4b-3.24 the order is different: man is created first, then the Garden, plants, and animals. Woman is created from the man's rib almost as an afterthought. When we read the story we notice that it is constructed in such a way that each detail is significant, either for the plot or the ideological contents which underlie it. The author, it seems, does not wish to surprise the reader with sudden unforeseen twists of plot but to him, at every single stage, at something that will unfold at a later stage. Thus the order in which the act of creation is told, together with the details attendant upon it, must be important. If the woman was created later than man, plant and beast—does this mean that, according to the writer, she is inferior to all three classes of beings? Or, following the principle according to which mankind, male and female, is created last in Genesis 1 because it is superior to all other forms of life—is woman superior, the pinnacle of divine creative activity? This second interpretation does not fit the context of the story as a whole: woman's secondary origin (from the man's rib) and her later conduct do not point in this direction. Whatever

way we look at it, the order of creation does reflect the view that woman is inferior to her mate. This fact, however, does not sum up the attitude of the story as a whole; other, conflicting views are expressed in it as well. Neither does it imply that woman is of little or no significance, for she is the only partner suitable for the man. The reader's task is to examine the evidence of the text, and to assess the relative weight of the negative and positive traits attributed to the first female and, by extension, to the sex of which she is the archetype.

Let us return, for a moment, to the beginning of the passage. From the very start man is a polarized creature: he is fashioned out of earth, but is given a divine spirit (2.7). Thus man is a link between heaven and earth, an intermediary figure whose strength lies in his dual origin—but so does his weakness too. Can the two elements live within him harmoniously? Will the twin ever meet? If, broadly speaking, we equate 'earthly' with 'evil' (or 'insubordinate', 'negative', 'foolish', 'primitive', 'chaotic', 'physical', 'unconscious') and 'divine' with 'good' (or 'obedient', 'positive', 'intellectual', 'articulate', 'organized', 'spiritual', 'conscious') then future conflict between the two aspects of his personality within, and between him and his God without, is unavoidable. When, at any particular instance, earth wins, man will remove himself—or be removed—away from his Creator. When spirit predominates, he will come closer to him. No permanent solution to this conflict can be arranged. Furthermore, the material used for fashioning man is earth (the significance, again, of the chronological order), while the spirit is introduced as a second, perhaps secondary, element. Hence, earth is the most dominant element in man's makeup. In short, the separation of man from the divine element external to him is to be expected even before the female appears on the scene and supplies the immediate means for this separation, for man is more earthy than divine from the very first moment of his existence.

The eventual expulsion from the Garden is inevitable for other reasons too. God is portrayed as a rather benevolent, albeit tyrannical, male parent. He is a progenitor who is kind enough to give his child total obedience, and practices constant supervision over his child. The youngster is denied two basic liberties: the knowledge of good and evil, inherent to man but waiting to be converted into awareness (which is symbolized by the Tree, forbidden yet lovingly to behold and flourish in the middle of the Garden); and the freedom of

reversal of roles: man now subordinates her by way of punishment for her forwardness and initiative (2.17-19), contrary to the original state of affairs. There was no reason to insert the celebrated matriarchal saying of 2.24 ("That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and the two become one flesh") within the present patriarchally oriented story unless it reflected the idea that, to begin with, woman was the stronger and dominant partner; and that she forfeited this position by behaving badly. Man gained his dominance over woman not by his own strength, but because woman's punishment dictates that he subjugates her. The Ancestress's initiative, energy, and persuasiveness are endearing; on the other hand her disobedience, lack of responsibility and judgment, and her sly approach justify her punishment.

On the credit side: what has the human race gained? It gained the freedom to move and go to places unheard of before. It acquired self-awareness and an ability to exercise judgment and discretion. It chose to learn what good and evil meant, and how to recognize the gamut of shades that lie between these two poles. It gained sexual knowledge and an ability, hitherto dormant, to procreate. By eating from the tree it leapt irreversibly into maturity and civilization, for consciousness (symbolized by shame and the subsequent attempt at self-clothing, 3.7) is the cornerstone of culture and social order. Woman was the instigator of this process of human growth and struggle to lead an independent life, albeit one of hardship.

Is freedom so worthwhile that it should be snatched or pursued even when it entails loss of life (or longevity)? Is a state of knowledge preferable to a state of innocence, even when the former implies suffering and the latter comfort? Is painful maturity preferable to pleasant childhood? These and related questions are for each reader to decide according to his or her own personal convictions. The story itself presents these existential human predicaments without offering clear-cut answers. Only one of the problems raised receives a definitive answer. To the question, Why is man, even a truly religious man, always separated from his Maker?, the answer given is: From the very beginning of human history close proximity was inherent impossible on account of man's dual nature and the choice (the Tree) with which God burdened him and his woman companion. Let us summarize. Women—every woman, every Eve—deserve to be managed by their men. They are resilient, obstinate, energetic, intelligent, shrewd, and enterprising—but also misguided, easily seduced, and morally inferior to their male mates. The hardship they

suffer in giving birth is their own Ancestress's—and, by implication, their very own—fault. They are the mothers, initiators, and ultimate preservers of human culture as we (author and readers) know it. Indeed, woman is the primal source of trouble and pain for the entire human race—but she is the source of human learning, consciousness, and civilization as well.

c. Genesis 2.4b-3.24: Echoes and Interpretations in the New Testament

Although several women were closely associated with Jesus, who apparently held no prejudices against the female sex as such, women

fare badly in the New Testament. Here and there we do encounter women who functioned as public leaders or supporters of the new ideology, as also we find some who were bitter opponents of the emerging creed. They certainly played a considerable role in the establishment of new communities. Nevertheless, it is repeatedly stressed that their proper place and fundamental tasks are domestic. Pauline doctrine is adamant on this point. Passages like 1 Corinthians 11.14, 34; Galatians 4.4-7; Ephesians 5.22; and Colossians 3.18 reiterate the usual patriarchal ideas. A woman should be obedient to her husband. She should remain silent in public. If she wants to understand community affairs or spiritual matters, she should receive instruction from her husband at home. A woman can learn but not teach, so that her silence in public and inferior position vis-à-vis males are maintained.

The silence in public and domestic subjugation prescribed for women refer back to the story of the Garden and the curses upon woman that are contained in it. The rationale of ironic retribution—the reversal from persuasion to silence, from a dominating position to subordination—supplied an ideological base for these recommendations concerning appropriate female conduct. This element of 'justice' is already present in Genesis 3, where it serves as an explanation for an existing social order. In the Pauline passages the principle is taken one step further: it is presented not only as an explanation for a social phenomenon (as in Genesis), but also as a moral justification for this phenomenon. Similarly, in Genesis 3 childbearing is mentioned as a painful experience for women, caused by the Ancestress's transgression; in the New Testament this statement of fact, which traces the actiology of birth pains, is accorded a new significance. Childbearing, as painful as it is, should be woman's

occupational role in life; and through its dedicated practice she may achieve salvation for her soul.

An explicit formulation of views concerning women, their character, and role is to be found in 1 Timothy 2.9-15. Women should behave and dress modestly; good deeds are much more important than external appearance (vv. 9-10). A woman should be quiet and obedient (v. 11), never dominating (v. 12). Two reasons are supplied for these prescriptions: (i) Man was created first and woman second (v. 13), which expresses the relative importance of each partner; (ii) Man did not contemplate eating from the Tree, whereas woman did and sinned (v. 14). Henceforth, she should be closely watched so that she does not commit similar sins. Her salvation lies in patient faith and childbearing (v. 15).

These are the views attributed to St Paul. For the present purpose it matters little whether they are authentic Pauline teachings or not. Even if they are the product of a later hand which added them and ascribed them to the authority of Paul, they still reflect social mores that were prevalent in his time or slightly later. Besides, too many such passages appear in Paul's letters for all of them to be additions. The ideas concerning women—like others advanced by the great preacher—stem from Old Testament views which are further developed, and often given a new turn or direction. In the case of women, Pauline teachings reflect a higher, more exclusive and moralistic system of values. The Old Testament does maintain that appearances are less important than faith and good deeds (Proverbs 31.30), and female finery is of no consequence (Isaiah 3); however, it does not forbid feminine finery *per se*. In contrast, early Christianity advocated the suppression of female finery in favour of modesty and devout behaviour. Female subordination, actologically explained in Genesis 2.4b-3.24 as the outcome of the Ancestress's action, is elevated to the level of religious value in the New Testament. And childbearing, woman's traditional and biological role, becomes a religiously endorsed sole function in life for every fertile female (see also 1 Peter 3). According to Genesis 3, one of the direct consequences of the eating from the Tree was the discovery of human sexuality. Pauline doctrine advocated celibacy as the best condition for serving God without succumbing to earthly diversions, while marriage was viewed as a lesser need (1 Timothy 7). Sexuality in Genesis is not a sin or evil in itself in Genesis 1.27 (the first creation story); it is a primary and inherent trait of humanity, and in Genesis 3 the discovery of

sexuality is that of a divine secret withheld from man until woman snatches it. By contrast, Paul considers sexuality to be a wasteful diversion of energy and a hindrance to the real business of a true believer's life. Hence, he devalues sexuality. Eve, every woman, is the temptress—a sensual, irresponsible, frivolous, sinful being. This rejection of sexuality, undoubtedly useful to the founders of the new creed, was extended to refer to the community as a whole. It is clear that within such a community women could not flourish, for they were looked upon as reincarnations of a base sexual principle which is either pagan or faithless. Only women who de-sexualized themselves—or were de-sexualized—by denouncing personal sexuality could aspire to influence, public respect, and saintliness. Christianity emphasized spirit over matter; eventually Mary's virginity was confirmed and the doctrine of the immaculate conception formulated, so as to remove all hint of 'earth' and 'flesh' and leave only the 'spirit' (cf. Genesis 2.7). Thus the conflict between earth (flesh) and spirit, inherent in man's nature, is brought to an end by the descent of the Son of man and the victory of the Spirit. Mary—in her turn—is regarded as the new, pure, de-physicalized Eve. This process of purification and spiritualization of the female principle lies, however, outside the literary and religio-historical scope of the present study.