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held May 29–31, 2000, at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem*

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Symbiosis, Symbolism, and the Power of the Past

Canaan, Ancient Israel, and Their Neighbors
from the Late Bronze Age through Roman Palaestina

Proceedings of the Centennial Symposium
W. F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research and
American Schools of Oriental Research
Jerusalem, May 29–31, 2000

edited by

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Winona Lake, Indiana

EISENBRAUNS

2003

*Material Remains and Social Relations:
Women's Culture in Agrarian Households of the Iron Age*

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1. *Introduction*

The American writer Harriet Beecher Stowe, most famous for her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was also, along with her father and husband (both were scholars and clergymen) a serious student of the Bible and of the "new" biblical criticism that reached American shores early in the 19th century. She had a particular interest in biblical women, and in the introduction to her little-known book, *Women in Sacred History* (1874), she makes two comments that seem prescient of what will be discussed below. She envisions the land of Canaan as divided into homesteads, each ruled by "family governance," with "the family as the central part of the state," and she refers to the married Israelite woman as the "coequal queen of the home." These comments suggest two things: the primacy of the household in agrarian life; and the importance of the woman's role in the household.

Both features are, theoretically, aspects of the social and economic organization of any society and as such are susceptible to examination in the material cultural record of that society. Inspired by Stowe's comments, as well as by the request of the organizers of this symposium that I present a paper on women's lives in relation to the household economy, I will consider the following:

- The concept of the household, with its artifactual and architectural components
- The interpretation of households as configurations of gendered space
- Two examples of gendered activities and activity areas, as components of women's culture
- Implications of women's activities for social relations

The chronological focus of this study is intentionally loose. Unlike most archaeological enterprises in Israel, which are overwhelmingly dominated by diachronic agendas, that is, by the interest in identifying continuity and change over time in the archaeological record, this study of the agrarian household is fundamentally synchronic. It assumes some commonality in the economic functions and social dynamics of productive domestic units in virtually all agrarian communities—both small rural villages or hamlets (Faust 2000) and walled villages and towns—throughout the Iron Age.¹ The relative stability of the

1. Agrarian communities include settlements called *'ārim* in the Hebrew Bible. In the Iron Age, many of these "cities" did not have the functions and features associated with the urban life of their Bronze Age predecessors; most had no public buildings and were little more than walled towns inhabited by farming families who worked the surrounding land (Frick 1997; Fritz 1997). Given this distinction between walled

varied ecosystems of Israel and Judah and the persistence of kinship-based structures meant a continuity of fundamental economic processes throughout that period. A system of mixed peasant agriculture (Holladay 1995: 386; cf. Hopkins 1985; Stager 1985)—basically the plow-assisted cultivation of cereal crops, along with varying amounts of viticulture, arboriculture, and the keeping of small animals—was carried out for hundreds of years in decentralized settlements scattered throughout the Judean and Israelite heartland. Peasant economies based in producing and consuming households began in Iron I and persisted throughout the period of the monarchies (Holladay 1995: 392–93).² The vast majority of Iron II settlements, despite the impression to the contrary created by the relative imbalance of traditional archaeological concentration on the relatively fewer and densely settled urban sites, were agricultural and rural, not urban (McNutt 1999: 152, 168).

The focus in this paper is thus on the agricultural class of the Iron Age, which constituted the majority of the population, rather than on the urban elites, even though these elites produced most of the monumental architecture and sumptuary goods as well as the ethnohistorical sources (viz., the biblical record) that have long attracted researchers. More specifically, I will examine the household, in which the primary functions of any society take place (Sharer and Ashmore 1987: 439).

2. Households

An examination of *households* entails recognition of their organizational, material, and social complexity. As has long been understood by social anthropologists, arriving at a definition of a household that is universal across cultures is virtually impossible. However, certain features of households in premodern societies can be identified. For one thing, households are not the same as families; these are distinct, albeit overlapping, social phenomena (Bender 1967: 495; Wilk and Netting 1984: 3). Similarly, households are not simply domiciles—structural configurations that constitute abodes for certain groups of people. Rather, a household is a built environment consisting of not only persons and their “hardware” (their material culture, including their domicile and all its associated installations and artifacts) but also their activities and other aspects of their daily lives (Rapoport 1994: 461). The household is thus fundamental to human society because it is the level at which premodern social groups articulate directly with the environment in order to survive. To put it another way, the household is a *strategy*, participating in and utilizing material culture, to meet the productive and reproductive needs of humans (Wilk and Rathje 1982: 618). It is based on an *economic* premise, going back to Polanyi (1944: 53), that people produce for their own sake and/or for that of the group of which they are a part (Henshaw 1999: 79).

towns and true urban centers, it is likely that only a tiny minority of people in agricultural societies lived in truly urban settings (Lanski 1984: 199–200). The common translation of the Hebrew *‘ir* as “city” is misleading in this respect. Note that the Hebrew *mibyarim* (“fortified towns”) is the most frequent specification of *‘ir*. These terms and other designations for settlements are discussed in Levine 1999.

2. Holladay’s judgment (1995; cf. 1992) is based in part on the persistence of the basic architectural unit (the four-room house and its variations), devised or adapted for small agrarian units, successfully exploiting the difficult highland environment.

Three elements of the household emerge from this understanding of its socioeconomic complexity. First, it is a social, or demographic, unit comprised of varying configurations of affinals and consanguinals; and it may sometimes include unrelated servants or sojourners. Also, as a demographic unit, it encompasses reproductive functions. Second, it has material components, which makes it susceptible to archaeological investigation. These components are the dwelling itself and the items of material culture—artifacts—that enable its inhabitants to satisfy their physical, social, and also their spiritual or ideological needs. The third element is the behavioral, that is, the set of activities carried out in the household context in order to meet the needs of its residents. The household is thus the most important locus of economic production and social interaction in traditional societies.

Studying the household provides the opportunity to understand the way people organize their economic and, just as importantly, social relations (Whitridge 1998: 2). For several decades now, anthropologists have done this by explicitly practicing “household archaeology,” a micro-scale investigation of the activities and spatial organization of the built environment. By analyzing the structure itself and its associated material remains, the major economic features of a household can be recovered. Then, using the artifactual and architectural record as the main data base, one can infer relations of production and consumption, of diverse tasks and divided task performance, and of associated ideologies (Steadman 1996: 54, 63). In short, the investigation of households offers the promise of providing information available in no other way about human behavior in past societies.

Analyzing the social context of material culture is difficult, and even risky, because of the complex interpretive processes necessary to move from physical remains to hypotheses about social relations; but it is a worthwhile venture that all too few archaeologists working in the historical periods have been willing to undertake. The existence of written documents from the Bronze and Iron Ages has given us the sense, probably false in many ways, that we have access to more direct and reliable sources of information about the past than the “mute stones” themselves. Furthermore, the information in those written records, the Hebrew Bible in particular, has seduced us into using archaeology to trace large-scale social and political processes without paying much attention to small-scale social and political processes. We have let the agendas of the texts set the agendas of our digs. We have been concerned with ethnicities and kingdoms, not with individual family groups. The “state” or “city-state” or “tribe” has been reckoned the primary social structure,³ when in reality the *household*, as the basic unit of production and reproduction, is the primary socioeconomic unit of society and should be acknowledged as the social and economic center of any settlement.

We should learn from prehistorians that a wealth of information about a society is possible were we to take more often a bottom→top perspective instead of the top→down perspective that has dominated Syro-Palestinian archaeology. We need to take advantage of the ubiquity and abundance of households and of their surviving material components—structures and artifacts—in order to learn more about life in the Iron Age as it

3. Ironically, Gottwald’s analysis of early Israel, with its explicit use of social-science methods and models, nonetheless depicts the tribe as the “primary structure,” with the extended family as “tertiary” (1979: 237–92).

was experienced by most of the population and not just the leadership classes. Too often the objects and buildings we excavate are disembodied; their meanings are expressed in typological and relative constructs, rather than as reflections of the way people organized and valued their activities and thus their interactions with each other. Among other things, therefore, the synchronic analysis of households—difficult as it may be—provides a window into the lives of the people, both women and men, in the societies that we study. And, because it can situate architecture and artifact assemblages within an economic and social context (Lawrence 1999: 121–23), household archaeology can also thereby explore the gendered relations of production.

3. Households and Gendered Space

Household archaeology must de facto address gender issues. Gender is an aspect of every society. We must resist the tendency to equate human behavior with the behavior of males; we must “identify or assert the presence of the activities of women” (Conkey and Gero 1997: 414–15), some of which can be differentiated from the activities of men in the archaeological record. The division of labor by gender has long been recognized and recorded by social scientists, who recognize that gender is a prominent feature in the allocation of responsibilities for subsistence tasks in even the simplest societies (Kent 1990b: 148; Costin 1996: 112). Thus, gender-specific activity areas exist in the built environments of all but the least complex societies (Sweely 1999: 164), and the study of households as settings for activity systems necessarily examines gendered behavior.

The activity areas in a household can be conceptualized in two ways. First, discrete household activities are performed in “gendered space.” In every household, from antiquity to the present, there are certain loci used predominantly for task performance by one gender rather than the other (Kent 1984: 2; Sweely 1999: 164).⁴ This does not necessarily involve fully segregated space, with no crossover of gendered activity. Rather, *common* space in agrarian households is typically used differently by women and by men, sequentially or in overlapping temporal units depending on the time of day, the season of the year, and the nature of the tasks to be done (Bourdieu 1973: 99; Steadman 1996: 65; Whitridge 1998: 2).⁵

Second, household space, especially in its gendered aspects, is “social space,” a term that describes the interplay of ground area (physical space) with the social relationships of the people using that space (Chernoff 1999: 7, 9; cf. Rapoport 1994: 480). Many, if not all, of the productive tasks in agrarian systems in an environment such as the highlands of

4. These divisions are not necessarily absolute—that is, women and men may sometimes, to greater or lesser degrees, perform tasks associated primarily with the other gender—but they are usually powerful enough to produce a cognitive association of certain domestic spaces with one gender rather than the other. Even in “liberated” Euro-American households, kitchens and garages tend to be gender-specific activity areas and, consequently, are perceived differently by the male and female occupants of the household (Kent 1990a: 6).

5. The variety of gendered functions in a single space means cognitive differences in the way such space is perceived and experienced by women and men (Ardener 1993: 19; Steadman 1996: 65). The fact that the household is called *bēt ’ēm* (“mother’s household”) rather than *bēt ’āb* (“father’s household”) in biblical texts dealing with women’s experience is probably rooted in the way Iron Age women and men differently perceived the household (Meyers 1991a).

ancient Israel would have involved group labor, whether the tasks were characterized by simple simultaneity (several people doing the same thing at the same time) or complex simultaneity (different tasks performed by several people at the same time).⁶ That several females from the same or nearby households typically carry out productive tasks together (Sweely 1999: 163) thus has implications for understanding social relations.

4. Gendered Activities/Activity Areas

Identifying gendered social space is a project that has received very little attention in traditional Syro-Palestinian archaeology. Thus, such a project can be helped enormously, in terms of method and content, by the veritable explosion in the past few decades of research on gender in premodern societies conducted by prehistorians and anthropologists. That research has challenged the way archaeology is practiced and presented, and the way its data are interpreted (Conkey and Gero 1997: 413). Although we are not always aware of it, archaeology is a “highly constructed form of knowledge-seeking” (Roberts 1993: 18), and its interpretive processes can serve various research agendas. In Syro-Palestinian archaeology, for example, publications tend to illustrate ceramic and artifactual materials in stylistic groupings rather than in locus groups (Daviau 1993: 26–27). This publication strategy reflects the diachronic goals of the excavators: to illumine change over time in correlation with sociopolitical history. As a result, determining the precise find spots of objects in relation to each other and to their architectural context is often difficult, if not impossible. Yet recovering the spatial distribution of artifacts and ceramics is essential for the reconstruction of room function (i.e., activity areas), as opposed to room configuration (i.e., architectural identity).

Gendered archaeology, or the archaeology of gender, must therefore redefine archaeological agendas in order to recover, organize, and interpret data in ways that can illumine past gendered behavior (Wright 1996a: 3).⁷ Valuable data have undoubtedly been lost because of excavation and record-keeping techniques (Steadman 1996: 76), as well as publication strategies, which have not been sensitive to the possibilities of recovering the

6. These analytical distinctions set forth by Wilk and Rathje (1982: 622–23) two decades ago are still operative in the interpretive strategies of anthropologists and archaeologists seeking to describe the household, estimate its size, and predict its articulation with surrounding residential or kinship groups. Larger households and strongly interconnected household groups are, in some ways, strategies to solve simultaneous labor requirements for the production and processing of diverse agro-products or to deal with land scarcity when the population increases (Wilk and Rathje 1982: 621; Wilk and Netting 1984: 7; Steadman 1996: 56). Iron Age households would have been variable in size and makeup, tending toward such large, or extended, family groupings. Faust (2000) has made the case for complex families in Iron Age rural communities. Even Holladay’s claim that the nuclear family was the basic social and domestic unit is modified by the inclusion of unrelated servants in that group, by the realization that the nuclear family is part of a segmentary structure with the extended family as the next level of complexity, and by the suggestion that certain activity areas (especially female ones) were probably used jointly by the extended family (Holladay 1995: 387–89; see also the discussion in Meyers 1997a: 13–19).

7. The archaeology of gender is often also a feminist project, in that it must grapple with the biases in the contemporary world and in academia that have precluded the recovery of material culture in ways that inform the inquiry into gendered behavior. Although elitist biases are being addressed in Syro-Palestinian archaeology, androcentric tendencies in both data recovery and interpretation are not yet being redressed in significant ways (see the discussion in Meyers 1997b).

gendered production of archaeological materials. Yet attempts can be made to salvage some such information from past projects, and future projects can be made more gender-friendly in their field work and publications.

The claim that archaeology can produce information useful for the reconstruction of gendered household activities is tested here by examining two examples of productive activities visible in the archaeological record. If these can be identified as female-gender specific, they can be probed for knowledge about the relationships in which they are embedded, that is, women's culture. Establishing gender specificity for an activity means taking the artifacts or artifact assemblages used in that activity, which are not intrinsically gender articulate, and establishing whether they were used predominantly or exclusively by one gender or the other. Then, using the spatial distribution of such objects or assemblages, household activity areas can be identified according to gender (Steadman 1996: 63) and interrogated for information about human behavior, hierarchies, and power differentials.

Can we really be sure about who—females or males—used specific artifacts? In order to resist imposing gender identities on artifacts from outside the experiential world of the Iron Age people we are studying, we can apply various interpretive strategies. Prehistorians practicing gendered archaeology have pioneered in identifying specific ways in which the gendered use of artifacts can be determined (e.g., Gero and Conkey 1991; Wright [ed.] 1996; Nelson 1997). Such gender-attribution procedures utilize three major sources: *ethnography*, *ethnohistory*, and *iconography* (Costin 1996: 117–20). All of these sources are often used in interpreting the data produced by Syro-Palestinian archaeology.⁸ Studies of Iron Age dwellings and their various functions (Stager 1985; Holladay 1992; 1997), for example, have been heavily dependent on several classic ethnographic studies of Iranian villages (Watson 1979; Kramer 1982). When attributing gender to household activities, the direct observation of human behavior is especially important in helping to determine, at the very least, the range of possibilities (Rapoport 1994: 480; Costin 1996: 121).

A. Food Preparation: Grains into Bread

Making bread is one of the most common of all food preparation activities, and archaeological remains establish the household as its setting.⁹ Although grinding-stones and other artifacts used in transforming grains into finished loaves are not always found in situ, not always published in ways that allow their spatial locations to be retrieved, and may not ever be published at all, even the minimal artifactual data suggest that bread was produced in individual households in Iron Age settlements. At 'Izbet Šarṭah, for example, the 13 grinding-stones of Strata II–IV (late 11th–early 10th centuries B.C.E.) were evenly distributed, with 1–3 in every four-room building unit and none found outside living areas

8. Ethnographic data used analogically to interpret archaeological remains, or ethnoarchaeology, is often challenged by those who question the value of using recent behavior patterns for interpreting ancient cultures. When used with caution and, if possible, in conjunction with other sources, ethnographic information can be invaluable, particularly if one uses data from the same geographic region, where there is the possibility of some cultural continuity. Even cross-cultural data from other geographic regions should be considered, especially if the ecosystems are similar (see the discussions in Carter 1997; Meyers 1997b: 276–78).

9. For a fuller discussion of bread production in Iron Age Israel, see Meyers in press.

(Finkelstein 1986: 93–94). In addition, remains of baking ovens, or *tabuns*, sometimes more than one, are found in virtually all households. In House 75 in the western quarter of Beersheba, to give just one of many possible examples, an oven was found with grinding-stones and cooking vessels beside it (Beit-Arieh 1973: 33, pl. 67). Also, each of the units identified as serving extended families (that is, households) in the Iron II villages described by Faust (2000) apparently had grinding tools and baking installations.¹⁰ Clearly, whether in the courtyard space (Mazar 1992: 488) and/or in an area of the main room of a four-room house, many of the complex and time-consuming series of operations needed to make cereal crops edible (Meyers 1997a: 25; 1998: 253–54) took place in the household. Moreover, the presence of several grinding-stones in individual household units suggests that several people would have been processing grain at the same time.

The gender attribution of these processes can be established with reasonable certainty. First, *ethnographic* evidence from the contemporary Middle East as well as from global cross-cultural studies indicates that food preparation tasks, and those involving cereals in particular, are almost always performed by women. In the landmark analysis of data from the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF), collected on 185 societies worldwide judged to be representative of human labor patterns (Murdock and White 1969), 50 technological activities were arranged according to the ratio of male and female participation, beginning with those mostly associated with men and ending with those in which women predominate (Murdock and Provost 1973). Food preparation in general appears in 49th place and the preparation of vegetal food in 50th place—they are the technological activities most strongly associated with women and are dominated by men in only 3 or 4 of the 185 societies represented (Murdock and Provost 1973: tables 1, 5). Many studies of individual societies corroborate these findings and also indicate another important feature about grain-processing tasks: such tedious activities are often performed in gendered work groups, in which women of one household and even of neighboring households gather together to grind, knead, and bake (Friedl 1991: 208; Sweely 1999: 168). Ethnographic evidence from regions close to Syria-Palestine (e.g., Kramer 1979; Watson 1979) invariably show women controlling the production of bread and other food-stuffs. Similarly, Palestinian ethnographic data collected in the late 1970s reveal female control of the artifacts of bread-production and the associated space (Hirschfeld 1996).

Iron Age *ethnohistorical* information from Syria-Palestine accords with the ethnographic materials. Texts show some gender variability in several other food preparation tasks, but the references to steps in the grain-to-bread sequence uniformly mention women.¹¹ Furthermore, these sources often seem to indicate collective grinding or baking task performance. Mesopotamian sources also attest to the fact that women spent much time grinding grain and baking bread; millstones might even be a part of a woman's dowry

10. A. Faust, personal communication, 1 May 2000.

11. See Lev 26:26; 1 Sam 8:13, 28:24; Eccl 12:3; Jer 7:18; and cf. Isa 27:11. Discussions of some of these passages can be found in Meyers 2000d (which examines Lev 26:26 and how it depicts women not only as bread-bakers but as those who allocate portions); 2000a (which considers 1 Sam 8:13 and its reference to female bakers as specialists in the upper levels of the political hierarchy in ways often reserved for men in traditional societies); 2000g (which suggests that the reference in Eccl 12:3 to "women who grind" is a *pars pro toto* designation of the role of women in converting grain to bread); and 2000e (which sees Isa 27:11 as a reference to women's responsibility for gathering wood and building fires to bake bread).

(Harris 1992: 949). Egyptian sources likewise suggest that women of all social classes were associated with a variety of household technologies, especially those associated with baking (Robins 1993: 100–102, 117–19, 126).

Finally, late Iron Age *iconographic* sources depict women, and not men, grinding or kneading, often in pairs or larger groups. A clay model from Achzib, dating to the 6th century B.C.E., depicts a female figure bending over a bread-trough and kneading dough (Pritchard [ed.] 1954: 152). A plethora of such genre scenes showing women grinding or kneading, perhaps inspired by Levantine coroplasts, have been recovered on Cyprus, some depicting women working at this task in tandem (Karageorghis 1998: fig. 24; pls. 29:9–10; 30:1–2, 4–5, 6–8). Similar figural appear in ancient Greece; and a Boetian terracotta showing women kneading dough in a communal trough led the excavators of Tel Dor to interpret an installation in an Iron I context as a bread-kneading trough (Stern et al. 1997: 52–56, figs. 10–12). Iconographic data (tomb models and wall paintings) from ancient Egypt also suggest that bread production was “one of the few activities usually involving women” in elite households as well as those of workers (Robins 1993: 102, 118).

Taken together, these sources make the attribution of bread production to women reasonably certain. The areas in Iron Age households in which bread was produced thus functioned as female space, at least during the hours—perhaps as many as two per day (Bossen 1989; Meyers 1998: 254)—devoted to bread production. Many other food-processing activities were probably also women’s tasks and were carried out in proximity to the grain-to-bread area, thereby creating an overall female activity area for many of the daylight hours in Iron Age households. The implications of this female use of space for the production of bread, the communal nature of this productive task, and the very fact that this basic household function was controlled by women will be considered below.

B. Textile Production: Spinning, Sewing, and Weaving

Scant remains of textiles themselves have been recovered from archaeological deposits. However, some of the implements used in the production of cloth and clothing—spindle whorls, needles, and loom weights—provide the hard data for considering spinning, sewing, and weaving as gendered activities. Unfortunately, perhaps even more than for grain-processing implements, the location of the tools of textile production are not easily, if at all, recoverable from many excavation reports. A study carried out in early 1990s attempted with little success to identify the find spots of spindle whorls and loom weights in the publications of Iron II sites (Meyers 1991b¹²). There are exceptions, however. For example, at Tell es-Sa’idiyeh, in each of five different Stratum V (8th century B.C.E.) buildings, groups of loom weights were recovered, usually in the main (pillared) room. They were aligned in such a way as to suggest that they were in situ, dropped from a horizontal beam (Pritchard 1985: 35–38; figs. 73–75, 87–89). All the excavated dwellings of this period and the preceding two Iron Age strata were identified as small domestic units in which, among other activities, weaving apparently took place on a house-by-house basis (Pritchard 1985: 78).

12. The then-graduate-student Karla Bohmbach who assisted in the study reported that “it’s shocking the amount and kind of information that is left out [about loom weights and spindle whorls].”

Weaving in discrete households is not the only discernible pattern. Other data suggest that, at least in the Late Iron Age (8th–7th centuries B.C.E.), weaving may have been conducted in specialized workshops, at sites in the Shephelah and Beth-shean Valley, in order to supply Assyrian tribute demands for fine fabrics (Browning 1988). Clearly, more careful recovery and more nuanced studies of the location and concentration of spindle whorls and needles, in addition to loom weights, are necessary before the various facets and types of thread and cloth production, whether linen, cotton, and/or wool, can be determined. Still, the evidence of textile production in households for household use and perhaps also for tribute, trade, or communal use, is substantial. The gender attribution of textile production can be established, again using several kinds of evidence.

Ethnographic data reveal a remarkably strong division of labor in craft production (Costin 1996: 121). The HRAF materials show loom-weaving to be a woman’s activity in 84%, and spinning in 87%, of the societies in which they occur (Murdock and Provost 1973: table 1; Costin 1996: table 4.1). In the few societies in which both women and men work in textiles, they tend to have specialized technological niches—men may be fullers or shearers, for example, while women spin, weave, and embroider (Wright 1996b: 98). This overall division of labor in textile production apparently is consistent across class lines and is found for work performed in both households and workshops. The latter point is important because it suggests that even if some Iron II textile production was “industrial,” it still may have been a female enterprise. The distribution of women and men as textile artisans across cultures suggests that men have a dominant role in such activities mainly in societies quite different from that of Iron Age Syria–Palestine: in horticultural societies, in which much of women’s labor is devoted to the production of foodstuffs; and in large-scale agroindustrial societies that produce export-quality cloth, although even then, men do not control all of the technologies (Schneider and Weiner 1986: 181).

Ethnohistorical materials likewise indicate that weaving was done by women. Mesopotamian texts provide evidence that women were organized in workshops to produce materials for trade (Veenhof 1972: 195; Wright 1996b). Indeed, the production of cloth and clothing was probably women’s work in the ancient Near East from the Neolithic period through the Iron Age (Barber 1997; Nemet-Nejat 1999: 106–7). Egyptian texts provide similar information. A papyrus from the late Middle Kingdom, for example, lists the occupations of 29 women—20 of them connected with weaving (Hayes 1955: 105). In the late-13th-century B.C.E. *Story of Two Brothers*, the wife of Anubis tries to seduce his brother Bata with the promise of making fine clothes (Pritchard [ed.] 1955: 24). In Egyptian peasant households and also in those of the elite, weaving was a female activity (Robins 1993: 35, 64, 95, 110). Ethnohistorical records from Syria–Palestine provide similar information. In Ugaritic literature, the goddess Athirat is said to have worked with “a mighty spindle” as well as a cooking pot (Smith 1997: 122). Iron Age biblical texts mention “weaving women” and “skilled women” who produce fabrics of colored yarns and linen and also of goat hair.¹³ Note that these biblical references to women imply that they worked in

13. 2 Kgs 23:7 and Exod 35:25–26, 36:6 (see the discussion of these passages in Meyers 2000c and 2000b, respectively). Note also the reference to Delilah’s skill with the loom in Judg 16:13–14. The specification of females in these passages does not preclude the possibility that males were weavers, as they may have been in certain state-sponsored workshops (see Isa 19:9, which refers to wage-earning textile workers in Egypt).

groups. Furthermore, these women were considered artisans or skilled designers, designations consonant with the high level of textiles produced in Syria-Palestine in the Iron Age (Sheffer 1995: 545-50).

Iconographic evidence relevant to cloth production is apparently nonexistent from Syria-Palestine, but images of women as weavers and spinners do appear in representational art from other ancient Near Eastern societies, for example, a stone relief of uncertain date from Susa depicting an upper-class woman spinning wool (Pritchard [ed.] 1954: fig. 144). Most graphic evidence for weaving as a gendered activity comes from Egyptian models and tomb scenes (e.g., Pritchard [ed.] 1954: figs. 142-43), which frequently depict women as the personnel involved in textile manufacture (Robins 1993: 103), especially in the production of linen cloth (Barber 1997: 192).

5. Discussion: Implications of Gendered Activities for Sociopolitical Relations

Because at least two household activities in Iron Age households can be strongly linked with women, certain Iron Age household areas can be identified as women's social space. To understand the full implications of this identification, several obstacles must be overcome, perhaps the most significant being present-mindedness. Assumptions about the meaning and value of women's household activities cannot be based on our experiences in contemporary middle-class Western culture (Nelson 1997: 13-21, 88). This is most salient in the tacit appraisal of what is masculine as inherently powerful and/or prestigious, with women's activities considered supportive and secondary, thereby being trivialized and marginalized.

Such negative evaluations of women's work are rooted in the identification of women with the home in Western ideologies in the last two centuries (Lawrence 1999: 121), which in turn is the result of the removal of significant economic processes from the household as part of the industrial revolution. Because women's unpaid tasks came to be seen as simply housekeeping chores, the economic value and concomitant social power and prestige of premodern women's household labor tended to become obscured (Meyers 1999a: 154-58). The conventional wisdom that saw women as passive and powerless in virtually all premodern societies is now recognized to be deeply flawed. In reality, women's productive activities in premodern societies had major economic value (Brumfiel 1991: 224-25). Newer studies of traditional societies show that women's household economic roles, in both subsistence tasks and craft production, functioned in ways that contest our often unexamined but persistent notions of female dependency and patriarchal dominance. The work patterns and authority structures in premodern societies meant that daily life was rarely hierarchical along gendered lines.

Another related and equally powerful obstacle to reaching an emic perspective on Iron Age or any other ancient culture is the public-private dichotomy. This analytical construction, which also stems from the modern experience in industrialized societies, posits the public (political and economic activities and institutions) and the private (family or domestic life) as separate domains. Popular several decades ago in assessing women's roles in traditional societies (e.g., Rosaldo 1974; Sanday 1974), the private-public binary as a use-

ful analytical framework is no longer accepted (Sharistanian 1987; Helly and Reverby 1992; cf. Rosaldo 1980; Meyers 1988: 32-33, 175-76). A more integrated approach now recognizes that in premodern societies the "public" and "private" are overlapping domains. The notion of a dichotomy between the two does *not* reflect reality. Rather, *all* activities in the household are significant for *both* the private and the public realm—the domestic *is* political and the private *is* public (Hegland 1991: 216-18, 228-29).¹⁴ The economic activities and concomitant social relations of an Iron Age household would not have been separate from larger domains, including political alliances (cf. Yanagisako 1979: 191; Hendon 1996: 47).

Women's productive activities, carried out in the gendered spaces of Iron Age households, were dynamic elements in the social and political fabric of their communities. As ethnographic research has shown, gender-associated artifacts signify gender-associated economic activities, which in turn have implications for gender-linked power. Traditional Western approaches to power tend to focus on formal institutions of power and authority, whereas informal power relations in traditional societies are the concomitants of the control of productive activities (Sweely 1999: 155-56) and are just as important as, if not more important than, formal relations of power.

Thus we can infer that power accrued to women in Iron Age agrarian communities because of their control of certain productive tasks. This would certainly have been true for bread-making. The virtual exclusivity of women as producers and distributors of any fundamental nutritional source of a society, which cannot be obtained in any other way, is an indicator of female power (Counihan 1998: 2, 4). A similar evaluation can be made about cloth production, especially because of the technological skill required for all its discrete operations. Cross-cultural studies of women's weaving indicate that "weaving women" exercise power because of their skills and also because of the economic value of the objects they produce. This is so whether or not they have direct control over the thread they spin or the cloth they weave or the garments they sew (Brumfiel 1991: 225; Sweely 1999: 165). But Iron Age women, according to at least one ethnohistorical source, *did* engage in marketing as well as making textiles.¹⁵ Considerable power accrues to such women.

Another critical aspect of female power linked to economic tasks is derived from the fact that grain-processing (grinding, kneading, baking bread) and textile production (spinning, weaving, sewing) involved women working in groups. Whether the work took place in households, in communal workshops, or even (as was probably the case for weaving at certain times of the year) in shady outdoor space beyond the settlement perimeter, women gathered together to perform these labor-intensive tasks. The presence of female work groups, whether for food-processing or crafts production, signals the existence of women's networks. Gendered household activity areas were thus social spaces, in which

14. This is true even today in Third World countries, where the state does not always reach into peasant households in rural areas. Politics in the communities comprising such households are conducted through kin relationships. Observations not long ago in Aliabad in Iran revealed that "personal and domestic relations were also public and political relations" (Hegland 1991: 215).

15. Proverbs 31 indicates the role of a female household manager in securing (buying?) wool and flax (v. 13), spinning thread (v. 14), making clothing (vv. 22, 24 and perhaps v. 21), and marketing the garments she produces (vv. 24 and 18). Although Proverbs probably received its final editing in the late 6th century B.C.E. (the Persian period), its materials are largely from the Iron Age II (Fontaine 1988: 495). Scholars are divided as to whether the acrostic poem in chap. 31 is pre- or postexilic.

women shared with each other certain kinds of knowledge and experienced certain kinds of interaction.

The sharing of knowledge relating to a particular trade, craft, or service is hardly a trivial matter. Textile production, especially in terms of the expertise required, was a quasi-professional enterprise involving knowledge of techniques, substances, equipment, guidelines, and other production factors (Meyers 1999a: 161–62, 165). That women gathered, however sporadically, to engage in the serial or simultaneous operations of cloth and clothing manufacture meant that those experienced in the craft passed on their skills and knowledge to younger artisans. This mentoring role entailed female leadership and the opportunity for women to experience status and prestige.

In addition, women working together for textile production would have developed a sense of solidarity,¹⁶ which also would have been a significant factor in the more informal networks of women who gathered in one household or another to carry out the often tedious tasks of food production. Whether kneading dough together in a communal trough or working side-by-side with differing foodstuffs, women sharing productive social space meant that they had access to social knowledge as well as technical knowledge. They knew each other and thus each other's families; and this sphere of relationships, which a woman began to build as soon as she married and entered her husband's household, meant that women had information otherwise unavailable to men that was critical for forging political connections, solving economic problems such as the differential need for field labor among households, and assisting with difficulties such as illness or death in individual households (Meyers 1999a: 176–77, 182–83; cf. Ardener 1993: 9; Sirman 1995). These informal alliances among women are designated in Iron Age ethnohistorical texts as *šēkēnôt* or by several feminine forms of the verb *r'h*, all signifying female cohorts (Meyers 1999b: 2000f).

Such women's groups were hardly casual affairs, even though they may represent a more diffuse and thus more elusive form of female power than the more visible power in male social groups. Indeed, especially in societies with limited material and labor resources, such women's networks contribute to the viability of the community as a whole.¹⁷ Women's networks may have constituted the informal but important mediating group that forged households into larger "kin groups," or *mišpahôt*, that functioned as "protective association[s] of families" by extending mutual social, economic, and military aid (Gottwald 1979: 257–67; cf. Lamphere 1993: 70). Indeed, not only because of their group labor but also because of their marital and consanguinal ties, women were better positioned than men to mediate such relations.¹⁸

16. The sense of intimacy among women engaged together in labor-intensive textile work was recently replicated in a project in experimental archaeology. In producing fabrics and sewing garments that would reproduce the "fashion" of Minoan women, the women working together on the project experienced a sense of connection to each other and even to ancient Minoan seamstresses (Jones 2000: 38).

17. Evidence of the importance of women's groups comes from ethnographic information about traditional societies (e.g., Strathern 1972; March and Taqqu 1986; Marcus 1992; Zonabend 1996). It is interesting to note that, even in developed societies, the often unrecognized bonds among women have now been heralded as important factors in social and political life (e.g., Smith-Rosenberg 1975; Evans 1989; Lambert 1995).

18. Women married into one household while still maintaining links with their natal households. They therefore had structural links with two descent groups, whereas men had such a link only with their own lineage (Meyers 1999a: 171–72).

Forged and maintained in female household social space, women's groups empowered Iron Age women as social actors in the larger community and contributed in important ways to the complexity and richness of their daily lives. Furthermore, just as craft-oriented women's groups entailed the leadership of certain women, so too the formation of a web of interconnecting kin and neighbor relationships through the social work space of households meant differentiation in female social roles according to age, experience, family status, or other such variables. Thus, these female-gendered groups would have had their own structures and hierarchies, however shifting and informal they may have been.

Acknowledging the hierarchical ordering of women's groups (Lamphere 1993: 71) means **contesting** the conventional wisdom about male dominance in pervasive hierarchical structures affecting all domains of human interaction in premodern societies. Because the household in Iron Age settlements was the primary unit of society, and because women had significant power in household social spaces, it may be better to consider the gendered spheres of these settlements as complementary rather than hierarchical. The social organization of Iron Age settlements is thus better understood as heterarchical rather than hierarchical (Meyers 2002). The concept of "heterarchy" was first introduced by anthropologists as an alternative to the central-place model in analyzing settlement patterns (Crumley 1979; 1987). It has since attracted widespread interest among researchers unhappy with the failure of evolutionary models to fit with archaeological data (Ehrenreich, Crumley, and Levy 1995). The concept of heterarchy as an organizational structure in which "each element possesses the potential of being unranked (relative to other elements) or ranked in a number of different ways depending on systemic requirements" (Crumley 1979: 144) allows for systems to be perceived as related to each other laterally rather than vertically.

Heterarchy is particularly suitable to accommodate the variability, context, and fluctuation of social relations in peasant societies (Levy 1995: 47). Women's activities are sub-systems in such a conceptualization, each with their own patterns of rankings, privileges, and statuses, with some women exercising meaningful leadership and dominance vis-à-vis other women in the system. Women's systems, along with those of men, can be understood as constituent systems of a heterarchical complexity. Situating gendered activity within heterarchical structures is an especially useful model to account for and acknowledge significant aspects of women's culture in the Iron Age.

Harriet Beecher Stowe may have had it right. She borrowed the term "homesteads" from American pioneer history, thereby acknowledging the economic primacy of the household. And she called women "queens," an inappropriate term to be sure, but one that nonetheless signifies what this study in household archaeology has shown—that women had power in their own stratified structures and that daily life in Iron Age agrarian settlements entailed more complex roles for all individuals than might otherwise be imagined. The lives of women, as producers of essential foods and fabrics, would have been replete with intricate and subtle opportunities for contributing to household and communal well-being.

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The Clan-Based Economy of Biblical Israel

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Introduction

Much has been said about kinship as a dominant feature of the Israelite societies, north and south, of biblical times. The clan, or "sib," as it has been called, was the salient socioeconomic realization of kinship in biblical Israel. One's status, rights, prerogatives, and obligations of all sorts are based on one's affiliation as a member of a family or clan; in other words, they are based on who one's relatives are and who one's forebears were, primarily consanguineously (blood-related), but at times also affinally (related by marriage). When kinship is operative, the larger society is usually configured as a network of kinship groups of various circumferences, and even the nation, in its totality, may be regarded as a single encompassing kinship group. Lineage is the defining diachronic feature of kinship groups, and at least a decided preference for clan endogamy is the defining synchronic feature. The patriarchal narratives of the book of Genesis provide a significant illustration of the kinship principle, because they relate how brides were sought from the ancestral clan back in Haran (Genesis 24: 28-29).

It has been recognized that there is a fictive, or metaphorical, aspect to some of the expressions of kinship in biblical literature, and furthermore, that not every aspect of Israelite societies can be explained in terms of kinship. Yet there are many areas in which real kinship was operative. As an example of contrasts, consider the following: the reference to the Israelite people (*benê Yisrā'el*) collectively as one of the *mišpāḥôt*, "clans, sibs, extended families," of the earth strikes us as figurative in Amos 3:1-2, where the prophet imputes collective responsibility to the entire nation and its leaders:

Heed this oracle that Yahweh has spoken regarding you, O people of Israel;
regarding the entire clan (*mišpāḥâ*) that I brought up from the land of Egypt:
only you have I acknowledged of all the clans of the earth (*mišpēḥôt ḥā'adāmâ*).
This is why I shall call you to account for all your iniquities.

However, other uses of the term *mišpāḥâ* in more discrete frames of reference is surely realistic. The most prominent is the economic context, in which the term relates to land ownership or land tenure in a predominantly agrarian economy; or, as some prefer, in a dimorphic economy, in which pastoral pursuits also produce wealth and goods. There is nothing fictive about the basic role of kinship in biblical legislation governing the inheritance of land, the restriction of its alienation outside the clan, and the pledging of land to debt. Certain narratives involving the disposition of clan property also exhibit a strong