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THE ISRAELITE WOMAN

SOCIAL ROLE AND LITERARY TYPE IN BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

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and Judy (Brenner-Hill)

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able rhetorical powers, as well as sexual charms; and is not always successful in her attempts to manipulate men. The similarities point to the fact that the two kinds of Temptress possibly belong to one basic prototype which for literary and ideological reasons was divided into 'positive' and 'negative' halves. Structurally, the two sub-types perhaps relate to one basic model.

Ruth, Tamar, and possibly Jael (who will be discussed in the next chapter) belong to the 'positive' paradigm, Potiphar's wife and the Foreign Woman to the 'negative' one. Lot's daughters have more in common with the former than with the latter. Samson's wives present a variation on the 'negative' type. They are not adulteresses, but allow former loyalties to override the loyalty they owe to their husband. Loyalty to the male spouse is placed by the author/editor of the Samson cycle above other loyalties. We are told that when two values are in conflict, the right one should be chosen and adhered to, with no regard to any other value; and that Samson's wives failed to make the right choice.

Chapter 11

FOREIGN WOMEN

a. Old Testament attitudes towards foreign women and mixed marriages

From the very beginning of Israelite history patriarchs, leaders, and simple folk took foreign (non-Hebrew) women for wives, concubines, and mistresses. Hagar was an Egyptian slave (Genesis 16.21 and 25.12). Apart from her Abraham had another foreign wife, Keturah (Genesis 25.1, 4; 1 Chronicles 1.32-33) whom he took after Sarah's death. Judith and Basemath, Esau's wives, were Hittite (Genesis 26.34). Bathshua, Judah's wife, was a Canaanite (Genesis 38.2, 12; 1 Chronicles 2.3). Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law and the mother of his twin children Perez and Zerah, was probably a Canaanite as well (Genesis 38). Joseph married Asenath, an Egyptian woman and the daughter of an Egyptian high priest (Genesis 41.45, 50; 46.20). Moses' wife Zipporah was a Midianite (Exodus 2.21; 4.25; 18.2), and his second wife was a Cushite (Numbers 12.1). Genealogical lists in Chronicles record foreign wives and concubines within the accepted structure of Israelite tribal society. These women were Egyptian (1 Chronicles 4.8), Aramean (7.14), and of other ethnic origins. Jael was a Kenite (Judges 4-5). Samson's two wives were Philistine (Judges 14-16). Ruth, King David's ancestress, was a Moabite. Bathsheba, David's wife and Solomon's mother, was perhaps a foreigner; at any rate, her first husband Uriah was a Hittite. Absalom's mother was from Geshur (2 Samuel 3.3 and elsewhere). King Solomon used foreign marriages as a diplomatic tool to an even larger extent than his father had done—he married many foreign women of noble descent, the most notable of whom was Pharaoh's daughter (1 Kings 3.1; 7.8; 9.24; 11.1 onwards). His heir Rehoboam was the son of an Ammonite woman (1 Kings 14.21), although we might have expected the Egyptian lady to be the mother of the heir to the throne. Asa's mother Maacah was probably an Aramean (1 Kings 15.9); Jezebel (1 Kings 16.13 and elsewhere) and Athaliah (2 Kings 8.26; 11; and elsewhere), of Phoenician origins. Mixed marriages, especially with

women of neighbouring nations, were so prevalent during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah that both leaders felt duty bound to fight this practice (Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 13.23ff.).

In short, according to the biblical records, many foreign women—many more than foreign men—intermarried into ancient Israel. Many of them turned out to be mothers of great men. King David's personal ancestry and history, for instance, are spiked with foreign females—Loi's daughters, Tamar, Ruth, and his wives Bathsheba (?) and Maacah. How did Old Testament writers, in various times and places, regard this phenomenon of ethnic impurity? As we shall see, mixed marriages were either overlooked or objected to. The reasons for upholding either of the two diametrically opposed views were dictated by changes in the political circumstances of the community.

The patriarchal stories in Genesis stress, time and time again, that a foreign wife is inferior to and less desirable than a woman of the man's clan or ethnic-national group. Abraham (Genesis 24.3-8, 37-41) and Rebecca (27.46) insist on endogamy at least for the favourite son, the carrier of the divine promise. Ishmael is inferior because he was born to a woman of foreign descent and lowly status, and married outside the family. Esau's Hittite wives annoy Rebecca, and serve as an excuse for sending Jacob to her family so that he finds a wife for himself. The migrant family of Abraham refuses to intermingle with the Canaanite nations of their new country. Intermarriages did occur, but were frowned upon or—in extreme cases—prevented by force. Thus Jacob and his sons refuse the importantly political liaison with Shechem when they reject Hamor's proposal to marry Dinah (Genesis 34). It is true that, in this instance, another weighty principle is at stake—Hamor of Shechem had raped Dinah before he asked for her hand, and her honour must be avenged. The girl herself is not consulted and the Shechemites' readiness to make amends by joining the Israelite community is exploited but not taken seriously. It seems, therefore, that the pretext of a sister's honour—although it is one of the reasons for attacking the city—is less significant than the reluctance to lose the clan's unique identity through intermarriage.

Once the self-confidence of the migrants grows, they begin to explore the benefits of intermarriage as a device for their cultural and political acceptance into their new environment. Prominent families set the trend, for they are more susceptible to fresh cultural influence and ethnic assimilation than other families. From the beginning of the monarchy the number of intermarriages increases, and exogamy

is socially tolerated to the point where it inspires indifference rather than anxiety. This attitude prevails until well into the First Temple era. It is usually assumed that a foreign wife will join her husband's family and adapt to its cultural and religious customs. From the time of Hosea, however (second half of the eighth century BC), the tide turns once more. Some classical prophets—Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Deutero-Isaiah—compare the nation of Israel to a foreign born and inferior slut (Ezekiel 16.45, for instance). Narrative sources from this period onwards contain strong indictments against intermarriages; and Wisdom literature (Proverbs 1-9) presents the danger of associating with foreign women of a certain type in vivid, perhaps too attractive, terms. A curious picture emerges: the main stream of Old Testament ideology views foreign women negatively. At the same time, royal persons as well as lesser dignitaries and ordinary people continue to intermarry. The wrath expressed by the prophets and the anger of the other literary sources could not change this until, during the Second Temple era, the situation became so bad that the cultural and religious identity of the community was threatened. Then, by the mid-fifth century BC, Ezra and Nehemiah struck an official blow against the practice and excommunicated families who refused to send their foreign members away (Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 13).

Intermarriage is perfectly natural and politically expedient. Why, then, did it provoke persistent opposition—which, for hundreds of years, did not succeed in suppressing the phenomenon?

The Deuteronomistic view of 1 Kings 11 argues that King Solomon's chief shortcoming was not his unwise treatment of the Northern Israelite tribes, but his inclination (in his later years) to indulge and even to participate in the foreign cults practised by his wives. Women are very often typecast as inherently religious; and when such a woman marries into an Israelite family—especially when she is of noble birth and good education—she tends to stick to her original religion. Instead of embracing Israelite religion, as they should, such foreign wives cause their menfolk to deviate from the right path and follow their pagan ways. King Solomon's wives, Asa's mother, Jezebel, and Athaliah—to mention but a few illustrious foreign ladies—all behaved in the same manner; and Cozbi, the daughter of a Midianite chief, nearly managed to convert an Israelite (Numbers 25.15-18). Women are viewed as chief practitioners of fertility cults by Hosea (mainly in chs. 2-3), Ezekiel (ch. 8 and elsewhere), Jeremiah (9.19), and other prophets. Israelite women are accused of practising these rites too, but foreign women are regarded as the most

fanatic adherents of the rites. This foreign religious influence must have been so great—probably because the beliefs and the practices it entailed seemed attractive, or culturally and diplomatically beneficial, to the Israelites and Judahites who adopted them—that they had to be continuously fought against.

Because foreign women were generally associated with fertility cults, they became associated with seduction, prostitution, and sexual disloyalty also. Even the best of them, those who were assimilated to the point that they became matriarchs and local or national heroines (and see section b below), are described as operating within the framework of sexual seduction. The associative chain which links foreign women with fertility cults, sexual promiscuity, and unscrupulous disloyalty is used many times by various prophets, from Hosea onwards, as a model for describing Israel's attitude towards God in terms of a relationship between a loving husband and his faithless, often foreign immoral wife.

Some prominent foreign women have already been discussed above, under headings pertaining to their sphere of influence (Part I—Jezebel, Asa's mother, Athaliah), or the literary model which informs their description (Part II—Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, and others). In order to avoid redundancy, the following remarks are confined to one particular aspect: What defines a given foreign woman as a positive or a negative character? Jael's case, which has hardly been touched upon so far, will be dealt with in greater detail than the other stories.

b. *The positive side:*

Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, and Jael

There are a few features which are shared by all four women, or by most of them. All of them are seductresses, amateur or professional: Tamar seduces Judah; Ruth does the same thing to Boaz; Rahab is a prostitute; and Jael, who puts Sisera in her own bed and his him so that he 'fell between her legs' (Judges 5.27, according to the Hebrew text), probably used her charms as part of her apparent hospitality—sexual connotations are part and parcel of the story. Tamar and Ruth feature in the genealogy of King David and, according to a New Testament source (Matthew 1.5, where Ruth and Tamar are mentioned as well), so does Rahab. All three marry into the tribe of Judah and produce male children who turn out to be leaders. At first glance Jael seems to differ from her three colleagues for, as far as we

know, she is childless. In addition, she is not a single woman who marries into the tribe of Judah. Jael is a married woman, the wife of Heber the Kenite. However, the Bible describes how the Kenites, originally a non-Israelite clan or tribe, were slowly assimilated into Judah. This process of assimilation was first geographical, then ethnic (Judges 1.16; 4.11, 17; 1 Samuel 15.6; 1 Chronicles 2.55). Indeed the foreign origin of the Kenites is noted, but no importance is attached to it because they cooperated with the tribe of Judah and were later incorporated into it.

Tamar and Ruth place the welfare of the family they have joined above their personal interest; Rahab and Jael prefer to serve the cause of the adopted community. By so doing, all four reap a personal reward as well. Their foreignness enhances the impact of their deeds, and their acceptance within their chosen community is assured.

By choosing this particular path, all four women incur grave risks to their person, and face these risks courageously. Tamar risks being burnt as an adulteress. Ruth leaves family, home, religion, and culture in order to accompany Naomi into a strange land and an alien cultural milieu. Rahab is in danger of being exposed as a traitor to her home town. Jael might have easily been overpowered by Sisera, a seasoned warrior who, even when exhausted, still possessed a presumably strong instinct for survival. All of them succeed because of their faith, and because they serve the right cause. It is no wonder, therefore, that their characters are judged to be extraordinarily righteous, and their contribution is acknowledged without any reserve. In short, when a foreign woman chooses to adopt Israelite (Judahite) society and religion, and her behaviour indicates that she is seriously committed to her new community, then her acceptance is guaranteed.

Tamar, Ruth, and Rahab have been discussed previously, and therefore no more will be said about them now; however, a few additional words about Jael seem to be in order. Unlike her three colleagues, Jael is a married woman. It even seems that she actually commits adultery with Sisera. The text (Judges 4–5) does not say so explicitly; nevertheless, various euphemisms and references to legs, beds, and so on impart broad sexual connotations. Because of her marital status, Jael's deeds could have been condemned by the biblical writers. However, she is not classified as a 'negative' foreign woman. In her case—as in that of Rahab's—political and military considerations which involve the community as a whole are placed above considerations of conventional morality. The narrator's view-

point is encountered again and again: whenever two social principles come into conflict (in this case, sexual standards of an individual *versus* survival of the community), the Bible teaches that survival comes first. Similarly, during the Maccabean period, self-defence in times of emergency was defined as more important than the observing of the Sabbath. When everything else fails, then, even adulterous seduction is a legitimate means of eliminating an elusive enemy. In this instance Deborah's—and Barak's—considerable talents prove to be inadequate: the outcome of the battle is not decided until Sisera is killed, and this they do not manage to do. It is perhaps symbolical that Deborah and Jael have to combine their resources in order to defeat Sisera. At this point Barak disappears from the scene, and does not participate in the conclusion of the battle.

A sizable part of the poem (Judges 5) deals with the two heroines—Deborah and Jael—and with their victim Sisera. The juxtaposition of the two heroines is interesting. Deborah is a female community leader—prophetess, military strategist, poetess, and judge. However, her figure lacks sexuality and domesticity: the attribute *'šet lappidót*, which is applied to her name, can be understood either as 'wife of Lappidoth' (an individual about whom nothing else is known), or simply as 'a spirited woman'. The Hebrew term *'šet* lends itself to both renderings. The Jewish Sages, who speculated about Lappidoth, identified him with Barak, thus supplying Deborah with 'wifely' integrity and womanhood. This interpretation, as we have seen, is linguistically uncertain. It is informed by the extralinguistic opinion that a woman, even when she is active in the public sphere, should retain her distinctive duties and sexuality. Otherwise, she cannot hope to be either happy or completely successful. Deborah, despite the efforts of the commentators, is sadly lacking in these 'feminine' qualities. Therefore, a complementary figure is required. Jael, who is represented as Deborah's complement, spends her whole life inside the domestic framework. She uses hospitality—a traditional virtue—and sexuality as devices for winning the battle. Without her initiative the end might have been different—and yet, whatever she does could have been done by any ordinary woman, for she uses no weapon but her own self. Is there a note of censure in the way events are told, an implied criticism levelled at Deborah for her deficiency as a woman? Jael herself, at any rate, is typecast as a representative of a well-established intercultural tradition—that of a brave married or widowed woman who sacrifices, or seems to sacrifice, her virtue in order to save her people. Another (post-biblical) instance of the same type—

later in date and more refined in tone—is Judith, who kills Holofernes by using deceit and seduction (Judith 8–13).

c. The negative side:

Potiphar's wife, Samson's women, and the Foreign Woman of Proverbs

Potiphar's wife and Samson's women are temptresses of a dangerous kind: their behaviour has fatal consequences for their male victims and, sometimes, for their own selves (cf. Chapter 10, sections c and d above). They share quite a few formal traits. They are foreign and married. They are faithless—be it for reasons of sexual desire (Potiphar's wife), cult (the Foreign Woman), or loyalty to a previous community (Samson's Philistine wives). This is their biggest fault. When a woman marries, she should join her husband's community. Like Ruth, she should forsake all other loyalties in favour of her newly-found one. Otherwise, law and order within the community will be supplanted by anarchy. Instead, these foreign women remain loyal either to their own personal interests or to those of the paternal household. Therefore, the readers are warned, they and their like are unacceptable. The results of consorting with them and other women of the same type will invariably turn out to be calamitous. Thus Joseph goes to jail—an event which, ironically, serves to elevate him to a position much higher than the one he occupied in his master's household. Samson loses his strength and is blinded; when he regains his unique power he commits suicide, destroying many Philistines together with his own person. And the Foreign Woman of Proverbs, that clever female of loose morals, devious charms and deviant religious convictions, is fatal for her followers.

d. Summary

Foreign women were accepted into the Judahite/Israelite community if and when they were prepared to forsake their previous ethnic, cultural, and religious ties and to adopt the systems of values and beliefs prevalent in their new environment. When this basic condition was met, exogamic marriage was either permitted or else overlooked. When a woman continued to practise foreign ways even after her marriage, she and her children were disapproved of. The examples of Tamar, Ruth and Rahab show that whenever a foreign woman demonstrated that she valued the welfare of her chosen community

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.

Chapter 12

THE ANCESTRESS—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