

Concubinage in the Hebrew Bible.

Studies of the ancient world have shown that though women were an integral part of society, but their most important role was played behind closed doors and in the process of childbearing. With childbearing being such an important aspect, it is not shocking that polygamy was widespread in ancient civilizations. We get a different version of polygamy, as it is interpreted today, in ancient texts such as the Hebrew Bible. A concubine was a woman who was in a constant sexual relationship without being entitled to wifedom; thus, the taking of concubines was a popular aspect in ancient societies. Literary traces of concubines are found in civilisations such as the Greeks and the Romans too. Though it was considered dishonourable for a concubine and a wife to live in the same house in Ancient Greece, the Hebrew Bible does not condemn this practice. There remains a hierarchy that is followed in the Hebrew household- the chief-wife, the concubine and the slave wife. The difference between the latter was that while the concubine was a free woman who voluntarily offers herself for the position, the slave woman was bought by the head of the household.

There remained two types of concubinage in the ancient world, the oriental and the occidental, the Hebrew concubine, the Pillegesh, belonged to the former category. The oriental concubine belonged to a complex and primitive family structure, while the occidental concubine was part of a later and simplified household. The oriental concubine enjoyed a distinct social and legal position in the household; she symbolised possession and pride for the head of the household. Therefore, the Bible shows various instances where sharing of concubines between two men lead to negative consequences. Though the property of a man it is not always his initiative that brings the concubine into the house. In 1 Kings 1, we read that King David was given a pretty Shunamite girl as the servants thought she would make him feel better and give him warmth. There are various instances where the barren matriarchs initiate the process by handing over their maids as concubines for their husbands. On the other hand, like the Greeks where the children of a concubine were not granted citizenship, the Jews too did not give equal rights to a concubine's children. Thus, property rights belonged to the children of the chief wife, i.e., the legal heirs.

This work aims to evaluate and analyse the rights of concubines in their households, and whether or not they were equal to their mistresses or if a change in status was possible. It will also attempt to look at the relationship between the master and the concubine. Four main incidents are selected for this study,

- A) The tensions that arise between Sarah and Hagar in Genesis 16:4
- B) How Reuben loses the right as the firstborn because he lays with his father's concubine in Genesis 35:22
- C) How the rape of a concubine brings Israel to a civil war
- D) David's treatment towards the ten concubines who were defiled by Absalom in 2 Samuel 20: 3

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