

4. WOMAN IN ANTIQUITY

The Witness from Archaeology

The status of women in the Bronze Age (from 3000 B.C. down to the time of the Judges in Israel) is a rather complicated issue, for there is so much material available from archaeology that it would take years to sort through it, and yet the material does not give a complete picture of every segment of society in every age. We must work with the representative glimpses of life through the records, laws, and covenants left to us from antiquity.

While the written materials do go back to around 3500 B.C., most of them come from the later period, that is, 2000-1000 B.C. (what is called the Middle Bronze Age and then the Late Bronze Age). We are looking at information from ancient Sumer, ancient Egypt, the region of Babylon and Nineveh, the Kingdom of Mari, Nuzu, and ancient Canaan. After surveying some of the findings, we will try to place the biblical material in these settings.

Women and Ancient Laws

Although women did not have all the rights in antiquity that they have today, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that their contributions to culture were significant, and their position was often held in very high regard.

That women were held in great esteem is the only explanation for the ancient dominating “mother-cults” in religion. Woman was the bearer of life, mother of the family, and at times head of the tribe, priestess, and ancestress. As early as ancient Sumer the woman was a central figure in religious conception. The Sumerian word for “rib,” *ti*, also means “create life.” The goddess, Ninti probably meant “female ruler of life.” Kramer pointed out the obvious connections to the Genesis story. And we have already noted the links to Phoenician ideas of the serpent and mother goddess. So the ideas of creation led to a deification of women in antiquity.

But herein is the irony. On the one hand with the idealization of the female mother women held the highest office of priestess, but on the other hand members of the same sex had to serve as slaves in temples. In the so called Uruk period of Sumerian civilization, this tension remained. By 2355 B.C. Urukagina of Lagash attempted reforms to ease the life of the widow and orphan (showing social conditions were unsatisfactory); and yet until this period women had had the right of polyandry.

Women at this time obtained a favorable position even though men dominated society. Women achieved a fair amount of freedom and independence -- at 2000 B.C. they were unconcerned and unafraid when appearing in court. Although the woman was “given” by her parents in marriage, and “taken” by her husband, she could deny herself to her husband and forbid

him to “put his head near her bonnet” without being punished. Later, in the days of Hammurabi (ca 1700), she could be put to death for this. In the Sumerian period the woman could dissolve the marriage; this too changed with Hammurabi’s law code. Nevertheless, rules of marriage were largely organized on patriarchal rules.

The man became master or lord of the family, and the rules from this period gave him absolute control. He could break the teeth of a wife who contradicted him, kill an adulterous wife, or sell or pawn his wife to honor a debt. Those sold had to work off his debts, and their labor could be hard. Hammurabi had rules to protect them, but middle Assyrian laws (12th century) omit such.

The man could divorce his wife rather easily, especially if she bore no children. He had to pay fine money and return the dowry she had brought him. But it was abominable for her to ask for a divorce since she had become his possession. That possession occurred at marriage when he paid a bride price for her. At that time she would refuse if there were legitimate reasons. Later, only harsh punishment awaited her if she sought to end the marriage. It was scandalous. One text from Nuzi (1500) tells of a woman’s garments torn from her body before she was chased from the house. However, at this time (late second millennium) there seems to be more tolerance since threats disappear from marriage contracts.

It also happened in royal families. In Ugarit (1250 B.C. Caanan) King Ammistamru II had several children by his wife, but she “gave him only headaches.” He divorced her. His sovereign overlord, the Great Tudhaliyas IV of the Hittites, approved it, and ruled any son siding with the mother lost succession rights. The man had to return the dowry, but could keep the children. Variations of this are found outside the court.

Adultery by the wife was punished severely. This may be singled out because adultery in the man was not as easily discovered--their form of marriage gave him a principal wife, concubines, and slaves, so as to ensure having descendants. Laws of Eshnunna (2nd millennium) gave the adulterous wife the death penalty. Hittite Laws allowed the husband to take her to the gate (= court) and declare, “My wife does not die.”

Women living together in households were not equally esteemed. The principal wife was the mistress of the home; she was anxious not to have her authority overstepped by a concubine or slave. Women with children were held in higher regard and granted greater legal rights.

In the work place the records as early as the 3rd millennium list occupations for women as potters, weavers, spinners, hairdressers, agricultural workers, barmaids, brewers, cooks, bakers, etc. Their wages were paid in kind, but generally were lower than those of men.

A Sumerian document tells us girls had to go to school as well as boys, until they could manage reading and writing. A good number of women became scribes. Even a midwife had to be educated, for she was known as “the woman who knows the inside.”

Women are represented in images and texts as famous singers who could perform artistically, accompanied by instrumental music (by men and women). They performed mostly in palaces and temples. They had to “settle down and learn” their art. In the temple at Nippur (mid-

2nd millennium) there was a clinic for singers who fell ill (coughs, colic, fever). They were well cared for, since a high official kept the court informed of their recovery.

This high regard did not carry over to women in other businesses. And woman could ply any trade on their own. There were “dream interpreters,” “collectors of salt,” “chemists” (two Mesopotamian women of the 13th century), and other more normal jobs. The female publican seems often to have been in trouble with the law--rigging prices, fraud, deceiving customers. The “beer women” were very sturdy. One of them, an innkeeper called Kubaba, succeeded in becoming one of the few independently ruling queens of the ancient Near East (2500 B.C.). Women could have almost any job, and they usually retained civil rights that went with them. They were entitled to carry on the business of law concerning their own affairs, even using their own seal to seal documents. Often, however, the husbands of women had to be present to give consent, probably when common possessions were involved. Many documents and contracts do not refer to the husband.

One group of women who were powerful and active in legal matters were the priestesses. In Old Babylonian there were several types: the *entum*, *nadiatum*, *shugitum*, *zikrum*, *qadishtum*, *ishtaritum*, and *kulmashitum*. The *nadiatum* were dedicated as children by their parents and seem to have lived in convents. There were many supervisors in these houses (so that the women be irreproachable); but the head warden was a male *sangu-priest*. Orders were not strict, though, as the *nadiatum* lived fairly normal lives, many of them becoming influential business women. They were, though, a privileged group, able to dispose of their dowries, inherit like sons, and marry if they chose (although not to have children; if they wanted children the Code of Hammurapi allowed concubines). These priestesses who were from the royal family were especially wealthy. Itani, daughter of Samsuiluna, had to have a large team of officials to manage her estates, which included a thousand head of cattle. All were not this wealthy, but all were well off.

Priestesses were connected with criminal events too, at times the victims, at times the criminals. Beatings, robberies, rapes, repeated sexual intercourse with the *en-priestess* were not unusual. Priestesses were often guilty of robbing the temples. A text from Elam in 1500 B.C. tells of four female guards who tried to tie gold pieces to their private clothes. Priestesses who went to beer halls were severely punished. They were the elite, and had to act that way. The ties between temple and palace solidified the hold the upper class had on economics and religion.

The slave woman seems to have been of greater importance to life in the ancient East. They were employed in every occupation. Notable is a dress factory in the temple of the moon god at Ur, which employed 98 women and 63 children. The value of an efficient slave was recognized; in Hammurapi’s time a female slave cost the same as one head of cattle. A female slave could be a marketable commodity, valued worker, or even a concubine. If she obtained favor in the home or market, the man could free her. Most slaves in antiquity came as prisoners of war; but there are reports that people in debt sold themselves into slavery.

Especially sad are the cases of young girls torn from home and sold, usually to prostitution. This was a lucrative business, as texts from Larsa (18th century) boldly affirm. Girls

were “adopted” and had to support their mistresses. Yet there are cases where runaways were given their freedom.

Slaves could work their way up by marriage or by liaisons, even to become queen. But these cases do not give the normal picture of the masses of slaves who never rose to such heights as to own a business, buy slaves, or gain freedom. Most often they were not free, and not treated as human beings.

Marriage and Family Life

Contrary to today, marriage in the ancient world was a matter of utility and common sense, for the family was a kind of emerging community. The rule was to have as many children as possible, and the more sons the better. The choice for marriage was usually made by parents, sometimes the girl being betrothed as early as three.

Matrimonial arrangements involved finances. Any renunciation or ruin of the plan involved financial loss. Great value was placed on the virginity of the bride as part of the bargain. If a girl was raped, the man had to marry her or pay triple; if she was engaged, he was to be put to death. All details of financial settlements had to be put into contract form. But the haggling took place between the families, and the girl had little to say in it, although she could protest the amounts offered.

Marriage rituals of the free citizens were lavish, the celebration lasting for days. It would all be costly for the bride’s family--gifts for the gods, gifts for the groom, feasting for the guests. The bride bathed herself, anointed herself, and put on colored make-up to increase the charm of her face. The veiling of the woman by her husband signaled her change in status.

Although the wife was subordinated to her husband (e.g., she could not contradict him in public), the two of them shared life fairly well. From the letters and documents we have it is easy to see the love and respect they often had for each other. Husbands often made donations to their wives’ future well-being and put clauses in the contracts to protect them. In one proverb a wife is called a man’s “refuge,” his son his “future,” and his daughter his “salvation.” One toast adds this wish: “May Inanna cause a hot-limbed wife to lie down for you, may she bestow upon you broad-armed sons, may she seek out for you a place of happiness.”

Anything that threatened the birth of children was a crime. Abortion was the most outrageous crime; it was punished by impalement and denial of internment. The female demon Lamashtum was greatly feared, for she destroyed children at childbirth. So magic and incantations were used to ward her off. The midwife even had to inspect the new born child to see if its condition might portend disaster. On rare occasion such children might be abandoned.

Bringing up children carried many of the problems still common today, such as favoritism and discipline. On occasion a daughter could be put in authority over younger brothers. But the mother was the center of the home, taking care of food, clothing and school needs. If there were

a lot of children, the task was more difficult. One record tells of a woman with eight sons who was afraid to enter her husband's chamber again.

Girls were prepared for marriage. Their education involved all the domestic things necessary to marriage and family. They learned to write, sing, dance, play, and do various occupations. They had time to play and flirt as well.

While there are many glimpses of the ideal family life--texts, wall paintings, letters--it should also be stated that married women did not always find it easy to live with their husbands, family, or children.

Sacred Marriage

Sex had an important role in old oriental religion, unlike Christianity. Coition was elevated to a sanctified act in worship, and even prostitution was a part of the ritual. Their religion, made up on many anthropomorphic gods, reserved for sexual pleasure a space so wide that we can only begin to imagine how it was carried out.

Many of the ancient cultures included in their annual ritual what is known as the "Sacred Marriage" (a euphemism), the important festival of love and fertility, which was a part of the New Year's festival. It was the wedding feast of a divine couple, the love of the mother goddess and her divine lover. The two were represented by the high priestess and the king or high priest. This orgiastic ritual was intended to further fertility on the earth, and to guarantee rulership for another year. The ritual has detailed texts (not usually available to public readers, or, at one time put in Latin so only scholars can read them), descriptions in carving and drawings, and many erotic love songs. From all we can tell, the festival ended with a general orgy of the participants. The ceremony is as early as the Sumerian cult of Inanna and Tumuzi, and as late as the 4th century B.C. It was, no doubt, conducted in a variety of ways.

In all probability many of the songs recited were composed by the priestesses who took part in the ritual. Some of them are preserved in picture and word: Encheduanna was the *en-priestess* of the god of Nanna and the daughter of Sargon of Akkad (2300 B.C.); she was a bride of the Sacred Marriage and became famous through her lengthy poem.

Brides of this *hieros gamos*, as it is called, were high order priestesses. They thus also occupied influential roles in society. Their roles in this cultic ritual must not be confused with the more common "temple prostitution," practiced as a part of the cult by lower grade priestesses, the hierodules, although both were based on the mystic veneration of procreating as a divine act. Over the years it degenerated into plain prostitution, the temple chests being filled by "business."

As might be expected there were some towns that abounded in such customs. Uruk, for example, by the middle of the 2nd millennium, was called "the town of strumpets, prostitutes, and harlots." Most of their activities were restricted to the temple, under a female warden; but they are also present in the street and by the shade of the wall. There were different ranks involved, but

most dedicated to the honor of the goddess. Their activities have been portrayed in scenes on amulets providing magic for fertility or love.

These women were not thought dishonorable. The goddesses they represented --Inanna, Nininsina, Ninlil, Nintu, Ishtar, Anat, and others--were themselves heavenly hierodules, performing the same “creative acts” within the pantheon.

In time profane prostitution increased. Hierodules found stiff competition from public prostitutes. This may be due in part to the changes in society, the middle class gradually declining into lower and poorer ones, causing desperate means of making a living. Fathers often sold their daughters, under the camouflage of ancient “adoption” rites. Accordingly, the social status of hierodules sank to that of the prostitute. Middle Assyrian laws, therefore, strictly forbid unmarried hierodules, prostitutes, and female slaves to veil themselves or cover their heads; this was the privilege of respectable Assyrian women.

This reflects the irony of the age--the art of love of the goddess is highly praised and extolled in religion, but is also despised and reviled. Fathers warned their sons against marrying a prostitute or temple harlot, whose husbands were legion; they also felt shamed if their daughters were dedicated to the temple.

Women of this profession often exercised their trade in public houses and inns, known for meetings of all kinds of rabble. “Respectable” priestesses of higher levels could not enter here. But laws protected women even though morals were very low in such settings. Only later in the Persian period are such women treated with utter contempt. The texts, however, record how these women were proud of the profession, and of their abilities in sex.

The numbers of women hierodules seem to be very high, some temples down to the Greco-Roman period employing thousands of women. But in the later period cultures retained little of the original “holy ritual.” On the one hand, in antiquity, all the normal aspects of love were included--fervent wooing, demure refusal, appropriate settings, clothing, cosmetics, wine, music, and magic potion--but on the other hand the presence of the magician priest to ensure through incantation the proper fertility showed there was a loftier portent to the “sacred marriage.” Accordingly, strict rules of holiness and purity accompanied the earliest rituals, but not so in the later ones. Ritual baths, separation rites, and the refraining from unclean individuals, all carried great symbolism for the ancients.

Women Rulers and Life in the Harem

Although the life of the common woman is relatively unknown to us, the life of the women in court is abundantly clear. The Hittite kings and the Assyrian kings (14th--11th centuries) leave us the most copious rulings for palace and harem women; whether they are using earlier prototypes is as yet unknown.

Life in the harem, according to these texts, was not very “romantic.” The regulations were not for their comfort, but the king's convenience. The king's will was law; everything catered to his will. The women were screened off from the entire world inside the palace. They belonged to different groups and were ranked accordingly. But women of different rankings, backgrounds, and ages all lived together. No eunuchs or courtiers could come within seven steps of the women, and that only under supervision; neither could they eavesdrop on palace women who quarreled or used abusive language. The women were reprimanded for quarrels, scuffles, or being insufficiently clothed. The wives of the king often resorted to physical force to solve problems in the harem. One rule prescribed throat-cutting for dishonorable behavior.

Everyday life for palace women was monotonous, giving opportunity for passions to clash. They spent their time dancing, playing (there were many singers and musicians in the palace), child-rearing, weaving, spinning, etc. Any interruption of the routine was welcomed by the women. Certainly every woman in the palace at some time or another tried to make contact, or even escape from the harem. Cases of bribery of the wardens were not all that rare.

Illicit intimate relations with a woman of the harem was severely punished. Even looking indecently at one, or trying to speak to one, was punishable. The warden was to cut off all contact outside the palace.

Women in harems often slept during the day, so as to be fresh for the night when they had to spend time as concubines with singing and music. They also accompanied the king on hunting trips. Any visit of the king to the harem aroused much excitement, the women wondering who might be chosen for love.

These women had an economically secure existence. But they paid for it with their freedom. They were prisoners. The queen was different. She could occupy a dominating position, whether she was the wife or the mother of the king. In the Hittite empire the queens even held an office with administrative rights. Many queens became famous; but in contrast to the masses of ancient women, they were the few privileged ones.

As a rule, queens held absolute power only as temporary rulers for the minor heir apparent. But some, like the Assyrian Semiramis, gained power as an energetic ruler. A number of women ruled in their own right; but since most political power was achieved through military might, kingship was the norm. After all, warfare in antiquity involved marching twenty miles in heavy armor and then fighting in hand-to-hand combat to the death. Most of the ancient records of kings are about warfare and building programs (necessitated by wars).

Many kings, as well as princes, gradually recognized their wives as their equals, giving them titles and powers that could not be removed even with the death of the king. The Hittite queen Puduhepa, wife of Hattusilis III (1289-1265) is the best example of this. Even in international treaties, Ramses II of Egypt addressed her as well as Hattusilis in the correspondence.

The queen mother occupied a position of great power, because she retained her status after the king's death. But if she tried to influence the new king too much, the royal family could be

disrupted. The king then might remove her from office (see 1 Kings 15:13). She might, however, exert a powerful influence in the succession of the throne (as did Bathsheba for Solomon).

Princesses were often destined for marriage to foreign princes to seal treaties and friendships. The more of these there were in the harem the more the king was known as an international power.

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The Witness of the Bible

When we study the biblical passages from the so-called patriarchal age against this well-documented background we can gain a greater appreciation for and understanding of the struggle for goodness, righteousness, and fulfillment in a pagan world. The lives of the famous people in the Bible are a mixture of the influence of the world and the calling of God. A thorough understanding of this time would require a study of both women and men in the Bible--but we shall be focusing on the women primarily.

The Mesopotamian Background

The Family of Cain. Genesis 4 traces the line of Cain which is characterized by open rebellion against God. By the time we get to Lamech (4:19), we can see how the knowledge of good and evil finds expression. On the positive side the race can produce culture--cities, musical instruments, implements of all kinds. But on the negative side the race overstepped its bounds--there was the killing of the youth, the belligerent taunt of vengeance, and **bigamy**.

Why or how Lamech came to have two wives is not explained. But the notice fits perfectly into the ancient world that saw the births of children as a top priority. Yet multiplying wives went beyond God's design in creation--one man and one woman united together as one flesh. Both Malachi (2:15) and Jesus (Matt. 19:5) would remind their audiences that "in the beginning" it was not God's design for a man to have more than one wife, not at the same time, and not one after another.

In the patriarchal world multiple wives and concubines was the common culture. God does not seem to interrupt it suddenly when he called Abram; but several points need to be made here:

1. In most cases where there were multiple wives there was conflict and lasting trouble (Sarah and Hagar, Rachel and Leah [see Lev. 19:19], Hannah and Peninnah, David's wives, and Solomon's wives).
2. In the early periods the main line of inheritance came through the child of the first or legitimate wife (Isaac through Sarah, Judah through Leah).
3. After the time of the birth of Samuel, there is no evidence of a commoner having more than one wife. Kings, yes; but common people, no. This is not to say they did not have them--just that no text in the Bible records it.
4. Classical works like Proverbs simply assume one father and one mother teaching wisdom to the children.

One can only conclude that the early change of God's institution of marriage, whether due to a desire for children or a seeking of power over other people-- especially women--was completely out of harmony with the will of God. Its painful results far outweighed any benefits one might have derived.

The Daughters of Men. Genesis 6:1-2 records the troubling accounts of the "sons of God" seeing "the daughters of men" and taking all they wished. Many views have been presented of this chapter, but not many of them satisfactory. For example, to make the "sons of God" the godly line and the "daughters of men" the ungodly line fails on several accounts: (1) it would make men righteous and women unrighteous--but only in the lines of Seth and Cain respectively, leaving the others unaccounted for; (2) it ignores the fact that all were evil and perished in the Flood; (3) it leaves in doubt how such marriages produced giants; and (4) it does not do justice to the language--"sons of God" is a reference to angelic powers in the Bible.

So we have to look for a better explanation. I have found the view of Umberto Cassuto (*Genesis: From Adam to Noah* [Jerusalem: Magnes Press]) helpful here, and adopted it in *Creation and Blessing* (Baker Book House). The "sons of God" would be a reference to the powerful despots--kings, warriors--of the ancient world. They were powerful because they were empowered by spirit forces--fallen angels or demons (examples: Prince of Tyre in Ezekiel 28; Prince of Persia in Daniel 10:13). These would be the angels that did not keep their first habitation and as a result are confined for the day of judgment (2 Peter 2:4, 5; Jude v.6), the "spirits" that Jesus went and preached to after he conquered sin and death and the grave (1 Peter 3:18-20).

What makes this such a helpful interpretation is that it not only makes sense out of the passage but fits the context of the ancient world. The powerful leaders thought they were gods, demigods, or the offspring of gods through the "Sacred Marriage." Immortality was achieved through the "marriage"--so they thought. But Genesis declares that they are but flesh, and will all die in the Flood in 120 years. So much for pagan mythology and the "Sacred Marriage."

One can hardly minimize the importance of Genesis 6. It undermines the religious world view of the ancient people. Divine judgment would not completely do away with the beliefs, but it sounded the warning and curtailed the great evil as it was developing. This understanding gives

greater significance to Jesus' statement that before the Flood "they were marrying and giving in marriage" (Matt. 24:38). What they were doing had to be wicked enough to warrant the judgment--not just living there lives and getting married.

Taking the "daughters of men" then, refers to the building of harems by powerful leaders, for their own satisfaction both physically and religiously as they sought perpetual life or immortality on the one hand, and peace and power with other nations on the other. God declared that their evil doomed the race. Only four couples would be spared from the catastrophe.

This pagan mentality of building harems was outlawed in the Law for Israel (Deut. 17). David and Solomon surely violated it, acting like pagan kings. In fact, by making subtle allusions to Genesis 6, 12, and 20--seeing a woman "very beautiful of appearance" and "taking her"--the Bible shows that David in 2 Samuel 11 was acting just like the ancient, power-hungry pagan potentates.

The Hurrian Culture

When we move to the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we enter the Hurrian culture, for the families were originally from Haran, on the northern edge of the Fertile Crescent. The tablets discovered at Mari on the Euphrates as well as Nuzu detail for us the customs that make these stories live--concubines, slave wives, rules for adoption, selling a birthright, deathbed wills, and the like.

Sarah. Sarah, the wife of Abraham, is one of the most interesting people to study in this period, for she is very much a woman of her times, but she also grows in her faith along with Abraham. These considerations surface in a study of Sarah.

1. Sarah was a regal person.

Her name (Sarai and Sarah are dialectical variants) probably reflects the family's worship of gods and goddesses, Sarai being connected to a goddess in Ur, for *sarra[tu]* was the wife of the moon god Sin (see Josh. 24:2). This places her life in the ancient cultural circumstances. But here is the main problem--she is barren. When we read that in Genesis, we know it is a major theme of the book, but we often miss the impact that it would have had in the ancient world. To be barren was simply not acceptable in that culture. Of course, the point in the Bible is that a birth to such a woman was evidence of divine intervention--the one born was truly a God-send.

Sarah is also Abraham's sister (half-sister, Genesis 20:12). E.A. Speiser has argued that to be a "sister" as well as a wife elevated Sarah in the social levels of the ancient world--a joint-heir

as it were (see his commentary on Genesis as well as “The Wife-Sister Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives” in *Oriental and Biblical Studies*, ed. by Finkelstein and Greenberg). No doubt Pharaoh’s interest in Sarai was motivated by her regal status as well as her beauty. After all, Abram and Sarai are on the same social level as the ruling princes of Egypt. Her beauty is that of a woman half way through her life who has yet to have children.

2. Sarah struggled in her faith.

Two events reveal Sarah’s (understandable) struggle with the new found faith. The first is the use of Hagar in Genesis 16. Sarai suggested that Abram take the slave girl Hagar as a wife. Under the social custom of the day if a woman was barren she could give her servant to her husband to bear a child for her. The husband would have to adopt the child officially before that child could be an heir, but it was a way to increase the family. This was antiquity’s form of the surrogate mother in the modern world--with the same ensuing legal complications.

The incident turned out badly. Sarai and Abram were on edge with each other (16:5 means “God will get you for this”), Hagar seemed to taunt her mistress, and Sarai oppressed the girl. We read of such tensions and fights in the records of antiquity, for human emotion would have had difficulty with trading such privileges and intimacies--no matter what culture allows.

God protected and blessed Hagar--but as the use of terms indicates God left her in her status as a servant and not “the wife,” for he always calls her “Sarai’s servant.” But Abram and Sarai were rebuked through it all for their lack of faith and impatience. They should have prayed and waited (the names say a great deal: “Ishmael” is “God hears” and “Beerlahairoi” is “the well of the God who sees”). So Sarai resorted to social custom, but God was not moving with culture but against culture. Abram, in the story, appears passive, a pawn in Sarai’s hand, but blameworthy nonetheless (as the allusion to Gen. 3:17 shows), blamed by Sarai when Hagar gets pregnant, and blamed by God when Hagar brought the Word of the LORD back to him (also, compare 16:2 with 3:17). Hagar is a woman of faith, being rescued by God, given a covenant for her son, instructed to take the word back to the household.

The second event in Sarai’s struggle is her laughter in Genesis 18. The background is Genesis 17, with two significant ideas. One is that Abraham laughed, giving rise to the name of the child--“Isaac” (Hebrew: *way-yitshaq*--“[and] he laughed” so the name would be “he laughs” or “may he laugh”). Sarah in chapter 18, like Abraham in chapter 17, laughed. They both stumbled at the promise, now being well beyond the time of bearing children, let alone having sexual pleasure (as Sarah says in 18:12). But the point is clear: a sure word from God was laughed at. The other point in chapter 17 is that God promised that “kings” were going to come from Sarai’s womb (making her a queen mother many times over--that is power), and then he pledged this promise by changing her name to **Sarah** (just an alteration in the spelling to signify the change in status). Here too God was elevating the woman to the highest level, for the mother of a king had the same power and prestige in the ancient world as the king. But then when the LORD assured a birth in the coming year Sarah staggered in her faith. It seemed impossible. But this is the point--God promises and commands the impossible.

3. Sarah's faith is confirmed.

Finally, as the LORD said, Sarah gave birth to a son, the child of promise, Isaac (Gen. 21:1-7). The theme of laughter is picked again, but now turned from unbelief to triumph--the LORD made her laugh (v.6)! Sarah's words show that she acknowledged the change, both in her circumstances and in her faith. She now became the matriarch, the ancestress of the family of promise. Scripture remembers her well as a devout believer. And she will become the first in the covenant to be buried in the land of promise as a pledge for the future (Gen. 23).

Hagar. Hagar also makes an interesting study. She was an unfortunate woman, a victim in many ways, oppressed, used, driven out on her own; but she was also fortunate, for she was better off with Abraham and Sarah than in Egypt with Pharaoh, and also God championed her cause and promised her a future. Usually Hagar is so identified with the Ishmaelites--the enemies of Israel--that she has no chance of our regard. And then familiarity with Paul's application of Genesis in Galatians 4:24 has led people (incorrectly) to assume she was not a believer. There is an interesting, albeit not completely satisfying, treatment of Hagar by Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 9-36.

Hagar is unfortunate in that she was caught in a culture that normally would use her and give her the hope of elevation in status. Trible documents the terms used to describe Hagar, showing the normally expected rise in stature was dashed by Sarai's oppression of her. She would flee from her mistress, only to be returned by God; then she would be dismissed when Ishmael rivaled Isaac, only to be blessed by God.

Her faith appears vital, however. In her flight from Sarai (Gen. 16) she cried to God who "sees" her--and this she acknowledged with the naming of Beerlahairoi. Then, she believed God's word, promising Ishmael and instructing her to return and submit, and she returned and instructed Abram to name the boy "Ishmael." Hagar, then, became the recipient and reporter of divine revelation (other women in the Bible were also instructed by God to go and tell men what God was doing--it makes an interesting study). Later, when Hagar and Ishmael were sent out, he being a threat to Isaac, God protected and provided for them in the desert (Gen. 21). The symbol of water in the wilderness was always a sign of divine blessing; and the word of God making a covenant with Ishmael was evidence that God had not cast them off. God champions the outcast, the widow, orphan, slave wife, and the oppressed. Of course, Ishmael and his descendants would have to believe in the LORD to share in the blessings.

Rebekah. The wife of Isaac figures prominently in three episodes; and like her husband she is exemplary in the first two, but not the last.

1. Rebekah complied with God's will.

Genesis 24 records the story of finding a bride for Isaac. Abraham's servant is the dominant character throughout, faithfully seeking the LORD's leading to find a bride. He eventually found his way to Laban's house, and insisted on settling the matter of the marriage before receiving his own hospitality. This he did by recounting how the LORD led him all the way.

The passage is interesting because of the marriage customs. The servant brings the enormous gift for the bride price, deals with the elder brother Laban instead of the father directly, secures the will of the woman to return to Isaac, and finally presents her to Isaac--veiled--to be the new matriarch of the clan (she enters Sarah's tent).

But it is Rebekah's will to go with this servant. Her family was convinced that God led the servant to them, but they wanted to delay the matter. It was Rebekah who insisted on going without delay.

2. Rebekah sought the LORD.

Rebekah, like Sarah, was barren for some time -- twenty years. But the contrast between the two situations is striking: instead of resorting to a custom about slave wives Isaac and Rebekah prayed. It is interesting that they were living in Beerlahairoi, where God met Hagar. Had they taken the lesson from Hagar to heart?

When God answered their prayer and enabled Rebekah to become pregnant, there was trouble in her womb. So she went to enquire of the LORD. We really do not know where she went. She could have gone to Abraham (he lived until Jacob and Esau were fifteen), or to Melchizedek, or simply into solitude. But the expression usually suggests someone is sought for divine answers. The trouble was explained that twins were in her womb and they would be progenitors of antagonistic tribes.

Thus, the hand of God was doubly shown to be upon this woman. Passages that show the opening of a barren womb, or some such divine intervention, are intended to signal the birth of someone of destiny. Moreover, when a divine oracle is granted to someone, then the event figures prominently in the history of redemption. Rebekah is highly favored among women.

2. Rebekah complicated life with deception.

Genesis 27 is a tangled mess of human frailties. The story is well known: Isaac planned to bless his favorite son, but Rebekah ensured that her favorite son would receive the blessing by helping him deceive the father. This is a dis-functional family. Genesis 25 already has informed us that Isaac loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob -- and this pattern of favoritism would plague the family for generations. Now, in Genesis 27, we see a fragmented family. There are several scenes in this story; and no more than two family members are on stage together at any one time. Not only that, they respond incorrectly. At a time of crisis when they should have sought

God's will, they make all their choices by the senses -- smelling, touching, hearing, tasting, seeing (or not seeing). In the end, all are punished.

Rebekah was the prime mover in the deception. She convinced Jacob to dress as Esau, even placing a curse on herself if it didn't work. She then reproduced Esau's cooking (had she often fumed under Isaac's preference for his game). It worked! Jacob was blessed, Isaac rebuked, and Esau left out in the cold. But Jacob had to flee from the nest he was feathering and do twenty years with Uncle Laban; and Rebekah would never see her favorite son again.

Rebekah and Jacob were two of a kind. They believed in the LORD, but were not going to wait for the LORD to work things out. Jacob's savvy in crises was probably inherited from Rebekah. But Rebekah surely has not been the only one to panic in a crisis and try to resolve matters by scheming manipulation.

Rachel and Leah. With these two women, and their maidservants, we catch a full viewing of life in the Hurrian culture. The story of their marriages to Jacob is well-known and need not be retold here. Rather, we shall look at some significant features about the women.

Rachel was Jacob's chosen bride; but through the deception of Laban she was cheated out of the privilege. Jacob had worked for seven years for her--that is quite a bride's price; but then he had to promise seven more years to get her with Leah. So in the story we see genuine love between Jacob and Rachel, as well as labor for the bride price.

But Rachel also was barren for some time before she had Joseph. And in her contest with Leah she did not handle it very well. She became angry with Jacob when desperate for a child, Consequently she resorted to her maid servant for an avenue for child bearing. On one occasion she resorted to magic, acquiring Reuben's mandrakes to do the job--but Leah became pregnant with Issachar. Finally, she had Joseph, and by faith announced that God had taken away (*'asaph*) her reproach, and prayed that God would add (*yoseph*) another son. The name Joseph preserves that prayer.

Rachel got her revenge on her father when the family stole away for Canaan. In Genesis 31, when Laban overtook them at Galeed, Rachel hid his household idols in her trunk and sat on it, claiming to be on her period. It never dawned on Laban that she would do that--gods and menstruation were kept apart (see Lev. 15). But Laban was defenseless, he thought, without them. In the process of getting even with her father, Rachel put a curse on herself (v. 32).

This oath probably came to fruition with the birth of Benjamin in Genesis 35, for Rachel died in childbirth. Nevertheless, the birth of Benjamin was an answer to prayer: "may he add another son."

So Rachel, Jacob's chosen and loved wife, had to endure the humiliation and conflict of the polygamous marriage, but did have her share in the birth of the "tribes" of Israel. Her hard death near Bethlehem became a by-word for lamentation--"Rachel weeping for her children," as expressed by Jeremiah, and quoted in the slaughter of the innocents under Herod the Great (Matt. 2:18).

Leah seems to be a bit more spiritually sensitive, perhaps as a consolation for being unloved. It is easy to understand her plight--it was necessary for her to comply with Laban in the deception. He could arrange it; but Leah had to pull it off. She could not really expect to be appreciated, let alone loved, by Jacob, or Rachel. Yet, she probably saw no other opportunity for marriage. Jacob may not have loved Leah --but he did visit her tent on occasion.

Leah's faith shows up in her naming of her children. She called her first born Reuben, saying, "The LORD has looked on (*ra'ah b'onyi*) my affliction." Her second was Simeon--"God has heard (*shama*')." Then there was Levi; "now my husband will be joined (*lawah*) to me." But it was not to be. So when Judah was born, she said, "I will praise (*'odeh*) the LORD." Jacob was a lost hope now, but she was fruitful--a sign of God's blessing, and for this she was grateful.

Life in such a polygamous marriage was very stressful, even though they were all believers. Favoritism was expressed often; angry words were exchanged frequently; and divisions were begun that would remain for centuries and split the nation into two kingdoms. They traded things above trading, and employed customs that were not at the heart of God's design for marriage. But in his grace God blessed them with families, the desire of women in antiquity. These two women, the Book of Ruth says, built the house of Israel.

Since Genesis is primarily concerned with tracing the development of the family into a great nation, it focuses on marriages and births. Only incidentally do we catch a glimpse of other phases of life. For example, the only cooking mentioned in these stories is Abraham fixing a meal for the visitors (Gen. 18) and Rebekah duplicating Esau's meal of game (Gen. 27). Taking care of sheep and goats is ascribed to both men and women. More strenuous activities like opening wells, digging the wells, fights and wars, are the activities of men. For the daily bedouin life we must rely on other accounts and other times for our information.

Dinah. Before leaving this part of the survey there are two women whose lives reach the crisis level that we must consider--Dinah and Tamar. Dinah is the daughter of Jacob who was date-raped (Gen. 34).

We do not know a great deal about Dinah--before or after--because the chapter's purpose is to show the violence of Simeon and Levi that cost them the blessing. Dinah's rape is the occasion for their slaughter. But we do learn some things about women's life in antiquity.

Dinah went out to see the daughters of the land. The verb "to see" describes an close investigation. At the outset we should note that the chapter serves to warn Israel not to mingle with Canaanites; but on the personal level the chapter shows a young woman intrigued with how pagan women lived, and she found out how pagans live.

This rape is complicated by the following facts: the language of the text is that which is normally reserved for loving couple ("lay with her") but with a crude twist (the preposition is not there: "laid her"); the young man "fell in love" in some sense with Dinah and wanted to marry her, the families were from foreign and incompatible tribes, the father of the man had hidden motives, and Jacob seemed indifferent because Dinah was Leah's daughter and not Rachel's. Later, under the Law, it would be clear: if he forced her against her will (she cried out) he would be put to death,

but if she was willing (or didn't protest), then he was to marry her if the father was willing; if the father was not willing, then the man had to pay the bride price anyway. In this chapter, Jacob did nothing, and Leah' brothers overreacted. They used deception to weaken the tribe and then slaughter the entire tribe. What is so bad is that they used the sign of the covenant as the means of deception.

Nothing more is heard of Dinah. She was certainly avenged in the story, but would be ruined for the kind of marriage agreement that women of antiquity expected. In fact the evil Canaanite society no doubt ruined scores of women daily. I shall return to this in the period of the kingdom.

Tamar. Genesis 38 records how this Canaanite woman married into Judah's corrupt family and survived not one but two wicked husbands. Tamar became a childless widow--a hopeless plight in antiquity, except for the law of Levirate marriage. But Judah was irresponsible. So after Judah's wife died, Tamar went into action to fight for her right to be the mother of Judah's children. Her only means--so she thought--was to deceive Judah and have his child. It was terribly risky for her, and almost cost her her life; but she was well within her rights. God used her to continue the line of Judah.

The story is interesting for several reasons. First, it shows the great drive of women to be mothers in that culture. With Tamar, we see a very courageous woman. We might say that she was in the forefront of the women's rights of her day. Second, the choice of words in the story reveals different kinds of prostitutes. Tamar dressed up like a *whore* (*zonah*) to deceive Judah; but Judah's friend went looking for a *cult-prostitute* (*q^edeshah*). Apparently Judah had some scruples about going to a cult woman, and his friend would never think of going to a street woman. Third, the story shows the age-old double standard. When Tamar became pregnant Judah wanted her killed; when he became known as the father, then all was forgiven. The irony is that their sexual intercourse was for him a sin but for her a responsible family act.

The Egyptian World

The Egyptian world was very different from the Semitic world of the patriarchs. It was a completely totalitarian society, whereas Mesopotamia was more democratic. Moreover, it was a dark society, preoccupied with death and demons (as was Babylon, but Egypt began forming half-human, half-animal spirits and gods). Life was hot and uncomfortable in Egypt; lice were such a problem women often shaved and wore wigs. But all life was tied to the Nile and its productivity.

Potipher's Wife. Into this world stepped Joseph. Young, healthy, handsome. Potipher's wife wanted him, and went after him. But once spurned she falsely accused him to land him in prison. On the human level one must conclude that Potipher did not really believe his wife, or the penalty on Joseph would have been more severe. Had he prior difficulty with this woman? But on the narrative level the incident is used as a test for Joseph.

The Joseph Story is not wisdom literature per se, but it is cast in that theme. Joseph is the archetypal leader--his story shows how wisdom rules. A careful study of Joseph in connection with Proverbs would be in order. But this event is to be studied in conjunction with Proverbs 5-7. The naive young prince in Proverbs is warned not to turn aside to the seductive foreign woman, for that would be the ruin of his life. Joseph perceived the folly in trying to serve God and disobey God at the same time. He proved himself wise. Nothing is heard of Potipher's wife again.

Asenath. Asenath was the daughter of the priest of On who was given to Joseph as a wife. It was a fixed marriage of state, for Joseph was elevated to Second in the Kingdom. We know nothing of Asenath; and this has led many to concoct all kinds of theories about her. The earliest classical novel is about Joseph and Asenath.

What is important is that even though Joseph married an Egyptian the children were given Hebrew names (Ephraim and Manasseh) with meanings that spoke of hope in the land of promise. Unlike Solomon, Joseph did not apparently change his faith to that of his wife. In fact, this evidence from the names has led many to conclude that Asenath embraced Joseph's faith. If anyone could be that influential, Joseph could. Of course, their life in government may not have been that normal.

The Hebrew Midwives. The Book of Exodus records the major events in the period of Israel's bondage in Egypt. The first chapter describes the phenomenal growth of the population in terms of the creation account in Genesis (Exodus 1:7), showing their fruitfulness was all God's doing. But, of course, Israel's faith cooperated with divine providence--under great persecution the Israelites chose to be obedient to the covenant to become a great nation.

The Egyptian ruling class became threatened and ordered all male babies to be destroyed. This is a strange order, killing off one's workers. It must have been temporary, to curb the rapid growth of Hebrews. The whole matter is easier to understand if we fit the event into the earlier date when the Hyksos ruled Egypt. The Hebrews were beginning to outnumber this foreign ruling class, not the native Egyptians. So a cruel decree was made.

The heads of the midwives, however, did not comply with the order. Exodus records their stand as an act of faith; God blessed their "civil disobedience" of the wicked order, giving them also full households. Their deception of Pharaoh shows a necessary ploy--they merely side-stepped his question. To them, correctly so, it was more important to save lives.

Women and the Birth of Moses. In Exodus 2 we have the account of the preservation of baby Moses by women. This account has all the features of a Hebrew story in which God acts through circumstances and people. The characters are typical: Pharaoh tries to be shrewd but becomes the fool; the princess is sensitive and positive; and Miriam is clever and ready.

The story works around the plot for the destruction of the Hebrew children by throwing them into the river. In a sense Jochebed threw her baby into the river--but in a basket. She never intended to abandon the child. That is why Miriam is the key to the story--she guided the child from the mother to the princess to the mother again.

The element that comes through in this story is irony. The first two sections of the story show how Pharaoh was undone by things that he thought to be weak. Although he was afraid of the warriors outnumbering his ruling class, he was not defeated by that. The foil for his plot came from the midwives, a woman, a girl, and his own daughter. The note of irony comes out the strongest in the fact that it was Pharaoh's own decree that determined that the females were harmless enough and could be spared.

1. The Hiding of the Infant.

The first few verses record the birth of Moses and his being hid from the decree of Pharaoh. The marriage, the birth of a child, the hiding in the river, and the positioning of Miriam, are all acts of faith. Israel's flourishing and prospering in Egypt were the work of God; the people followed the plan of God, and so in spite of the harsh reality of Pharaoh's decree, this couple has a baby.

One of the connecting links between the sections of the story is the repeated verb "when she saw"--when the mother saw the child, she desired to protect it; when the princess saw the child, she desired to save it. The effect of a healthy baby on two women spoiled the evil of Pharaoh, and prepared the way for the deliverance of Israel. But the wording of the verse--"when she saw that he was good" seems also to be an allusion to Genesis 1, in which God saw that he had brought something good out of a chaotic state--he was a healthy baby.

2. The Deliverance of the Infant.

The story develops quickly and surprisingly; only the essential details are provided to show the irony of the situation. The story traces the movement of the daughter of Pharaoh as she comes to the river to wash and finds the crying infant. Apparently Miriam was able to slip in among the servants when the basket was discovered and make the suggestion of someone to nurse the child. Placing a child here would be wise, for the women would come to wash at the river, and they would be more likely to have compassion on a child.

Of course the princess allows Miriam to find someone to take care of the child. The words that are used in the passage are striking, for they foreshadow what is to come. Simple words like "call to" or "summon" the child's mother to care for it will reappear when Pharaoh summons Moses in the plagues. And the verb "send" is ironic; the royal family is summoning the Hebrew woman and sending for her to protect the child; later Pharaoh will summon Moses the deliverer who wants Pharaoh to send them away (usually translated "let my people go").

Hebrew stories love to top off the narrative with a naming report and an interpretation of the name. The naming here is complicated. "Moses" is an Egyptian word meaning "child." Naturally an Egyptian princess would name him with an Egyptian word. She explained that she had drawn him from the river--probably meaning to her and to her family that the river

god gave birth to a child (the Nile was venerated as the source of life). Now, the trick comes when the story was translated into Hebrew for the Israelites (by them?). When they spelled *mas* or *mosis* (Egyptian, as in Pharaonic names such as *Thut-mosis*) *mosheh* (Hebrew), this Hebrew word had a different meaning: “the one who draws out.” So the writer could capture the real meaning of the story by the double use of the Hebrew verb “to draw out,” once in the name and once in the explanation. It is as if he were saying, “You called him born one or child, after your custom, but in our language that name means drawing out--which is actually what he will do. The one drawn out of the river by Pharaoh’s daughter will draw Israel out of Egypt through water.”

The name, then, always reminded them of the unusual circumstances of the deliverance of this child of destiny from the death decree of Pharaoh. Although irony is at work, the lesson of the story goes beyond that. God often uses the weak things to confound the mighty--it is his way.

We have no way of knowing who this Egyptian princess was. But if we accept the conservative, biblical dates for the event, putting Moses in the Eighteenth Dynasty of Egypt (born in 1526 B.C.), the time would correspond with the life of Hatshepsut, who would have been a princess at this time. What makes her a good candidate is that she later seized the power and ruled as a Pharaoh, even with the honorary beard attached. In other words, she had what it took to defy the order of the Pharaoh, her father probably.

Zipporah. When Moses, the murderer, fled to the back side of the desert, he met his wife, Zipporah. We know very little about her. She gave Moses two sons, Gershom and Eliezer, but when things got very difficult in Egypt during the plagues, she returned to her father’s place until after the exodus.

In Exodus 4 on the way to Egypt there is a disturbing confrontation. Apparently Moses had failed to circumcise his sons, and he fell deathly ill (interpreted as God meeting him to kill him). The leader of the covenant people surely must comply with the sign of the covenant. At any rate, Zipporah had to do the job; in disgust she threw the foreskin at his feet and called him a bloody husband. How much she understood about the covenant, or how sympathetic to it all she was, is hard to say. But if she shared her father’s view after the exodus when she joined Moses, she was part of the community (Exodus 18).

Miriam. Finally, we need to mention two additional pictures of Miriam, the older sister of Moses. The first occurs in Exodus 15 where she seems to have come to prominence in the company. She is called a prophetess; she leads the women out with the timbrels in dances and antiphonal singing in praise of God for the great deliverance.

The other incident reveals that she tried to overstep her bounds. Numbers 12 tells how she tried to assume a co-leadership role with Moses--“has God only spoken through Moses?” (The Text says that she and Aaron came to confront Moses, but the verb is feminine, signifying she was the main one). It may be that the real occasion for this attempted coup was Moses’ marriage to the Ethiopian woman. Perhaps Miriam’s turning “white” as leprous was poetic justice. But it was at least a divine rebuke of her--God had indeed chosen Moses to lead, and communicated with him face to face. It was arrogance and utter folly for Miriam to try to replace the mediator, no matter

how gifted and influential she was. God chooses spiritual leaders, and no one, female or male, can change God's calling by any means.

Conclusion

From our knowledge of the ancient Near East we may say that the biblical records reflect their cultural settings very well. This is not to say the biblical characters follow their culture all the time, or if they did whether they should have, for God often turned culture away as he developed his program.

That program was the development of a seed through whom he would bless the world. But why a seed? Why a male? In the ancient world men were the tribal or political leaders because the leaders had to be warriors and defend the clan, almost like the animal world (indeed, "horn" is a symbol of kingship). So the future of a tribe or nation depended on a strong warrior-leader, in all probability, a male. Since Genesis is concerned with that matter, as well as the inheriting of it, it focuses on "patriarchs." I doubt that later male writers have suppressed parts of the stories to give top-billing to men. Dinah, for example, is not discussed fully because the account is explaining how Simeon and Levi lost the leadership. In fact, even though more text is given to men, they are often shown to be sinful or weak.

So what do we know about the life of women in ancient Semitic and Hebrew culture? On the one hand the public scene was probably dominated by men through power (as the curse anticipated); but on the other hand the women seem influential if not in control from the domestic side, at times changing the course of history in spite of the will of men. The ancient curse that announced a perpetual struggle between men and women has indeed been borne out.