

## 6. THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN RELIGION

How then did women participate in the religious activities of Israel? We will not at this place be concerned here with how the women participated in the other religions of the ancient world, except in passing; nor will we be concerned with the activities of women in idolatrous religious practices in Israel, such as Jezebel. We will note how women took part in the legitimate worship of Yahweh under the Law of Moses, that is, according to the prophetic religion (and not the popular religion).

### Women in Religious Gatherings

Women were included in all religious gatherings and solemn assemblies, even though on occasions they may have chosen not to be there. Hannah and Peninnah, the wives of Elkanah, were accustomed to going to the sanctuary (1 Sam. 1:1ff). The Shunamite was expected to go to the sanctuary on new moon and *sabbath* by her husband (2 Kings 4:23). The daughters of Shiloh normally came to the annual feasts (Judg. 21:6-25). Women were also present at the moving of the ark under David (2 Sam. 6:19). The Law of Deuteronomy provided for women's presence and participation (12:12, 18; 14:26; 15:20; 16:11, 14). All the way through the Old Testament women were actively present in the religious ceremonies, and even after the exile they appear side by side with the men in all the joy and solemnity (Neh. 8:2,3; 12:43).

### Women and Sacrificial Meals

Women were by no means idle spectators of the activities when they were present. They shared in the ritual acts. Once again Hannah is a good example, first taking a portion from Elkanah, and then later on her own bringing three animals for her thank offering (they were probably wealthy, and she no doubt had servants to help with the animals). The references in Deuteronomy above clearly state that women were to share in the sacrificial meals. The best illustration that this sharing was actual and not simply theoretical is Nehemiah 12:43. Then, in the priestly families, women were to share in the "holy things" that could be eaten (Lev. 10:12-15; 22:1-16; Num. 18:8-19).

Eating at these meals was not simply a family activity, or just another meal. We must remember the cultic significance of eating the meal at the temple. Israelite faith was centered on the idea that eating the sacrifice--unique to Israel--was a sign of kinship between God and the worshiper. It was an act of communion between God and the worshiper, which is why the Law

had so carefully safeguarded the holiness code of those who could come and eat. The woman and the man alike, if they were sanctified by the ritual, could freely eat of it together.

## Women and Sacrificial Acts

In the earliest times the worshiper had no need of a priest but could make the sacrifices (e.g., Abraham, Job). Later, as the priesthood became highly developed with the worshiper essentially laying a hand on the head of the animal while the throat was cut. This identified the worshiper with the substitutionary animal. The rules in Leviticus 12 and 15 suggest that the woman brought the offering on her own, and we may assume went through the ritual. Later, Jeremiah referred to women involved in the cultic acts (Jer. 7:18; 44:15ff); true, it was corrupt worship, but Jeremiah rebuked them for the object of their worship, not the manner. So from Leviticus onward when a woman made the "sin offering" and the "whole burnt offering," she would have to place her hand on the head of the animal just as the man did. Baruch 6:29, although not Scripture, witnesses to the fact that women did touch the sacrifices.

## Women and Vows

Could women make vows in the sanctuary, vows such as the *Nazirite* vow? The evidence is that they fully shared that right as well. We tend to think of men making the vow because they were to let their hair grow. But Numbers 6:2 says "a man or a woman." If the woman was included in the *Nazirite* vow, there is no reason to think she was not included in the ordinary vow in Numbers 15:1-13. It is addressed to men in that passage; but it probably includes men and women—unless we want to say the whole Law was for men only (which of course is not the biblical view). Hannah again is a good example, for she made a vow in the sanctuary (1 Sam. 1:11). The regulations on the vow give a good picture of the relation of a woman to society and to the cult. If the woman was independent, a widow or divorced, her vow was as binding as that of a man. If she was still unmarried in her father's house and her father heard the vow without opposing it, or if married and her husband heard the vow without opposing it, it was equally binding. Here we may think of the mother and father of Samson, because the boy and the mother were under the *Nazirite* vow. But if a husband or a father disallowed the vow, the vow was not binding. The meaning of this is all clear: the cult knows no distinction between man and woman in general, although there are some qualifications; but it is the position of woman in society that introduces the difference. This is a point that will surface again.

## Women and Prayer

Because prayer and praise are so completely connected with sacrifice and the assembly, women were also fully participating in this cultic act. Again Hannah is a perfectly good example,

for she prayed earnestly in the sanctuary. Vows, prayers, blessings, oaths, praises--women were fully free to share in them all, with or without men present. Deborah also offered her praise, and it mentioned how the men failed.

## **Women and Oracles and Theophanies**

While not a normal part of Israelite worship, i.e., planned by the leaders, God frequently broke through and appeared to people, in or out of the sanctuary; and God also gave oracles when he was consulted by people who were troubled. These were not restricted to men. As early as Genesis 25:22 Rebekah went to enquire of the LORD about her pregnancy. She was given an oracle which was to be shared with her husband, and the world. Other passages confirm that there was no restriction or hindrance for women's free approach to divinity, or from receiving oracles: see Genesis 3:13ff (Eve); 16:8ff (Hagar); 18:9f; 15 (Sarah); 21:17ff (Sarah); Judges 13:3ff (Samson's mother).

## **Women and Naming**

Naming was a sign of authority, in the family, in the government, and in the world at large; and it was not only the place of men to name. Naming was also an important religious event in the lives of the Hebrews, for they gave names that expressed their religious beliefs and sentiments. Sometimes the women expressed their profound faith on their own ("Judah," "Joseph," etc.) and sometimes the LORD told them what to say ("Ishmael," "Immanuel"). But one of the most striking examples is the naming of "Ichabod" ("inglorious" or "alas for the glory" or "woe for the glory") in 1 Samuel 4:21. The war was lost in Aphek, the ark was captured, the priests Hophni and Phinehas died in battle, and fat old Eli fell over and broke his neck. The (now) widow of Phinehas gave birth and called the child "Inglorious," saying "the glory has departed." At least we can say that it was quite natural for a woman so to feel the loss of the ark as to hand down to posterity her pain in the very name of her son. Could such deep religious feeling be associated with an exclusion from full participation in and appreciation for the cult? That would be unlikely.

## **Women and Annual Feasts**

The Law said that three times in the year all "males" were to appear before the LORD in the Holy Place. We have already noted that such a sweeping positive requirement could not be made with regard to women, not without contravening the other legislation that excluded her from approaching holy things at certain periods. Women were fully welcome in such festivals, indeed, expected to be there, unless their condition prevented it. And due to the nature of the feasts, they would certainly want to be there--it was a time of great celebration.

## The Law of the Firstborn

According to Exodus 13:12; 34:19, Deuteronomy 15:19, and Numbers 3:40ff, the firstborn male was to be dedicated to Yahweh in the sanctuary. There is no justification or reason for explaining away this minor custom of the cult. In its earliest form it goes back to the period of the Exodus where the firstborn was redeemed by the application of the blood to the doorposts of the houses. Thus, these firstborn belonged to God. Then, as the laws developed, the firstborn son was to be dedicated to God as a token in harmony with the Law of offering first fruits to God. The Hebrew *zakar* is clearly the "male"; and this reflects the need and desire in the ancient world for the family lands and name to be retained by the male heir. It is true that "your sons" could equally be translated "your children," allowing for the dedication of any firstborn child--but not the word male.

This custom was linked in some ways to the laws of circumcision, which was also limited to males. While the operation of circumcision could only be performed on the male, its covenant significance was the same for men and for women. Being a sign connected with the sexual organ, it would be a perpetual, and sometimes last minute, reminder that sexual intercourse was only legitimate within the bounds of its covenant purposes in marriage. For a woman to have sex with an un-circumcised man, or a circumcised man to engage in sex with a foreign woman, would be clearly a violation--and they would know it at the time.

## Women and Funeral Rites

Here, too, we find full participation, but with some specified activities for women. Jeremiah 16:6-8 gives us a good list of mourning rites and customs. In each one women participated. Lamentation was common, and there were professional women mourners (Jer. 9:16). Laceration would be engaged in for extreme cases (Deut. 14:1; 1 Kings 18:28; Jer. 16:6; 41:5, etc.). The hair-offering was common among women (Amos 8:10; Micah 1:16). Sacrificial meals were connected with the funeral (Jer. 16:7, 8).

Part of the beliefs at death included being "gathered to my fathers." This term "fathers" need not be limited to men, but is probably a general reference to the ancestors. Barzillai's words to David include the desire to die in the grave of his father and of his mother (2 Sam. 19:38).

We may also note here the care taken in the Bible for the burial of women in the faith: Genesis 23:2; 25:10; 35:8, 19f.; 48:7; and 49:31f. The tombs of these ancestresses were then held to be sacred--just as the men's were.

## Sacrificial Animals

The Levitical laws specify the gender and the condition of all animals that were to be brought for the sacrifices. A male was required for Passover, the Whole Burnt Offering, and for the Sin Offering for the priest, ruler, or congregation. A female was offered for the Sin Offering for the common person. For the Peace Offering the animal could be either a male or a female. We need not sort out the reasons for these choices at this time (--whether it is entirely possible to do that I am not sure). But the Hebrew cult did not exclude the female sex in the sacrifices. One would have expected that if the cult excluded women because of her sex, it would have ruled out female animals as well. But that was not the case (unlike some strict monastic orders that do not allow a female anything, ever).

A case can be made to show that in the earlier sacrifices female animals were favored, whereas in the legislation male animals were used in the more solemn assemblies. But there are too many contingencies to make a hard and fast rule.

## Women and Cult Leadership

### Prophetesses

There can be no doubt that women were prophetesses in the Old Testament. Of course, it must be noted that there were nowhere near as many women as men who held this function. But there were not a great and vast number of prophets anyway--only 37 are named prophets, and others are mentioned in general ("schools of the prophets" or "a man of God"). Remember, though, that we are talking about official offices and not merely a gift of uttering a prophetic word. We do have Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, and Noadiah singled out (see 2 Kings 22:14ff; Nehemiah 6:14).

The office or role of the prophet/prophetess was important, but it was not a cultic office, *per se*. They were not part of the Temple staff, nor were they on the Temple payroll, and in many cases were not even welcome in the Temple because of the truthfulness of their words. Prophets did several things: they declared the Word of the LORD, either by answering those who sought them out, or in general by their preaching and their oracles; they predicted the future; they interpreted history, and they wrote Scripture (usually). Their words became the binding, authoritative message from God for all time. The office of prophet/prophetess thereby differed substantially from the spiritual gift of prophecy in the New Testament.

We have already mentioned Miriam and Deborah. Huldah in the Book of Kings is important. She is the person to whom at the order of the King of Judah Hilkiah the priest and Shaphan the scribe and others prominent in state should direct themselves to inquire about the discovery of the Book of the Law. The event under consideration was a major turning point in Israel's religious history, and Huldah was the prominent religious authority.

## Priestesses

The priests and the High Priest functioned to make sacrifices, burn incense, and teach the Law (Deut. 33:9,10 and Mal. 2:1-9). This was not open to women at all. There is no reason given in the Bible, but some of the explanations gathered from the descriptions and circumstances make very good sense: (1) priestesses in the ancient world were usually devotees of goddesses and involved in the "Sacred Marriage" rites --they were often cult prostitutes, and God was not about to have a hint of that in his House, as Leviticus makes clear; (2) the priests had to be at all the assemblies to do their work, and women might not be able to be present if the purification laws conflicted; (3) there was a great deal of heavy labor in the sacrificial work, and this may have been difficult at times for the women to do--it was not simply teaching, praying, and counseling, but slaughtering animals and putting them up on the altar, cleaning the altar and taking the reminds out to be burned, taking the tabernacle apart and moving it to the next site and reassembling it, and such.

Note that in the Old Testament the priest was the officially designated teacher according to Deuteronomy 33:9, and these were men; prophets could teach, exhort, warn, rebuke, advise, and predict, and these were men and women. As we shall see, Paul, in addressing largely Jewish churches rules on the basis of the Old Testament order and the synagogue to say women should not teach, but they can prophesy. He is simply continuing the Jewish order of things into the early Church so that the new form of the faith would not be off-putting to the Jews.

## Officials and Servants

Several times the Bible will refer to the company of women that gathered or assembled at the door of the Temple (Exod. 38:8; Num. 4:23, etc.). They seem to be there to render some service to the sanctuary or to the service in a Levitical capacity. The Greek Bible translates the Hebrew term in question with variants of *leitourgein*, to capture the meaning as in the Exodus passage or "the serving women who served at the door of the tent of meeting." We do not know what that service was, but the words used are also used for the service of the Levites.

## Singers and Musicians

Male and female singers were employed by and housed in the Sanctuary. There were apparently different classes of singers; the general singers (*sharot*, Isa. 23:16; 2 Sam. 19:35; Jer. 31:4; Exod. 2:8); those who celebrate with music the victory of the LORD (Ps. 68:11, Exodus 40:9 (*m<sup>e</sup>basseret*, using instruments and dance with the voice, as in Exod. 15:20; Judg. 5:1, etc.); and women singers in the sanctuary choir (*zimrah*, singing to the accompaniment of stringed instruments), as in Neh. 7:67 and Ezra 2:65; and then there is the heading in the book of Psalms '*alamot*, "the virgins, young women," which seems to be a reference to a women's (virgin's) guild of singers that such psalms would be given.

Psalm 68:11 [12] is interesting; it reads, "The LORD gives the word, and great is the company that proclaims it." The word "proclaims" is a feminine plural participle, and conveys the meaning that "a great number of women would line the way like trees. They might do as in the days of David, where the women sang "Saul has killed his thousands, but David his ten thousands."