



THE SPRINGFIELDER

March 1970
Volume 33, Number 4

The Place of Woman in The Old Testament

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GENESIS INFORMS ITS READERS that woman is a special creation of God (Gen. 1:26-27; 2:18-24). Like Adam, so Eve, the mother of all living people, is depicted as superior to the animal world that God had brought into being by fiat command. The Biblical text states: "So God created man in his image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them" (Gen. 1:27). "While higher criticism and evolution discredit the Biblical record of woman's formation from the rib of man (Gen. 2:21-24), the passage emphasizes most profoundly, the inseparable unity and fellowship of a woman's life with that of man's."¹ Woman was created to be man's helper (Gen. 2:18) as well as his companion.

According to the Biblical account Adam had priority in creation over Eve. The New Testament contains important information concerning the relationship of Adam to Eve. In I Cor. 11:7-9 Paul stated: "For a man ought not to cover his head since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man." In I Timothy 2:13-14 (R.S.V.) man is ascribed a superiority in the worship services, because "Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor." The woman has her origin and purpose in life in man. In I Cor. 11 Paul argues that "the insubordination of woman in refusing to acknowledge the authority of their husbands would offend the angels who, under God, guard the created universe (Cf. Col. 1:16; Eph. 1:21), and know no insubordination."² In forbidding woman either to assume leadership or the teaching office in the church, Paul cites the order of creation, as establishing man's natural leadership.³

In Ephesians 5:21-32 Paul calls upon women to be subject to their husbands as unto the Lord. "For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands" (22-24 R.S.V.). As Zerbst wrote:

The mere fact that in this series of sentences St. Paul includes also Christ, whose Head is God, guards against such a misconception, (i.e. something humiliating and dishonorable.) Everyone has his "head," i.e. everyone has the God-given duty of rendering obedience in that position to which God assigned him through creation or redemption.⁴

Schlatter wrote:

Even as the Christ is Lord through obedience, so man becomes a servant of God through obedience rendered unto Christ, and so also woman achieves the same distinction by submitting herself to man and living for him.⁵

Man needed a human companion and thus Yahweh gave Eve to Adam and told them to be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth. Both were to be mutually dependent upon one another. However, by virtue of their creation, man and woman differ from each other physiologically and temperamentally. Norah Lofts, in her volume *Women in the Old Testament*, pointed out that women are the weaker members of the human race and "among these weaker members all women—if they are performing the natural functions of woman—must willy-nilly rank themselves at one time or another."⁶ This holds true especially when a woman bears a child; there is a time when a child-bearing woman usually needs the help of a man or others in the community. As the mother of a number of children the woman generally is economically dependent on a man, the father. Mrs. Lofts claims that "upon this fact and upon an inferior equipment of muscle and brawn the long story of woman's subjugation is rooted."⁷ Down through the ages some women have excelled men in many respects. They often have surpassed men in the manner in which they have endured suffering, sorrow and pain and separation.

Throughout history man has often been guilty of mistreatment of woman, caused by pride, ignorance, moral perversion. Some men have at times treated women as chattel as is still the case today among pagan tribes, where women have no rights whatever. It is generally agreed by historians that in the world of antiquity woman occupied a lowly and inferior position.

In contrast to the ancient world the position and treatment of woman in Israel was much higher. The Old Testament Hebrews had received a revelation from Yahweh through Moses about woman's endowments and concerning her place in the family and in the congregation. Moses received a number of directives from Yahweh guaranteeing to women certain rights and freedoms (Deut. 21:10-14; 22:13; 22:28). How did the Jews treat their women? Did the Hebrews share the same low view found in antiquity? Mrs. Lofts responds:

From such a test the Jews of the Old Testament emerge honorably. The very fact that one can sit down today and study the lives and characters of these Old Testament women proves that while they were alive they were regarded as human beings in their own right, not as mere appurtenances of men.⁸

The names, idiosyncracies and deeds, of many women are recorded on the pages of the Old Testament. Two books of the Old

Testament canon are named after women, namely, Ruth and Esther. A number of women are portrayed as playing more important roles than did their husbands in Old Testament history. Deborah was married to Lapidoth and is described as a prophetess and a woman who judged Israel. Jael was married to Heber and she was responsible for killing Sisera who had been the oppressor of Israel. In the history of Near Eastern and Far Eastern lands women are only mentioned because they loved some famous men, or because from behind the purdah they exercised influence. The only example of the latter type of influence in the Old Testament was that of Esther and she was a queen of a Persian king. The Old Testament does not state that women in general lived segregated from men nor did the women have to observe silence in the presence of men.

Monogamy and Polygamy

Christ claimed that God instituted the marriage relationship and that it was the will of the Creator that one man and one woman should remain together until death. The relationship between Adam and Eve during the age of innocency must have been ideal. This relationship, however, was disturbed by their fall into sin. Eve listened to the lies of the Tempter who claimed that God was trying to withhold blessings from her and Adam by forbidding them to eat of the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil." St. Paul, who claimed to write by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, instructed Timothy: "And Adam wasn't deceived; the woman was deceived and so fell into sin. But woman, having children, will be saved if they live in faith, love and holiness, and use good judgment (I Tim. 2:14-15)." (Beck Translation) In Genesis 3 God pronounced curses and judgments upon the tempter, the woman and the man. To Eve God said: "I will greatly multiply your pain in child bearing, in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be to your husband and he shall rule over you" (Gen. 3:16). Man was to work hard and meet with many failures; work would no longer be a pleasure but drudgery till he died.

As civilization developed and sin increased man perverted the ideal and purpose of marriage, polygamy, polyandry and free love became practices not in harmony with God's original arrangement. Polygamy became especially prevalent; one of Cain's descendants was the first to violate God's original ordinance by taking two wives, Adah and Zillah (Gen. 4:23). After the flood polygamy seems to have become general and although it became a prevailing custom, God never approved of it. The Mosaic Law sought to restrict departures from the original monogamous relationship by human regulation. Old Testament records clearly show how polygamy was a social arrangement that brought with it jealousy, hatred and trouble. This can be seen from Elkanah's home life with his two wives, Hannah and Pinninah. The biographies of David and

Solomon are also replete with failures and tragedies that can directly be attributed to polygamy.

The Mosaic Law permitted the dissolution of marriage under certain circumstances. To some degree a woman was the property of her husband (Deut. 24:1). There were licentious men who for trivial reasons would divorce their wives (Deut. 24:1-4). A man was not required to take his wife to court in order to divorce her, but simply announced: "She is not my wife, neither am I her husband" (Hosea 2:2). When this occurred the divorced woman would return to her parental home and had the right to remarry. In contrast to the Old Testament position, Jesus promulgated the indissolubility of the marriage relationship and asserted that the monogamous union was a symbol of the union between Christ and the believer. In the Old Testament the prophets used the monogamous marriage as the symbol of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel (Is. 54:5; Jer. 3:14; 31:32; Hos. 2:19). The New Testament represents a different position relative to polygamy than does the Old Testament, for in the New Testament it is not condoned or permitted for the believer.

Woman and the Religious Life of the Old Testament

In the pre-Mosaic period the father of the household is portrayed as the family priest (Job 1:5). Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob built altars, offered up sacrifices and consecrated themselves and their husbands (Gen. 12:7; 13:18; 26:25, 35:1, 21). Women are not depicted as acting in the capacity of house priests. In the Mosaic period Yahweh instituted the high priestly and the priestly offices. In Numbers 16:5 Moses has furnished Biblical readers with the key to the Old Testament idea of the priesthood.

The Old Testament priesthood was established by God to maintain fellowship between Himself as the Holy One and a sinful nation. The tribe of Levi was appointed by God to furnish priests who would receive the people's gifts, while mercy and salvation as gifts from God were bestowed by the same men as mediators between God and the Israelite congregation. The selection of priests was limited to one family, namely that of Aaron, with other members of the tribe of Levi designated as assistants to the priests. Women had no part in the public service of the tribe of Levi during the entire time that sacrifices were offered in the tabernacle, or in the Solomonic temple as well as in the postexilic temple of Zerubbabel. It was also a function of these priests to give instruction to the people in the law of the Lord.

In the Old Testament there seem to have been three classes of religious men, priests, prophets and wise men (Cf. Jer. 18:18). The prophetic institution was provided for in the Law. Deuteronomy 18:16-22 refers to a succession of prophets to arise who would be active from Moses to Christ, running parallel with the kingdom of Israel. The Old Testament does not portray an unbroken series

of prophets, each of whom was inducted into office by his predecessors, except in the cases of Joshua and Elisha, who were respectively inducted by Moses and Elijah. The prophets are represented as receiving their prophetic office directly from God and were not concerned with any human being conferring this office upon them. The prophets often proclaimed the will of God in the days of apostasy, defection and religious crises.

While there is no evidence whatever that women were permitted to serve in the temple as priests or their assistants, the Old Testament knows of a number of women who arose to positions of prominence as "prophetesses." Miriam, the sister of Moses is called a prophetess who led a choral dance in celebration of Israel's deliverance from Egypt (Ex. 15:20). Miriam, motivated by jealousy, later directed a rebellion against her brother, for which she was punished with leprosy and banished from the camp of Israel for a week. Deborah, a mother in Israel (Judg. 5:7), inspired Barak and served as judge for a time. Huldah, living in the seventh century, the keeper of the royal wardrobe, is called a prophetess and was consulted by Josiah concerning Yahweh's will after the "book of the law" was found in the temple (2 Kings 22:14). Noadiah, a prophetess, is mentioned as joining those who wanted to intimidate Nehemiah and prevent him from completing the rebuilding of the walls. From Ezekiel 13:17 we infer that there were also false prophetesses as well as false prophets active in Judah in the sixth century B.C.

The Old Testament does not indicate to what extent prophetesses were active in the religious life of the Hebrew people. All sixteen prophetic books are attributed to prophets but none to a prophetess.

The wisdom literature of the Old Testament is believed to have come from "the wise men." Books like Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and certain didactic psalms were written by wise men. There is no record of Biblical materials having been produced by wise women.

The Religious Service of Old Testament Women

In the Old Testament women found their most important function as mothers of families. There are constant references to mothers in the biographies of successive kings indicating the important part they played in determining the life attitudes of their sons. The Book of Proverbs refers to "the law of thy mother" (1:8; 6:20), and holds up for emulation her teaching, authority and example (Prov. 14:26; 20:21).

The Law of the Old Testament required children to honor their mothers equally with their fathers (Ex. 20:12). A dreadful punishment was to come upon those who cursed their mothers (Lev. 20:9). During infancy and the years of early childhood the mother conscientiously watched over her children. The love of a mother is used to describe God's love for His people (Is. 49:15). Proverbs

30:10-31, an acrostic poem, is replete with praise for the virtuous mother. It was from a woman that ultimately God's Son was to be born and that the promise given in Eden to mankind's first parents was to be fulfilled (Gen. 3:15).

In the theocracy of Israel the woman had the same religious rights as the man. Women were equally responsible for keeping the Mosaic law (Deut. 31:12); (Neh. 8:12). According to Numbers 30:6-8, a husband could cancel a vow made by his wife. This regulation was probably enacted because of the welfare of the family since it might be affected by a wife's vow. Similar regulations also existed relative to the daughter's vow prior to marriage. Only the male members of the Israelite congregation were required to attend the three annual festivals (Ex. 23:15), but the fact that this obligation was not enjoined upon women was probably out of a humane concession due to childbirth and the woman's duty to take care of her children. Women could attend the festivals with full rights of participation.

During the Babylonian exile there developed the institution known as the synagogue. R. H. Pfeiffer and others believed that the synagogue may have originated in Ezekiel's addresses to the Babylonian exiles. Such gatherings may have taken place in Ezekiel's house (Ezek. 8:1; 20:1-3). In the time of Christ "teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath" was already a well established institution. The "ruler of the synagogue" had charge of the external order of worship and supervision of the concerns of the synagogue. Evidence available seems to indicate that women were not involved in the conduct of the synagogue services nor as teaching rabbis.

Following Old Testament precedent, Christ only chose men as apostles and the Holy Spirit's qualifications for the bishop or presbyter only mention men. Thus the precedent of the Old Testament where women were not the leaders in the regular public worship of the Old Testament congregation was continued in the New.

FOOTNOTES

1. Herbert Lockyer, *The Women of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1967), p. 13.
2. S. Lewis Johnson, "I Corinthians," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*. Pfeiffer and Harrison, (eds.) (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), p. 1249.
3. R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy and Titus* (Columbus: Lutheran Book Concern, 1937), pp. 574-575.
4. Fritz Zerbst, *The Office of the Woman in the Church*, Translated by Albert G. Merckens (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), p. 32.
5. A. Schlatter, *Erläuterungen zum Neuen Testament: Die Briefe an die Galater und Epheser* Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1920, pp. 308-309.
6. Norah Lofts, *Women in the Old Testament* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1950), p. 1.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 1.