



STATUS OF JEWISH WOMEN WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO OLD TESTAMENT

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Abstract

The subject of women is as ancient as the pre-historic period or evolution of man and society. Woman's creative significance is as fundamental as the archetypal myths. Women are life partners and co-travelers in the creation of life and progress of the society. They constitute about one-half of the global population but are marginalized in many ways owing to gender difference and bias. The oppression of women is the most universal form of exploitation which supports and perpetuates the other forms of exploitation in both Church and society. The Jewish society is not an exception. Though a few women played predominant role, majority of them underwent an inferior position.

The Jewish men looked down upon women; she was treated on par with an animal. They were so opinionated that every Jew in his daily prayer used to thank God the Jahova for not being born a slave or a woman or a non-Jew. Such was the spite every male had for women. The Jewish women had no equality in the society. Thus she was reduced to nothing, socially and personally. This paper highlights the inferior position of women in the Jewish society during the Old Testament days.

Key Words : Male Chauvinistic – Mohar – Tora - Polgamy- - Polluted - Sexual Predators.

Introduction

Most of the ancient societies were patriarchal in their perspective. The Jewish society as depicted in Hebrew literature was male dominated and so was its religion with its Father-God image. Yahweh was the God of Abraham, Issac and Jacob and of Jesus and all His men like Paul too. Those who retold the story of God's dealings with mankind, tended to tell his story rather than her story. The Jewish writers were so male chauvinistic that they used just a male pronoun to refer to both the sexes. Further, such exclusive phrases like, sons of men, son of god, brotherhood of man, mankind and brethren were current. Down through the ages, god men's perspective vis-à-vis God was conditioned by the use of symbols that were predominantly masculine in character. The God of the Bible was a male and was portrayed in terms of a Father, Brother, Kinsman, Man of War, King, Lord, Judge, Shepherd, Husband etc. When writing about women characters, the tendency was to play down the importance of the female characters and to dwell more on male. The writers closed their eyes on the fault of the male god. They also relegated women to the background. Thus, Moses, the god man who was supposed to have authored Genesis reversed the process of recreation, which is exclusively of a woman by narrating that Eve, the first woman of mankind was formed from a rib taken from the first man and her essence as a human being was linked with her function as a companion to the male. After God gave Adam his bride, Adam tactfully used the passive form of construction presumably not to dominate, to give her generic name; "she shall be called woman. . ." This paper aims at a close study of the Old Testament in order to bring out the position of women held in the Jewish society.

i) Social Status

In patriarchal Hebrew society women enjoyed only a low status. They were inferior and subordinate to men. A woman was identified in relation to the men in her family on whom she was always dependent. The man as the head and father of the family had supreme authority over its members. He desired male children more than female ones so that his name and family could be perpetuated. He controlled his daughter's life until he arranged for her marriage or in extreme cases, sold her into slavery for payment of debt.

a) Betrothal

Betrothal, which was preceded by courtship and the drawing up of the marriage contract, signified the acquisition of a woman by her man-master and thus the valid settlement of the marriage. But it was only with the marriage itself which ordinarily took place one year after betrothal that the girl definitely passed from her father's power to that of her husband. In the Jewish society the contract between the families was sealed on payment of Mohar to the parents of the bride. The Mohar is mentioned in the Book of Exodus. A perpetrator of sexual crime against a woman, paid the Mohar, married the girl whom he had seduced unless her father refused to give her, in which case the offender must pay just the Mohar and managed to escape social stigma. The Mohar could be paid in the form of service as Jacob paid Laban for his wives. The dowry of the bride most often included one or more slave girls who remained the personal property of the mistress.

b) Marriage

Marriage in Old Testament period was contracted at an early age as in most less civilized communities. For girls it was probably not long after puberty was attained. The contracting parties were not the bride and the groom but the families, namely the fathers of the spouses. The brothers of the bride had the right of disposal of the girl if the fathers were dead.



The married couple lived with the husband's family as a rule. The wife's first duties were household chores. She had to grind floor and bake food and wash her husband's bed. For repayment of her upkeep, she had to work the spin and weave the wool. Her duties also included preparing her husband's cup and washing his face, hands and feet. The wife's servile relationship with her husband who was a veritable lord reduced her to the insignificant plight of a chattel in his household. The rights of the husband over his wife went even further. The veil the women were compelled to wear to cover their heads was symbolic of the yoke on them. They were not allowed to wear men's clothes nor were men allowed to wear women's clothes.

c) Polygamy

There was social sanction for men's promiscuity. Polygamy was permitted, the wife had, therefore, to tolerate concubines living with her. A man could marry as often and as many women as he desired. Lamech became the first known polygamist when he took two wives. Subsequently men who took multiple wives included: Esau with three wives, Jacob two, Ashur two, Gideon many, Elkanah two, David many, Solomon seven hundred wives of royal birth and Rehoboam three. That the concubinage existed as an institution regulated by custom and to some extent by law is clear but there is some uncertainty as to its practice. Though the concubine woman cohabited with the same man, she did not appear to have the rank of a wife and there is no indication either that the union was permanent. Concubines were owned by Abraham Essau's son Eliphaz a Levite of the period of the Judges Gideon and Rizpah. But these men had their wives, too. It was the social outlook that led to an increase of polygamy. For men of affluence possession of many wives was a sign of wealth and power. For the ordinary man the possession of a harem was not possible for economic reasons. The harem of the Hebrew householder consisted of all his wives and all the female slaves who were not the personal property of his wives or of his sons. Not very often the female slave could be substituted for the childless wife. This occurred in the case of Sarah and Hagar ;Rachal and Bilhah ; Leah and Zilpah.

d) Divorce

The right to divorce was exclusively the husband's . A wife could not initiate divorce but her husband could divorce her if he found her lacking. A soldier was allowed to marry a woman captive without regard for her wishes. A woman was required to be a virgin when she was married. If she was found to have lost her virginity, she would be stoned to death. There was no such imposition on men. A virgin woman who had been raped must marry her assailant, no matter what her feelings were towards the rapist.

The chief function of women was to bear children for her men. Barrenness among women was considered a great misfortune, even a divine punishment. Such ill-fated women underwent a trauma. The barren woman was ridiculed as well as pitied. Women were given the job of killing children. The Pharaoh of Egypt ordered the midwives to kill all Jewish boys at birth, because of the threat they might pose to the kingdom. The girls, being considered less important, were not seen as a threat. Hence, they were allowed to live. A newly delivered mother was considered a menstruant for the next seven days for a boy and fourteen days for a girl and therefore was in a state of ritual impurity. It would appear that the act of delivering a baby was a highly polluting act. To give birth to a girl was twice as polluting as giving birth to a boy. However in ancient Israel it was motherhood rather than womanhood that merited respect.

ii) Religious Status

As for religious practice, especially with regard to the study of the Torah , a woman had no access to that. She was snobbishly kept away from the study of it. "If a man gives his daughter knowledge of the Law it is as though he taught her lechery." As her religious duties were limited, so were her religious rights. Women could never go into the Temple as well as into the courts of the gentiles. During the time of their monthly purification and also for a period of forty days after the birth of a son and eighty days after the birth of a daughter they were not allowed even into the court of gentiles. It was not customary for women to lay their hands on the head of the sacrificial victims or to receive the portions of the sacrifice. They were forbidden to teach. In the house, the wife was not reckoned among the number of persons summoned to pronounce benediction after a meal. A woman had no right to bear witness.

A woman had the right to make vows to the Lord independently from her husband, as in the case of Hannah. But the husband, in the case of a married woman, and the father in the case of a young daughter living in her father's house had the right to overrule it . A wife or daughter could not over rule the husband's or father's authority in the home by claiming she had made a vow to the Lord, a higher authority than her male protectors whom she had to obey most.



iii) Legal Status of Women

A woman in the Israel of yester years found identity not as a separate individual but as a member of a family. She was a daughter, then a wife and then a mother during the different phases of which she was a mere cog. A woman was expected to be chaste before marriage and faithful afterwards. For example a man could accuse his bride of not being a virgin. If the woman could not prove she was virginal at the time of the marriage, the law required her to be stoned to death at the door of her father's house formulated by man. The law was, thus, unfair and cruel to a woman. It demanded absolute virginity of the woman and provided a platform to the husband to be assured that he was the first one to have sexual intercourse with her. But such smug assurance was never meted out to women who had no opportunity to evaluate the premarital behaviour of their husbands.

If a married woman was suspected of adultery she might be forced to undergo a "trial by ordeal". A man who suspected his wife of adultery but could find no witness to prove it could bring her to the priest for a special experiment. After taking an oath spelling out the details of what might happen to her, the wife was forced to drink a bitter liquid. It was a mixture of holy water and dust from the tabernacle into which had been dipped the writing pad that contained the list of the curses, concocted by the priest. If guilty of adultery the wife's body was expected to swell and her thigh to fall away. If innocent, she would escape the signs of the curse and be able to bear children. A woman could be compelled to undergo this shameful and frightening experience for no other reason than her husband's jealousy or suspicions. Yet the law provided no means for her to check upon him if she felt he had been unfaithful to her. It was extremely important for a father to keep his daughter virgin until he transformed her from his house to the home of her husband.

iv) Education

Regarding education, during earliest childhood, Israelite boys and girls alike learned from their mothers, especially moral teachings. Parents were responsible to God for the religious training of both sons and daughters. However, as children grew, boys and girls were separated in their training. Girls remained under their mother's control and learned to perform household tasks in preparation for marriage and house wifely. Boys were turned over to their fathers for education in crafts and trades, for instruction in their national heritage and for specialized religious training. Prophets, priests and elders also played a part in educating boys because knowledge of the Torah was considered vital in the life of every Israelite male. Boys were educated for full participation in all facets of their society, while girls were educated for the private world of the home; while man was for the field, women were for the hearth.

v) Economy and Women

In Israel's agricultural economy, women largely contributed their share in providing for their families in countless ways. Doing the laborious tasks of working in the fields, looking after flocks, cooking, spinning, sewing and caring for many offspring made Israel's women "Working mothers" in a very real sense, even though they didn't have paid jobs outside the home. Women were not considered fit for military service. But they would come out to greet the returning victors. The Old Testament projects women as the property of men. In the tenth commandment, the neighbour's wife is lumped together with his ox, ass, or any other thing that belongs to him. She was one more beast or a piece of property that was willingly bartered away. The story of the Levite who, in order to save his own skin, gave away his concubine to the men in Gibeah to be abused until she died is one of the most revolting illustrations to this 'property image'. A girl was transferred to her new husband. A father could sell his daughter as a slave. In the case of a man who seduced a virgin, it was considered just a property offence against the woman's father but not a trespass. The seducer was required to pay money to her father, even if he did not have to marry the woman. The money was in compensation for the damage to the father's property, his daughter. The widow became the property of her eldest son.

Moses describes the rules of inheritance that God has given. According to that edict if a man dies, his son inherits the estate, and his daughter gets nothing. If there is no son, then his daughter inherits it. If a man dies childless, the estate is given to the man's brothers and his sisters get nothing. Widows do not inherit their husband's property; women might have property in their own name from a marriage gift. However, dowry is not an established norm, nor is it mentioned in the social code.

vi) Women as Sexual Predators

In the Old Testament there are instances in which women were given the image of sexual predators. Lot's two daughters made their father drunk with wine on two successive nights. Each daughter committed incest with her father and became pregnant. Their two sons, Moab and Ben-Ammi became the patriarchs of the Moabite and Amorite people, who were two of Israel's most serious foes. Delilah seduced Samson in order to find out the secret of his great strength. This ultimately led to Samson's death. In the case of Solomon, many of his foreign wives and concubines convinced him to worship other gods



and build pagan temples. This led to his downfall. Youth was often warned about the seductive beauty of women and told to resist the sexual drive entrapping him. The prophet Isaiah had depicted the frivolity and extravagance of the daughters of Zion; so had prophet Amos blamed the wealth and selfishness of the women of Samaria. The whole iniquity of humankind came to be represented symbolically by the prophet Zachariah, as a “woman called wickedness . . . , to be dropped on the dung and rubbish of Babylon”. Such was the partial and prejudiced way of looking at woman, as the source and cause of all evil.

vii) Position of Widows

The position of widows calls for special mention. A vow made by a wife continued to bind her even after her husband's death. By Levirate law, a childless widow could continue as part of her husband's family. If there were no levir, she could re-marry outside the family, spending the interval before her second marriage with her own father and mother. The story of Tamar, however, shows that even during this period her father-in law retained his authority over her. The widow wore mourning, at least for a time. How long the period of mourning lasted is not known, but to spend more than three years of mourning, as Judith did, seems exceptional. Judith was a rich widow. More commonly widows, especially those without children to support were in a piteous condition. They were therefore protected by religious law and commended to the charity of the people together with orphans and resident-alien, like all those, who in fact no longer had a family to assist them.

Conclusion

God himself is the protector of all especially women, according to the Psalms. The picture that generally emerges of the Old Testament is that woman was relegated to an inferior position in all aspects of life, social and personal. However, it cannot be held to be universal as there are instances of women occupying important positions of influence and power.

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