



The Feminine Image in the Old Testament

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What if Adam had bitten the apple first and then coaxed Eve into eating it? Would women have lorded it over the men the same way we men have been doing to women down through the centuries? Admittedly, it is a facetious question and why worry about a mythical apple. But explanations just as shaky as "your kind ate the apple first" have been offered for why women have been getting such a bad press ever since men first started to write about them.

The Old Testament presents a rather interesting portrait of womanhood on two counts: (a) when you compare it to other literature of its day, (b) when you find side-by-side in it praises to women and tirades against them. Before taking a closer look at the Old Testament

image of women, here is a sampling of other pre-Christian literature on man's favorite subject, women.

Oriental and Greek Views on Women

The writings of Confucius must have been close to the hearts of oriental woman-haters. Women were compared to men much as the earth compared to heaven, which means in short, there was no comparison. Buddha was not any more favorable. He cautioned his followers that "the outward appearance of woman may be that of a holy one, but her heart is that of a demon." Avoid her at all costs because she is the root of all evil: "keep yourselves from woman, the cunning temptress, who entices you by sex and love into the world which the wise man shuns." Before a woman could progress toward salvation in Buddhism, she had first to undergo rebirth into another form, for being a woman and attaining to Nirvana were incompatible.

It is with Greek ideas that Westerners are more familiar and by which, accordingly, they were more influenced. Plato proposed a theory concerning the outcome of men who led unvirtuous lives; they were reborn as women.

He who lived well during his appointed time was to return and dwell in his native star, and there he would have a blessed and congenial existence. But if he failed to attain this, at the second birth he would pass into a woman, and if, in that state, he did not desist from evil, he would continually be changed into some brute. . . . (*Timaeus*, No. 42)

Clearly, Plato was pessimistic about a woman's chances of leading the virtuous life he envisioned for the citizens of his perfect state. It was a man's world for Plato, for he says in the Sixth Book of the *Laws*, "woman's nature is inferior to that of men in capacity for virtue."

Aristotle is more the biologist than Plato but equally the champion of the male mystique. The woman is something like a castrated man.

Now a boy is like a woman in form, and the woman is as it were an impotent male, for it is through a certain incapacity that the female is female. (*On the Generation of Animals*, 728 a 17)

In the *Politics* (1259 b 1), Aristotle likens the male to the female as the elder and full-grown compares to the younger and more immature. His idea influenced St. Thomas centuries later; Thomas' theory is that a woman is begotten because of some inherent weakness in the seed

or from some material indisposition. Had things been better, a boy would have been born.

The Testimony of the Old Testament

Against this backdrop we have the Old Testament, and its testimony on womanhood, it must be confessed, is somewhat checkered. One would be hard put to find in ancient literatures a greater litany of praise to woman than in *Proverbs* 31 where the perfect wife is "far beyond the price of pearls." On the other hand, the misogyny of Buddha was no stronger than one finds in the 7th chapter of *Qoheleth*:

I find woman more bitter than death;
she is a snare, her heart a net, her arms are chains;
He who is pleasing to God eludes her,
but the sinner is her captive. (vv 26-27)

Proverbs and *Qoheleth* are part of a class of biblical books called "The Wisdom Literature." This literature represents an unique type of literary style, and we will return to it after briefly considering another type of biblical literature, the legalistic codes. The reason for turning to the laws of Israel is that here is a likely place to detect a biblical evaluation of womanhood. For in whatever respects women were considered superior, equal, or inferior to men, the laws by which Israel lived would be a barometer of it.

Israelite Laws

The over-all tenor of Israel's laws placed the woman in an inferior position to men. The laws concerning marriage, the discharging of vows, the possibilities of divorce, etc., reflect the male-female disparity. Consider the most widely known formulation of Judaic laws, the Decalogue. Whom was it addressing? Men, almost without exception! Note also the context of what we have come to call the Ninth Commandment. A man's wife is enumerated on a par with his property.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his servant, man or woman, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is his (*Ex* 20:17. cf. also *Deut* 5:21.)

The word itself the Hebrews used for "to marry a wife" indicates the direction their marriage laws will take. Its root meaning is "to

become master"; in fact the wife addressed her husband with the same word a slave did his master or a subject his king. There is some dispute whether an Israelite *bought* his future wife. The prospective husband paid a sum of money to the girl's father and thereby acquired a right over her; but that this represented a direct purchase remains unclear. What was clearly a purchase was when a girl's father sold her to another man to be his or his son's concubine. She was a slave and could be resold, and unlike male slaves, she could not regain her liberty.

Marriages were arranged with the girl's parents, and she did not seem to have much say in the matter. The young man, however, could make his preference known, even to the extent of going against his parents' wishes, as Esau did (*Gen* 26:34). The Old Testament mentions only one written marriage contract (*Tob* 7:11); here Sara's father declares her to be Tobias' wife. Ancient Hebrew marriage contracts have been unearthed with the formula, "She is my wife and I am her husband, from this day forward." Significantly, the woman made no declaration.

As it was the man who declared a woman to be his wife, it was only the husband who could repudiate his wife; she could not divorce him. *Deuteronomy* 24 gives, as grounds for divorce, that the wife "had not pleased him and he has found an impropriety of which to accuse her." A few restrictions were placed on this right of the husband. If he falsely accused his wife of not being a virgin when he married her, he could not divorce her (*Deut* 22:13), nor could the man who was compelled to marry a girl he had violated. The spirit behind these laws is that the woman could never take legal initiative; the law treated her as a minor.

In the legislation on adultery and prostitution, there is what we would today call a double standard. If a married woman committed adultery, she and her partner were stoned to death (*Deut* 22:22). But the married man, and bachelor as well, were under no legal sanctions in frequenting a prostitute. A wife's unfaithfulness was *the* disgraceful sin, because she was viewed as the exclusive property of the husband. A wife's adultery violated her husband's rights; a husband's adultery, as long as it was not with a married woman, tended to be winked at in practice.

It would be most misleading not to balance the above legislation on marriage with other Old Testament practices wherein the woman's

position is more esteemed. One would be the emphasis on monogamy. The patriarchs in Seth's line are presented as monogamous—polygamy first appeared in the reprobate line of Cain when Lamach took two wives. One does not have a legislated monogamy nonetheless, for there are famous exceptions. Jacob married Lia and Rachel. Gideon had more than one wife. (The practice of one or more concubines does not undermine monogamy; for the concubine never had the same rights as the wife, as we see with Sara and Hagar.) The Wisdom books, reflecting a later period, never mention polygamy. With the Prophets, the frequent allusion to Israel as bride of Yahweh has to be read from a monogamous context. The contention here is simply that the stronger a society emphasizes monogamy, the higher is its estimation of its women.

The Wisdom Literature—*Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Canticles, Qoheleth, Wisdom, Sirach*—is a key source for views on women. The spectrum ranges from the misogyny of *Qoh* 7:27, "I find a woman more bitter than death . . ." to the serenading of the Valiant Woman in *Proverbs*. First a brief recounting of the misogyny.

Negativism in the Wisdom Literature

Much of the Wisdom Literature contains the common sense advice the sages would give to the young men of Israel. The sage distrusts feminine wiles. The rest of the *Qoheleth* text is given on a previous page. *Sir* 19:2 has, "Wine and women corrupt sensible men" which has an echo among the numerical proverbs:

There are three things beyond my comprehension,
four indeed that I do not understand:
the way of an eagle through the skies,
the way of a snake over the rock,
the way of a ship in mid-ocean,
the way of a man with a girl. (*Prov* 30:18-19)

Prov 11:22 minces no words: "A golden ring in a swine's snout is a woman fair and foolish." Hardly the most enviable companion!

The sage had a battery of observations on the spiteful and nagging wife. "I would sooner keep house with a lion or a dragon than keep house with a spiteful wife" (*Sir* 25:13). "Better to live in a desert land than with a scolding and irritable woman" (*Prov* 21:19). "A woman's scolding is like a dripping gutter" (*Prov* 19:13). "Better

the corner of a loft to live in than a house shared with a scolding woman" (*Prov* 21:9).

As one would expect, the sage continually warns against the allurements of the prostitute and the adulteress. Perhaps *Prov* 5:2-6 sums up his whole message.

For the lips of this alien drip with honey,
her words are smoother than oil,
but their outcome is bitter as wormwood,
sharp as a two-edged sword.
Her feet go down to death,
her steps lead down to Sheol.

The *coup de grâce* to femininity comes in *Sir* 25:24, 33. "Sin began with a woman, and thanks to her, we all must die." Some rabbis took this indictment so seriously that they never spoke to their wives. A favorite rabbinical prayer ran: "O God, I thank you for not having made me a woman."

Positive Contributions of Wisdom Literature

Such misogyny in the Wisdom Literature of Israel has strong parallels in the literatures of other ancient Semites. This is not surprising since exegetes of biblical Wisdom Literature have discovered in it heavy borrowing from these other literatures. But the Scriptures make this decided contribution: one is hard put to find in these other literatures the counterbalance the Scriptures provide, namely, the praising of womanhood.

Happy the husband of a really good wife;
the number of his days will be doubled.
A perfect wife is the joy of her husband,
he will live out the years of his life in peace. (*Sir* 26:1-2)

The text goes on to enumerate the qualities of a good wife; beauty, diligence as a homekeeper, intelligence, forbearance in speech, modesty. One will notice in this text and those that follow that a woman is praised precisely as *wife*. Israelite women were expected to marry, not remain virgins. An unmarried woman was a blemish to her father's house. Thus there should be no misunderstanding when one only reads of the wife being praised, not the maiden.

A good wife is a gift of God. "Who finds a wife finds happiness, receiving a mark of favour from Yahweh" (*Prov* 18:22). "House and

riches are given by parents, but a prudent wife is a gift from the Lord" (*Prov* 19:14). The man who finds a good wife has "the makings of a fortune, a helper that suits him, and a pillar to lean on" (*Sir* 36:23).

The book of *Proverbs*, for all its tirades against the unfaithful wife, mellows its stridency with frequent eulogies on marital fidelity; it ends with an enthusiastic commendation of the perfect wife. Often called the Poem to the Valiant Woman, these closing words of *Proverbs* do not celebrate a woman for her bravery or raw courage, but rather for the domestic virtues of the homemaker. She is the Ruth of the Old Testament, and not so much the Deborah or the courageous Judith. Her sphere of activity is within the home, not in politics and battles. Her home is the Promised Land, in one author's phrase, where the special gifts of God to her woman's nature can unfold and bear fruit.

Of many themes in this salute to femininity, these are the more salient. The perfect wife is the priceless treasure of her husband, esteeming him in the sight of men: "She is far beyond the price of pearls . . . her husband is respected at the city gates" (vv 10, 23). She is industrious and self-sufficient: "She does her work with eager hands . . . she weaves linen sheets and sells them" (vv 13, 24). She is mindful of her household help and the poor: "Snow may come, she has no fears for her household, with all her servants warmly clothed . . . she holds out her hand to the poor, she opens her arms to the needy" (vv 20-21). She is a cultivated woman: in *clothing* ("she dresses in fine apparel"), in her *speech* ("when she opens her mouth, she does so wisely"), in her *deportment* ("she is clothed in strength and dignity, she can laugh at the days to come").

In nearly every discourse on the feminine virtues, which for the Old Testament means *wifely* virtues, the primary concern nonetheless is the happiness the good wife brings to the husband. Her role is indeed praiseworthy but is always orientated toward the man's. St. Paul's exhortations to the married were from this perspective; husbands were to love their wives, and wives were to respect and obey their husbands. But as can be seen, while Old Testament misogyny is somewhat counterbalanced by themes like the Valiant Woman, we have not come full circle to a feminine personalism.

Revelation vs. Mores

Suspicion and distrust of women, praises to the good wife, such is the checkered testimony of the Old Testament. Where do we find the

inspired teaching of Scripture? where simply the *mores* of those times and the unavoidable influences of neighboring cultures? The misogyny has no more place, theologically, than the polygamy and divorce mentioned then. The most horrendous examples of biblical misogyny put into practice also most clearly reflect mores of the Ancient Near East. I refer to the "Crime at Gibeah" and the incident involving Lot in Sodom, the two classic examples.

A man was visiting a house in Gibeah. The Benjaminites of the town wanted to abuse him. The man's host made the following proposal to the townspeople, almost incredible to modern ears:

My brothers, I implore you, do not commit this crime. This man has become my guest; do not commit such an infamy. Here is my daughter; she is a virgin; I will give her to you. Possess her, do what you please with her, but do not commit such an infamy against this man. (*Jgs* 19:23-24)

Lot did no better at Sodom. Two "angels from Yahweh" came to visit him. The men of Sodom wanted to abuse them. Lot offered his two virgin daughters as proxies "to treat as it pleases you. But as for the men, do nothing to them, for they have come under the shadow of my roof" (*Gen* 19:8). The stories show to what extent the sacred duty of hospitality could lead in those nomadic times. Hospitality was a necessity for desert life, as it is today; the honor of a woman was of lesser account than this sacred duty. To Christian eyes, however, such an attitude to women is abominable.

What is theological is the positive advance toward esteeming womanhood made in the Wisdom Literature and the theoretical bases given for sexual equality in the opening chapters of *Genesis*. The symbolic language of the creation of Eve is saying, in different words, what *Proverbs* 19 sounded above in describing a woman as the gift of Yahweh. She is bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh; she is like man. Woman is formed from the side of Adam, because her place is to be at his side, as companion, and not at his feet as slave.

An exegesis of *Gen* 3:16 is offered to explain the existing inferiority of woman. God gave this punishment to the woman: "You shall give birth to your children in pain. Your yearning shall be for your husband, yet he will lord it over you." The punishments were appropriated to the specific functions of man and woman; childbearing for the woman, providing bread through toil for the man. John L. McKenzie proposes the following as the theological purport of the narrative. The

existing inferiority of the woman, her subjection to the man and dependence on him for sexual fulfillment, which is the root of her subjection, is attributed to a curse. Her inferiority is presented as a come-down from the original unspoiled condition of mankind.

Conclusions

The Old Testament view on women, as one easily gathers, is both checkered and incomplete. Checkered, because (1) Old Testament literature was influenced by other cultures, and women had a rather low position in the Ancient Near East; (2) the Old Testament is often reflecting the mores of the times, and these are not being proposed as God's revealed will for one to follow; (3) Hebrew writers often used antithesis as a way of presenting a complex reality, and consequently they would have some very lofty things to say about women and in the next breath something rather deflating. As to its misogyny, Old Testament literature is no better nor worse than its contemporaries; as to its positive views on women, it looms almost unique. (Egyptian writing is a notable exception too; Egypt's women occupied a very elevated position in its social structure.)

The other quality of the testimony is its incompleteness. An Old Testament view of women is incomplete and in many instances imperfect. The Christian revelation provides a corrective where it is imperfect and a fulfillment where it is incomplete. Implementation is another question yet; many Christian writers labored under the male syndrome of misogyny, and perhaps it has only been our own century which has achieved an adequate feminine personalism. The New Testament also provided the concrete realization of the ideally redeemed person, and this a woman, Mary.

Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to cull this image of femininity from the Old Testament, but in particular from the Wisdom Literature. Old Testament woman is like a glass of wine. The sage mistrusted woman for her power to stupor the strongest of men, much as a heady wine can. The prostitute and the adulteress are like wine turned sour; they can bring only bitterness. But the valiant woman of the Old Testament is the rare vintage wine, a gift of God and a delight to the heart of men. One comes away with the feeling, though, that the sage of the Wisdom Literature leaned more toward being the teetotaler than the sophisticated connoisseur of muscatel.