

WOMEN AND THE HOME:
AN OLD TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE

by
David M. Moynihan

Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Divinity in
Grace Theological Seminary
May 1985

Title: WOMEN AND THE HOME: AN OLD TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE
Author: David M. Moynihan
Degree: Master of Divinity
Date: May, 1985
Adviser: John A. Sproule

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the biblical perspective regarding women and the home. Due to the scope of the project, the study has been confined primarily to that of the Old Testament though the New Testament is brought in for exegetical support of some of the major points.

The study begins by presenting a thumbnail sketch of the background and issues involved within the current theological debate regarding the 'woman question.'

It then moves on to examine the Old Testament perspective in an overview fashion. This is done by first setting the cultural backdrop for the Old Testament. This was followed by a survey of the role of the ancient Hebrew woman as presented in the Old Testament Canon. Major areas between the cultures are discussed and compared.

This is followed by a more detail analysis of some key Old Testament passages related to the issue. It was found that the first creation account (Genesis 1:26-31) taught the ontological equality between the sexes, but gave no information regarding how they were to relate to each other. This was discovered in the second creation account (Genesis 2:15-24) which taught the authority and headship of the man over all of creation including the woman. The importance of this second chapter of Genesis is seen by its frequent use in the New Testament to support male headship and female subordination.

The major conclusion reached in this paper is that Scripture consistently teaches, as God's ideal plan from the beginning, not only the ontological equality of sexes but also a functional distinctiveness which works itself out in the headship of the husband and the subordination of the wife. Specific tasks and responsibilities are to be worked out by the couple within this basic, God-given framework and the precepts of His Word.

Accepted by the Faculty of Grace Theological Seminary
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree
Master of Divinity


Adviser

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter	
I. THE CURRENT THEOLOGICAL DEBATE: TWO MAJOR POSITIONS	7
The Evangelical Traditionalists	8
The Evangelical Feminists	10
The Movement as a Whole	10
The Moderate Wing	17
The Radical Wing	19
Summary and Conclusions	21
II. THE OLD TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE: AN OVERVIEW	23
The Cultural Backdrop	23
The Common Patriarchal Culture	24
The Ancient Mesopotamian Culture	26
The Old Babylonian Culture	29
The Middle Assyrian Culture	33
The General Overview	36
The Original Dignity and Honor.	36
The Familial Structures and Regulations	38
The Social Attitudes and Practices	44
The Religious Attitudes and Practices	50
Summary and Conclusions	53
III. THE OLD TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE: SOME KEY PASSAGES	57
The First Creation Account	59
The Uniqueness of Mankind	60
The Image of God	61
Man as Male and Female	64
The Second Creation Account	73
An Overview	74
Some of the Evangelical Feminists Claims.	76
Ontological Equality	83
Hierarchical Relationship: Headship and Subordination	85
Summary and Conclusions	95
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	98
BIBLIOGRAPHY	104

INTRODUCTION

Living in a day of modern technology and mass media has many advantages and few truly long for the 'good ole days.' Most people are living longer, earning more, working less and enjoying an overall better life-style than any previous generation. On the other hand, those same scientific marvels have also brought along a host of new problems which our forefathers never had to contend with in those more simple days. The traditional family structure of the father being the 'bread winner' and the mother being the 'homemaker' was more of the rule than the exception. Role identity and functional responsibilities were usually well defined giving a sense of order and security.

Unfortunately, things are not so simple today. Whether it be in the political, economic, social or religious realms, life has become very complex. Everything is changing rapidly from technology to life-styles to even foundational beliefs. This has no doubt contributed to the pervasive feeling of relativism so noticeable today. Nothing is absolute anymore; everything is relative. Such a state of affairs does much to heighten the level of stress and confusion within the society. In reaction to such a milieu, many have possibly begun to turn inward by concentrating more on their 'rights' than 'responsibilities.'

While this was taking place in all segments of society, from the youth to the adult, one graphic example was seen in the demands for 'women's rights.' While the days of the bombastic and often startling 'women's lib' demonstrations of the late sixties and early seventies has probably become a thing of the past, the philosophical waves of the movement have not. Instead, it has continued to pound away at the traditional, 'male-oriented' edifices without any sign of a calm. No segment of society has been left unaffected. The persistent cry of 'discrimination' and demand for 'equal rights' has taken its toll on both language and media as well as education and business. All have experienced tremendous change and adjustment, but perhaps one of the more important areas which has been affected during this time has been that of the home and family. One national news periodical wrote a special report dealing with many of these changes. Regarding some of the changes within the home, it reported:

THE TRADITIONAL FAMILY roles are in a state of flux. For many women, the dilemma of the 1980s is how to balance a job with marriage and motherhood. The image of the nuclear family with the breadwinning father and a full time housewife mother represents only 12 percent of the American households. The Census Bureau reports that in more than 60 percent of families both the husband and wife work. Some 66 percent of women who are single parents are in the labor force. All in all, 33 million children have mothers who work full time. . . .The fastest growing group of working mothers is those with very young children. By 1983, 33 percent of mothers with babies under 7 months old were employed. . . .In the past, women who pursued careers did not usually have a family life. . . .In the 1980s, many women are rejecting

the either/or choice of job vs. home and are trying to do both.¹

Further on in the report under the heading "Relationships: Blurring of Roles," the authors point out that as more and more women move out of the domestic world and into that of business, men are being forced to change and adjust both at home and at work. The main problem for the man in adapting to this new arrangement seems to be one of "self esteem," and for the wife, it's "getting the husband to share in the housework." Noting that many men appear to have successfully adjusted to the "new woman" life-style, it further points out that many have not. As one rabbi expressed it "We were programmed by parents into believing that the male was the breadwinner. His job was top priority. . . He was the senior partner; she was the junior partner. But the curtain has fallen on those old assumptions, and its painful and bewildering."²

Indeed many are feeling the stress of not knowing how to cope with this new development and are often looking for answers. Unfortunately, the Church, for too long failed to address the issue of the women's role from a sound biblical prospective. Either the problem was ignored, with the hope that it would go away, or it was addressed in terms of old traditional cliches or 'proof texts.' As with most

¹Abigail Trafford, et.al, "She's Come A Long Way--Or Has She?" U.S. News and World Report (August 6, 1984): 48.

²Ibid., p. 51.

issues, however, the problem did not go away but rather spread even into the inner sanctums of the Church itself and before long many 'progressive' churches were seeing the 'wisdom' of ordaining women to the ministry. While the more conservative groups maintained their traditional stance, they were not unaffected by the challenge of the evangelical feminists who sought similar concessions on more 'exegetical' grounds. As Waltke expresses it:

We are in the process of taking a new look at sexual roles in western culture. Women are standing up to be counted and challenging both Scripture and/or the traditional interpretation of it, which they feel have suppressed feminine dignity. This fresh breeze, or should I say, wind, has had the heuristic value of blowing away the clouds of traditional male prejudice and enabling the exegetical theologian to see the Scriptures afresh in a new cultural context. In this contextualization we can better separate the pure ore of Scriptural teaching about the role of the sexes from the impurities of vain tradition that have become mixed with it.¹

This, of course is easier said than done as many have begun to find out. Some of the major passages which deal with the role of women have real exegetical difficulties which cannot be ignored or made light of. Complicating the problem even more, has been the evangelical feminists' legitimate concern over a proper hermeneutics. Just how does one accurately interpret the Bible? Do cultural considerations come into play and, if so, how? Does living a 'biblical' life-style mean adopting the customs of that day? These are just a sample of numerous questions the serious

¹Bruce Waltke, "The Relationship of the Sexes in the Bible," Cruix 19 (September, 1983):10.

exegete must address today. While many of these perplexing questions will not be able to be addressed in this paper, due to the scope of the project, it is hoped that the reader will nonetheless acquaint himself with these important issues and perhaps be spurred on to further investigation.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the Old Testament perspective regarding the role of women in the home. The approach will be to begin by acquainting the reader with the current theological debate regarding this question and then move into the biblical texts themselves. This will be done with the presupposition that the Bible is truly the very Word of God and therefore worthy of one's attention and obedience. Since the words came through men in a given historical-cultural setting, however, care must be exercised to more fully understand that context before seeking to making 20th century application. For this reason, some time will be expended to determine the cultural backdrop of the Old Testament before examining the texts itself. The textual investigation will begin with a general overview of the woman's role in the home as recorded in the Old Testament canon. Having completed this, the paper will finally address what are believed to be some of the key passages dealing with the issue.

The basic thesis of this paper is that, while the Bible does teach that men and women are equal before God, ontologically, it also consistently asserts that their economic roles are to be functionally distinct. In the case of

the home, this general principle translates into the hierarchical role relationship of the husband's headship and the wife's subordination. Specific tasks and responsibilities are to be worked out by the couple within this basic, God-given framework and the precepts of His Word.

CHAPTER I

THE CURRENT THEOLOGICAL DEBATE:

TWO MAJOR POSITIONS

The role of women in the home has been changing dramatically over the past 25 years. This has been brought about by a number of factors, not the least of which has been the secular women's liberation movement which began in the late 60's. Unfortunately, many traditionalists at that time, both within and without the evangelical community, paid little serious attention to the issues which were being raised. Unable or unwilling to look beyond the sensationalism of those early days, they failed to discern the changing cultural attitudes even within their own ranks. Quebedeaux rightly observes, with the benefit of hindsight, that "the feminist movement has demonstrated that many (though not all) middle-class women do not have a sense of worth and dignity when their role in life is limited to childbearing and the confines of home and family."¹ As a result, many women have been moving out into new and challenging endeavors with the hope of finding a new fulfillment in life. The overall impact of this movement on the evangelical community

¹Richard Quebedeaux, The Worldly Evangelical (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1978), p. 120. This work has been the primary source for this chapter.

began slowly but has been increasing steadily under the impetus of those who call themselves 'evangelical' or 'biblical feminists.'¹ It has been between this camp and that of the 'evangelical traditionalists' that the current theological debate regarding the role of women in the church, the home and society has been waged. Therefore, a brief sketch of these groups will be drawn before examining what the Bible says concerning this question.

The Evangelical Traditionalists

This group, largely made up of the right and center evangelicals,² strongly upholds the "centrality of the nuclear family and the traditional roles of husband, wife, and children within that family."³ In reaction to the increasing challenge, posed by liberal Protestantism, the evangelical left, and the general populace who speak against

¹Susan T. Foh, in her book Women and the Word of God: A Response to Biblical Feminism (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1979), pp. 2-3, differentiates between this group and those she labels "Christian feminists." She points out that while the "biblical feminists" claim to believe the Bible as God's inspired word and, in fact, point to it as the source of their views, this is not so with the "Christian feminists." This latter designation is more inclusive, for those of this group, such as Rosemary Reuther and Mary Daly, while associating themselves with Christianity, makes no claim to believe in the divine inspiration of the Bible. The views of this group will therefore not be addressed in this paper.

²These are Quebedeaux's designations. Fundamentalists which he labels as the "evangelical far right" also hold these values. For a more extensive discussion, refer to his book The Worldly Evangelicals, pp. 25-80.

³Ibid., p. 74.

the traditional view, several leaders from this group have begun to enter the forum not only to defend their traditional stance but to repudiate the various non-traditional ones.¹ While all of these individuals advocate a hierarchical role relationship between men and women, there are some differences of opinion regarding the actual outworking of the various functional responsibilities.

Theologically, right and center evangelicals, usually believe that the Scriptures are totally inerrant, not only in matters of faith and practice but also in those relating to history and the universe. For this group, all Scripture passages are to be interpreted in their natural, literal sense² unless context or the analogy of faith requires a broader interpretation. As such, extrabiblical considerations such as linguistics or culture, though studied, are never allowed to dictate the interpretation of a given passage. Indeed, these evangelicals are usually very cautious when it comes to supplementing the absolute

¹Some of the current writers and speakers representing this traditional view are: Larry Christianson, Susan Foh, Elisabeth Elliot, Kenneth Gangel, Gene Getz, Bill Gothard, Duane Litfin, Neil Lightfoot, John MacArthur Jr., and Marabel Morgan. Some of their works are included within the Bibliography.

²This term should not be confused with 'wooden literalism' which makes no allowance for various forms and figures of speech. Instead, the term 'literal sense' should be understood to refer to the usual, customarily acknowledged meaning of an expression as it is used in its particular context. It is the plain, normal sense the original author meant to convey to his audience. For further discussion, see A. Berkeley Mickelsen, Interpreting the Bible (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), p. 405.

authority of the Bible with one's experiences or reason, and the discoveries of the natural and behavioral sciences. Quebedeaux points out that there is really very little difference between the right and center evangelicals except possibly with the intensity with which they hold these beliefs and the strictness with which they act them out. He goes on to note that the group represented by these designations makes up the vast majority of the evangelical community in the United States today.¹

The Evangelical Feminists

The Movement as a Whole

A General Profile

Contemporary evangelical feminism is a movement within the evangelical left--a group consisting of the 'young evangelicals' and their sympathizers.² Most evangelicals of the left, as those of the right and center, support the nuclear family. However, at the same time, they are also open to alternative domestic life-styles such as extended families and communes. Most of the affiliates of this group are also feminists³ who support the ordaining of women, egalitarian marriage, and the utilization of

¹Quebedeaux, Evangelicals, pp. 29-30.

²Ibid., p. 30.

³Quebedeaux defines a "feminist" as one who has "a social, political, and often religious analysis regarding the oppression of women as well as a desire to promote the welfare of all women" (pp. 120-21).

inclusive language. For them, the old evangelical taboos, concerning drinking, smoking, dancing, etc. are no longer regarded as binding. Biblical criticism is greatly employed by both students and scholars alike in this group. Knowledge from the natural, social, and behavioral sciences is often used to shed light on their Biblical studies. Scripture is now recognized as culturally conditioned in many parts. In proportion to the total evangelical community, this group constitutes a small but increasingly vocal and influential minority.¹

A Historical Profile

The roots of the current evangelical feminists movement can probably be traced back to the late 1950's when Russell Prohl, a Lutheran pastor, wrote his book Woman in the Church. In it, he concluded that it was time for Lutherans to support the 1955 Presbyterian resolution that "there is no theological ground for denying ordination to women, simply because they are women."² By the early sixties, it was becoming more apparent that there was a growing discontent among American women regarding their role in

¹Ibid., p. 84.

²Russell C. Prohl, Woman in the Church (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), p. 80, citing the Minutes of the General Assembly, p. 97.

life.¹ Sensing this frustration, Betty Friedan published The Feminine Mystique which proved to be a turning point for woman's consciousness in the States. The book without question hit a nerve for in the first ten years, 2 million copies had been sold.² Still, little was being said by evangelicals during this time, possibly due to the fact that the secular feminist movement had not yet made very deep and serious inroads into their community.³

But in February, 1966, Eternity magazine published an article by freelance writer Letha Scanzoni entitled "Women's Place: Silence or Service?" where she, like Prohl, also argued for the ordination of women. This was followed by another article, two years later, in which she advocated the elevating of marriage to a partnership. Then in 1969, Scanzoni wrote to Nancy Hardesty, a teacher at Trinity College (IL), concerning the possibility of co-authoring a book

¹Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, All We're Meant To Be: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation (Waco, TX: Word Books Incorporated, 1974), p. 7. Scanzoni goes on to point out that articles on the 'trapped housewife' were beginning to appear in the popular press.

²Don Williams, The Apostle Paul and Women in the Church (Los Angeles: BIM Publishing Co., 1977), pp. 22-24. Williams goes on to point out that while Friedan did not mention the Bible or Paul in her book The Feminine Mystique (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1963), she did assert that "our houses and schools and churches" were built around the lie of the feminine mystique--the woman's God given nature of inferiority (p. 24).

³It should be noted that some evangelicals were attempting to nip the effects of the movement in the bud. One example of this was the work by Charles C. Ryrie, The Role of Women in the Church (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958).

on 'the woman question.' Hardesty agreed and the work was finally published in 1974 as All We're Meant To Be: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation.¹

By 1970, at the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship triennial missionary convention,² it became apparent that a new generation of young evangelicals who repudiated the modern alliance of theological conservatism with social, political and cultural conservatism in America was appearing. From this point on, the discontent among these young evangelicals and their sympathizers grew until approximately 50 of them, along with a few evangelical elder statesmen like Carl Henry, Rufus Jones and Frank Gaebeline forged out the much publicized Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern over the 1973 Thanksgiving weekend.³ Among other things, the signers of this Declaration acknowledged that "we have encouraged men to prideful domination and women to irresponsible passivity. So we call both men and women to mutual submission and active discipleship." Quebedeaux makes note that the phrase "mutual submission" has been used by evangelical feminists as a more Christian-sounding substitute for the word "equality."⁴ It was also

¹Quebedeaux, Evangelicals, p. 121.

²More commonly referred to as "Urbana."

³Quebedeaux, Evangelicals, pp. 83-84.

⁴Ibid., p. 122. For text and commentary, see Ronald J. Sider, ed., The Chicago Declaration.

during this year that Sharon Gallagher, as the new editor of Right On, introduced radical evangelicals to feminism.

The following Thanksgiving, a workshop was held to implement the Chicago Declaration. While little was accomplished in this regard, participants were introduced to a new evangelical feminists periodical, Daughters of Sarah, founded by Lucille Dayton. This publication has experienced an increasingly broad readership among evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike.

In November of 1975, a conference was held by the evangelical feminists, in Washington, D.C., where they officially endorsed the ERA and established the Evangelical Women's Caucus (EWC) for the purpose of raising the grass-roots consciousness. It has been estimated that some 3,000 women are active members and/or receive EWC literature. News regarding the evangelical feminist as well as their views appear regularly now in such radical evangelical publications as Sojourners, Radix, and The Other Side, as well as in some of the more moderate ones like Wittenburg Door, and Faith at Work.

For the most part, this group is composed of white, upper middle-class intellectuals and activists, both married, single, and divorced. In many ways, their ideas resemble those of the early secular feminists of the 60s in that their approach is practical and task oriented. They are concerned with the problems faced by women with careers as well as those who desire release from the restrictions of

housework. They support both singleness and egalitarian marriage as workable Christian alternatives as well as the ordination of women. Quebedeaux remarks that they "would fit well into a moderate wing of the National Organization of Women (NOW)."¹ While feelings are strong and convictions run deep, evangelical feminists, as a whole still claim to be Christians first and feminists second; feminism has not yet become an alternative religion for them.

A Biblical Profile

As mentioned above, evangelical feminists claim to believe in the divine inspiration of Scripture. It should be noted, however, that this does not mean that they all hold to the doctrine of inerrancy. In fact, an increasing number of leading evangelical theologians are beginning to subscribe to a 'limited inerrancy' view of the Scriptures.² Advocates feel strongly that this position both preserves the authority of the Bible as well as allows for the use of the literary-historical-critical method for biblical studies.

It was also noted above that evangelical feminists point to the Bible as the foundation for their position regarding the role of women in the twentieth century. It is their contention that the basic, fundamental teaching of the Bible, concerning men and women, is 'equality.' Hence, they

¹Ibid., pp. 122-123.

²Ibid., p. 88. This position holds that Scripture is inerrant in matters of faith and conduct, but not necessarily to areas of history and the universe.

argue that the outworking of this principle must ultimately take precedence over any contrary social patterns or structures which have evolved from the surrounding culture. While many of their individual arguments will be dealt with in more detail further on in the paper a brief summary of their rationale is presented below.¹

1. The first creation account (Gen. 1:26-28). Originally, God created people, male and female, in his own image.² They were equal before God and were to be co-rulers over the earth. There are no 'role distinctions' in this passage nor is there any hint of 'subordination' of the woman to the man here.³

2. The fall and its effects (Gen. 3:1-17). The fall devastated the harmony and order established by God in the beginning. The subordination of women, along with slavery, racism and all other social 'inequalities' are viewed as the subsequent result of this event and not due to any plan or

¹Ibid., p. 123. See also Howard Reed, "Women: Keepers of the Home" (Master of Divinity Thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1984), p. 4.

²Many believe that this implies that God thus possesses both masculine and feminine traits. For a full development of this position, see Paul K. Jewett, Man as Male and Female (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975).

³The second creation account (Gen. 2:15-25) is usually played down if not totally ignored by the feminists. When it is dealt with they argue against the 'subordination' concept seen by the 'traditionalists.' In fact, some even see hints of the woman's 'superiority' though they do not push the issue. See Patricia Gundry, Woman Be Free! (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977), p. 23.

decree of God. Thus, Genesis 3:16b is viewed as descriptive and not prescriptive.¹

3. The life of Jesus. The attitudes and practices of Jesus reveal that he was a true feminist himself bucking the tide in a male-dominated, woman-subjugated society.

4. The redemption of Jesus. All the walls and barriers set up and prevailing in the old, fallen creation are now broken down to give way to God's new creation order--complete 'equality.' Thus Paul could write in Galatians 3:28, "There is no such thing as . . . male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus" (NEB).² With the pre-fall 'equality' restored, Christian men and women are now to relate to one another in a spirit of 'mutual submission.'

The Moderate Wing

While all evangelical feminists arrive at the same basic scriptural position, the more moderate wing holds that the Bible really does not teach what it has been assumed to teach regarding the subordinate role of women. Instead they believe that the traditional 'male-dominated' interpretation

¹God declares what will take place versus what should take place. As Scanzoni and Hardesty see it: "He does not institute or condone role stereotypes for sexes, but his words point to the sinful ways in which men and women would be limited by cultural construction." (All We're Meant To Be, p. 34).

²Unless otherwise noted, all scripture will be quoted from the New American Standard Bible.

of the Bible has warped the evangelical community's understanding of God's Word. Their goal, then, is to "get back to what Paul really meant"¹ and thus demonstrate the agreement which exists between Paul's views and their feminist position of personal and functional equality. To accomplish this, they endeavor to employ the hermeneutical principle 'analogy of faith.'² While this is a good principle of interpretation, it can be misapplied. Consider for instance how it is employed by many feminists. Scanzoni and Hardesty write:³

The biblical theologian does not build on isolated proof texts but first seeks the locus classicus, the major biblical statement, on a given matter⁴. . . . Passages which deal with an issue systematically are used to help understand incidental references elsewhere. Passages which are theological and doctrinal in content are used to interpret those where the writer is dealing with practical local cultural problems.⁵

¹Quebedeaux, Evangelicals, p. 123.

²Also called the 'analogy of Scripture,' this principle is based on the belief that Scripture, having one divine author, can not contradict itself. Hence, as the Reformers declared "Scripture interprets Scripture."

³Scanzoni and Hardesty, All We're Meant To Be, pp. 18, 19.

⁴Ibid. The authors cite, as their example the doctrine of the creation and fall which is "most clearly spelled out in Gen. 1-3 and Rom. 5:12-21, not in I Cor. 11:2-16 or I Tim. 2:13-14"--two problem passages for the feminists.

⁵Ibid. This is the governing plank in their hermeneutical platform as seen in their following parenthetical observation: "Except for Gal. 3:28, [their locus classicus on the matter], all of the references to women in the New Testament are contained in passages dealing with practical concerns about personal relationships or behavior in worship services."

Thus for the moderate wing of the evangelical feminists, any apparent contradictions in the Scriptures will be shown to be just that--only apparent.¹

Leading speakers and writers of this camp include Sharon Gallagher, Patricia Gundry, Nancy Hardesty, Letha Scanzoni, and Don Williams. While some of these like Gundry and Williams would claim to support the total inerrancy of the Scriptures, the actual outworking of these as well as the rest of the group demonstrates a limited inerrancy position.

The Radical Wing

Some of the well known leaders of this camp are Paul K. Jewett and Virginia R. Mollenkott. Like the moderate wing, this group asserts that the New Testament proclaims liberty for all people and was never meant to burden modern women by forcing the patriarchal structure of the first century on them. However, their methodology is far more extreme. For example, Jewett in his Man as Male and Female, emphasizes the cultural conditioning of the Bible so much so that he actually challenges (logically) even the 'limited inerrancy' position. Referring to Paul's appeal to the second creation narrative as a reason why women ought to be silent in church (I Tim. 2:12-13), Jewett remarks:

. . .[He] is assuming the traditional rabbinic understanding of that narrative whereby the order of their creation is made to yield the primacy of the man over

¹Quebedeaux, Evangelicals, p. 123.

the woman. Is this rabbinic understanding of Genesis 2:18f correct? We do not think that it is, for it is palpably inconsistent with the first creation narrative, with the life-style of Jesus, and with the apostle's own clear affirmation that in Christ there is no male and female (Gal. 3:28).¹

The thrust of Jewett's argument throughout the book is that Paul's teaching about women was obviously conditioned by his male dominated culture and rabbinic training. Therefore, such time-bound authority ought not to be imposed upon Christians in other times and cultures. In other words, Paul was wrong in this teaching of Christian practice at least in terms of universal authority and application.²

Regarding the reactions of the evangelical community to Jewett's new hermeneutic, Quebedeaux observes that while the conservative establishment was understandably rocked, the evangelical left was less shaken and many even scoffed at the inerrancy emphasis altogether. In assessing the trends for the future, he predicts that "because the conservatives' [the moderate feminists] argument that Paul did not really mean what he and we thought he meant involves a strained and quite unconvincing exegesis, we can assume that the radicals' methodology will eventually become dominant in left evangelical circles."³

¹Jewett, Man, p. 119.

²Quebedeaux, Evangelicals, p. 88, 124.

³Ibid.

Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter on "The Current Theological Debate: Two Major Positions," an attempt has been made to orient the reader to some of the characteristics and arguments of those groups engaged in the controversy. Looking at the evangelical traditionalists, it was noted that this group, consisting of the rights and centers of the evangelical community, holds to the traditional, hierarchical relationships between men and women. Theologically, this group, on the whole, adheres to a totally inerrant view of the Scriptures and interprets them in their natural, literal sense unless context or the analogy of faith would dictate otherwise. Several authors and speakers were noted, as representative of this group, who have come forward not only to support their traditional hierarchical view of the role relationships but also to repudiate the egalitarian views of the evangelical feminists. The discussion surrounding this group was considerably shorter than the second because they represent the traditional view as well as the majority of the evangelical community, both of which contribute to this group's ideologies being better known.

The remainder of the chapter dealt with those who have come to be known as the evangelical or biblical feminists. This began with a general profile of the movement as a whole, noting that evangelical feminism really comprises a movement within the evangelical left. General characteristics of this broader group were observed regarding their

views on various areas of life including biblical studies. It was further noted that while the evangelical left was a small minority of the total evangelical community, it was becoming increasingly vocal and influential.

Following an historical profile of this group, a biblical profile was then considered. It was pointed out that whether by claim or practice, most evangelical feminists subscribed to a 'limited inerrancy' position, and the literary-historical-critical method of biblical studies. For them, the main biblical statement regarding men and women is that of 'equality.' A brief summary of their rationale was also presented.

Within the evangelical feminist movement, it was observed that there were two distinct wings: the moderate and the radical. The moderate wing holds to a limited inerrancy approach to the Bible and demonstrates this by their effort to harmonize their feminist views with Paul's hierarchical passages. The radicals emphasize the cultural conditioning of the Bible to a far greater extreme. Some have even gone so far as to say that Paul, a product of his own time, was wrong in some of his teachings. While it was noted that conservative evangelicals were shocked by such 'heresy,' this radical hermeneutic will most likely become ascendant among left evangelicals in the future.

With this background in mind, an examination of the Old Testament perspective regarding women and the home will now be presented.

CHAPTER II

THE OLD TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE:

AN OVERVIEW

The purpose of the remaining two chapters is to examine what the Old Testament itself has to say about the role of women in society especially as it relates to the home. This chapter will begin by first sketching out the cultural backdrop for the Old Testament canon. This will be followed by a general overview of the laws, attitudes and practices which are recorded within an examination of the Old Testament writings themselves. Then, in chapter three, what are believed to be the key propositional¹ passages relating to this issue will be conducted.

The Cultural Backdrop

Before examining the Old Testament perspective regarding women and society it is important to gain some understanding of the ancient world in which it was written. This will provide a historical and cultural backdrop against which the biblical data might be compared and better

¹A proposition is a statement which either affirms or denies something so that it can be characterized as either true or false. Urdang, Lawrence and Flexner, Stuart Berg, editors, The Random House College Dictionary (New York: Random House, Inc., 1973), p. 1062.

understood and evaluated. Swidler emphasizes the importance of this investigation when he writes:

We can no more understand a human event outside of its historical context than we can grasp the concept of the sound of a single hand clapping . . . The importance of the historical context is even further heightened when the human event being investigated is a person's, or a society's attitude concerning the status of the most broadly distributed class of persons in a society, namely, the status of women in society.¹

The Old Testament Period spans several millennia and therefore shows evidence of a number of cultural changes both within the ancient Hebrews as well as that of their neighboring nations. As such, only significant elements which seem to be representative of this period will be mentioned. Nevertheless, it is hoped that by examining the role of women in a few of the more prominent cultures surrounding ancient Israel, a better grasp of the Old Testament's perspective concerning women will be obtained. Before discussing any of the specifics of these individual cultures, however, it will be profitable to consider one very basic characteristic common to them all, namely their patriarchal culture.

The Common Patriarchal Culture

Unlike the modern day 'nuclear family' of the Western world which consists of the father, mother and children with other blood ties seen only in the background, the

¹Leonard Swidler, Women in Judaism: The Status of Women in Formative Judaism (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1976), p. 4.

ancient Near Eastern 'family' was viewed much differently. Here, individual 'nuclear' units were bound close together with other similar blood-related units to form what was known as a tribe or clan. People were seen as members of these tribes as opposed to simply being related. They were an integral part of the whole. The senior male of the clan often functioned as the head and representative of the whole group. Thus his actions and decisions had definite consequences for the group as a whole. As time went on and these groups became more urbanized and thus less tribal, the functions of the patriarch became more limited.¹

Within this societal structure, financial arrangements, in both business and marriage, often entailed sizable amounts of family wealth and the interests of the tribe needed to be considered. This is in large measure the reason why fathers worked out marriage contracts for his children. Even in the case of two adult parties, the negotiations often involved the father and even brothers who were seen as having vested interests. These financial agreements, such as dowries and bridal gifts, became significant for the clan at the husband's death or in the event of a divorce. The personal assets of the woman and her ability

¹James B. Hurley, Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), p. 21.

to work could be lost by the tribe if she remarried someone from another tribe.¹

Because of the clan's double role as both a family and legal unit, respect for parents was far more than a case of private morality, it was a civil obligation as well. The role of the patriarch as the legal spokesman for the clan also affected the marriage and family relationships. The authority of the husband-father over his wife and children became a subject of civil law.²

Having this common cultural characteristic in mind, it will now be easier to understand and evaluate the woman's role and status in the ancient Near Eastern cultures both outside and within the nation of Israel.

The Ancient Mesopotamian Culture

Most scholars would agree that civilization began in the Fertile Crescent between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. One of the more ancient civilizations in this area was that of the Sumerians.³ Opinion is split regarding the role patterns among this people. Some have reported that it was a male-dominated society where the men ran everything from the government and economy to the schools and religion.

¹Ibid., pp. 21-11.

²Ibid., p. 22.

³This civilization was prominent from about 4000 B.C. to 1960 B.C. R. K. Harrison, Old Testament Times (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), pp. 41-55.

Women were generally considered 'second-class' citizens without power or status. Others, however, have pointed out that this was mostly true only of the later Sumerian people¹ and that in earlier periods, women may have been equal to the men both socially and economically. Prior to 2400 B.C., it appears that polyandry existed in Sumer. Indications are that women also may have owned property, held public office and exercised religious leadership. Swidler also points out that from about 2000 B.C. onward, however, the role of women deteriorated greatly and men generally ruled.²

Marriages were neither sacred in nature nor purpose. They could be readily ended if the plaintiff could provide an allotment to the forsaken mate. If divorce was undesirable, one could still be freed from the marriage contract by obtaining an annulment or proving unfaithfulness--the penalty of which was death. Adultery was a charge normally filed by the man against his wife. This could be done even on the ground of mere suspicion and the only recourse the woman had to prove her innocence was to undergo a 'trial by ordeal.'³ The converse of this situation was not true. In

¹Thought to be from about 2000 B.C. on. Swidler, Woman, p. 4.

²Swidler, Women, pp. 4-5, citing the findings of Sumerologist Samuel Noah Kramer.

³The accused was taken before a sacred shrine, sentenced, bound and thrown into one of the two sacred rivers. If she sank she was considered guilty, but if she floated and could get back to shore, she could have her accuser humiliated in public by having half of his hair and beard shaved off. Arthur Frederick Ide, Woman: A Synopsis. From

fact, a woman with similar suspicions would have little opportunity to end such an affair. The reason for this was that while Mesopotamian women were expected to be faithful to her one and only spouse, the men were not and could have sexual relations with any woman. While a woman could obtain a divorce, it was far easier for a man to do so.¹

Regarding her family, the ancient Mesopotamian woman had very little voice. While she was expected to bear children for her husband, she held no control or custody on the new born child. This resided with the father who exercised full power over the child to the point of even life and death. Children could be disinherited by their father for almost any offense and could be sold into slavery in times of economic hardship. Daughters were the least desirable of the offspring probably because, among other reasons, they normally outnumbered the boys making it usually difficult for the father to secure a marriage contract for her.² On the whole, the status of the ancient Mesopotamian woman was greatly inferior to her male counterpart--at least in this latter period.

the Dawn of Time to the Renaissance (Mesquite, TX: Ide House, Inc., 1983), p. 24.

¹Ide, Woman, pp. 24-25.

²Ibid., p. 26.

The Old Babylonian Culture¹

Ancient Babylonian women seem to have enjoyed a greater status and measure of freedom than did most other women in Mesopotamia. This can be seen from many of the laws recorded in the Code of Hammurabi.² While law codes do not necessarily give a complete and accurate picture regarding a society's actual practice, they do provide some understanding as to the women's legal status in a given culture.

Marriage³ in Ancient Babylon was 'contracted' by a man or his father with the father of the intended bride. This legal agreement involved the girl's dowry, a 'bridal gift' from the prospective bridegroom, as well as any other agreed upon stipulations. Such a contract was very important because it laid down the rights of a woman regarding her support and inheritance should the husband die. A widow

¹The Old Babylonian Period has been variously estimated to be from about 1830 B.C. to 1550 B.C. This period compares well with the Patriarchal Age which has been variously estimated to be from approximately 1950 B.C. to 1550 B.C. Harrison, Old Testament, pp. 59 and 72 respectively.

²Hammurabi was king of Babylon between 1792 B.C. and 1750 B.C. Desiring to establish a written legal code for his kingdom, Hammurabi collected, classified and modified earlier Sumerian oral decisions which had been handed down. He also extended their scope to encompass most areas of life. It stands as a true monument of ancient jurisprudence. For further discussion see R. K. Harrison, Old Testament, pp. 57-61.

³The codes addressing marriage, family life and divorce extend from law code 127 to 184. For a full discussion of this section see G. R. Driver and John C. Miles, The Babylonian Laws, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. 245-383.

could expect to be cared for by her older children as well as enjoy the settlement of her husband's estate until she died or remarried which she was free to do on her own.¹

Motherhood received special honor and her ability to rear her children was especially noted. As mistress over her maidservant, she had her own area of authority in the home which her husband recognized and respected.²

Babylonian women were protected by law from capricious cruelty in the homes. For example, neither a father nor a husband could punish a woman at will. Neither did they hold the power of life and death over them.³ In fact, if she were physically or socially mistreated, or divorced by her husband without just cause, she could return to her father's house without losing her dowry or her dignity. In such cases, the woman retained custody of the children and could raise them without the interference of the father.⁴ She could divorce her husband for proven cases of cruelty or adultery.

¹Hurley, Biblical Perspective, pp. 22-23.

²Elizabeth Mary MacDonald, The Position of Women as Reflected in Semitic Codes of Law, University of Toronto Studies: Oriental Studies, ed. J. P. McMurrich (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1931), p. 31. A biblical example of this authority can be seen in the accounts concerning Abraham, Sarah and Hagar.

³Ibid.

⁴Ide, Woman, p. 28.

The Code of Hammurabi gives hardly any information as to how the households were set up as well as the woman's societal role. It is clear, however, that while women were generally sheltered by law, a widow was allowed to manage her estate by herself, thus implying that she could also engage in business. There is also a large series of tablets¹ from this time frame which reveals that some women were at times greatly involved in commerce and trade as well as managing servants, goods, money, and textile related activities. Thus it appears from these tablets that Babylonian women were often involved in numerous activities which would at times take them outside of the home.²

Looking briefly at the religious realm, it can be clearly seen from the Code of Hammurabi that there was a complex hierarchy of devoted women and priestesses. While nothing concerning their personal lives is revealed in the Code, other records from the period, however, do indicate that some of these priestesses were able to obtain and manage great amounts of personal wealth and property.³

¹Hurley, Biblical Perspective, p. 24. The author points out that this series of tablets represents the correspondence of Iltani, King of Aqba-hamnu, and cites as a reference S. Dalley, C.B. Walker and J.D. Hawkins, The Old Babylonian Tablets from Tell al Rimah (Iraq: British School of Archaeology, 1976). Tablets which are of special interest concerning women are 22, 81, 96, 106, 120, 134, 293.

²Ibid., pp. 24-25.

³Ibid., p. 25.

While the women of Babylon enjoyed certain advantages and rights there were some very definite disadvantages and inequities. For example, her husband could sell her into slavery for three years to pay off a financial debt incurred by him, yet the converse was not true. Her marriage, as mentioned earlier, was set up by her father and prospective husband leaving her no say in the arrangement. In addition, her husband could terminate their marriage at will even though he was obligated to provide for her and the children. Her moral status was less favorable than her physical one. For instance, her virtue was often selfishly used in the name of religion. Codes addressing unfaithfulness were directed toward the woman. Marriages were only monogamous in theory since polygamy was an accepted practice.¹

Looking at the data as a whole, it would appear that while the ancient Babylonian woman enjoyed only a basic and inferior legal status within her culture, there were more advantages than disadvantages, especially in light of some of the civilizations about them and which later succeeded them.

¹MacDonald, Women in Semitic Codes, p. 31-32.

The Middle Assyrian Culture¹

Marriage, according to the Assyrian code,² was usually 'contracted' between a man or his father and the father of the prospective bride. Here there was the customary exchange of various bridal gifts and the dowry as well as the drawing up of a contract. This contract, which among other things specified the woman's legal benefits in the event of a divorce, was of great importance to the woman. Without it, she could be sent away with nothing, not even the children, except perhaps for her dowry and personal belongings, but even this was at the husband's discretion. One Assyrian law relating to divorce reads: "If a man divorces his wife, if (it is) his will, he shall give her something; if (it is) not his will, he shall not give her anything; she shall go forth empty."³ Unlike the Code of Hammurabi, no provision was made for a woman to divorce her husband, while he could do so at will.

¹This period (ca. 1450-1250 B.C.) was arrived at from the dating of nine Assyrian law tablets which were excavated at Assur between 1903 and 1914. It is called the Middle Assyrian Period to distinguish it from the Old Assyrian period (ca. 2350-2100 B.C.) and the Neo-Assyrian period (ca. 911-612 B.C.). Hurley, Biblical Perspective, p. 26.

²For an excellent translation and commentary of these laws, see Godfrey Rolles Driver and John C. Miles, The Assyrian Laws (Germany: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1975. Reprint of the 1935 Oxford edition with supplementary addition and corrections by G. R. Driver).

³Code 37 as translated by Driver and Miles, Assyrian Laws, p. 405.

The Assyrian Code was also harder on the widow in other respects. For instance, she was not even recognized as a widow and thus free to marry again until there were no eligible men from her husband's family. As she had no say in choosing her husband initially, she had to submit to a levirate-like¹ system should he die. It should be noted, however, that the rights of a 'recognized' widow to remarry did parallel the Babylonian Code. If a widow was left without provision, she was to be provided for by her sons, but she was not entitled to any portion of her husband's estate. On a more positive side, it should be noted that the state provided for the woman whose husband was absent in the interests of the state.²

Within the home, an Assyrian woman was subject to the totalitarian rule of her father who could punish her as he saw fit. This situation did not improve once married since her husband held the power of life and death over her. As a wife, she was responsible for any debts incurred by her husband, while as an unmarried daughter she could be

¹While it is not certain that the Hebrew form of levirate which gave a widow to her brother-in-law (cf. Gen 38, Deut 25:5, Ruth 1:11) was practiced in Assyria, there is evidence she was given to her father-in-law. In either case, the Assyrian levirate seemed more for the purpose of not losing the acquired property should a widow return to her father than for the purpose raising up children for the deceased "that his name may not be blotted out from Israel" (Deut 25:6). For further discussion, see MacDonald, Women in Semitic Codes, pp. 45 and 74.

²Hurley, Biblical Perspective, pp. 26-29. See also MacDonald, Women in Semitic Codes, pp. 48-49.

enslaved for her father's debts indefinitely. In public, married women and those of high birth were required to have their heads covered, while prostitutes and slave girls were forbidden to do so. Veils in the Assyrian culture, were a sign of rank and dignity, as well as ownership by a man. Unfortunately, nothing is known to date regarding the woman's participation in the social life of that period. In light of the Babylonian records however, as well as the demands of daily living, some have speculated that none but the wealthy could have secluded their women from the work force.

The Assyrian Code is also silent regarding the religious activity of women though again many presume, as in Babylon, that there was some measure of religious prostitution. Morally, the woman's status was comparable to the Babylonian woman, namely, her virginity and faithfulness were required as the right of her husband. Personal honor versus any religious convictions undergird these stipulations. Men, on the other hand, had no such restrictions and the custom of having auxiliary wives was quite prevalent.¹

With this Old Testament historical backdrop in place, one should be better able to note the similarities and dissimilarities with the Old Testament canon. One striking difference which should emerge is that while these codes of law were based upon secular, pragmatic

¹Ibid.

considerations for societal order, they were not always moral. The Code of Moses, on the other hand, not only dealt with the practical concerns of the day, but was fundamentally theocentric and moral in nature.

The General Overview

In this section, specific laws, attitudes and practices concerning women in the Old Testament will be discussed. While the data describing the lives of Babylonian and Assyrian women came primarily through their respective codes of law, the Old Testament contributes this information from a variety of sources. In addition to various regulations laid down in the Mosaic Law Code the Old Testament also contains narrative, poetry, prophetic and wisdom types of literature all of which add to the collective understanding of the ancient Israelite woman's daily life. Before launching out to examine some of these specifics, however, it would perhaps be advantageous to briefly discuss the basic foundation upon which the Old Testament develops its view of human life and relationship. As one might hope, this foundation is laid down in the opening chapters of the Bible which begins with the origin of mankind.¹

The Original Dignity and Honor

Unlike any other literature in the world, ancient as well as modern, the Bible sets forth a high and lofty

¹These will be discussed more fully in chapter three.

explanation of the origin of women.¹ In its first chapter, the Bible describes, in a majestic and sweeping fashion, how God created the heavens and the earth and everything within them. Seeing that it was all good, He then created man,² unlike any other creature, in His own image and likeness. Having created man as "male and female," God then blessed them and commanded them to reproduce and "fill the earth" with other image bearers like themselves. He also told them corporately to subdue the earth and rule over all that He had created (Gen 1:26-28). Clearly, both the male and female 'man' were the very apex or climax to all of God's grand creational activity. Not only were they to rule over the rest of God's creation, but they alone would bear the very image of their Creator.

While chapter one presents a panoramic view of God's creational handiwork, chapter two concentrates on the some of the specifics surrounding the creation of man and his immediate environment. It describes how God formed man from the dust of the ground and planted a garden for him to tend

¹Many cultures which did and do believe in reincarnation explain the origin of women as a man's consequence for living unrighteously in his previous life. Modern evolutionists would describe her origin along with man's as coming from some ape ancestor who found her (?) roots extending back into some primordial swamp.

²Man is used in the collective generic sense here and should be thought of as "mankind" in contradistinction to any other 'kind' of creation. Another functional equivalent might be 'humanity.' In the second chapter of Genesis, however, the same Hebrew word is used of the individual man as well as to designate his proper name "Adam." See BDB, p. 9, as well as page 68, footnote 1 of this paper.

(Gen 2:7, 8, 15). Here man was also to have fellowship with God (Gen 3:9). The narrative then goes on to point out a very important piece of information so germane to this study, namely it was "not good for man to be alone" (Gen 2:18a). The man needed the companionship of another like himself so God made for him "a helper suitable for (or corresponding to) him" (Gen 2:18b). Here the origin and purpose of the 'woman' is explained. God fashioned a woman from the side of the man that she might end his loneliness and that together with him, she might serve God and rule the earth.

From these two opening chapters of the Bible, then, it can be seen that the fundamental Old Testament perspective of humanity is that both the man and the woman were made in the image of God and were given responsibilities to display that image in their daily lives. The man was to tend the garden and rule the world; the woman was to walk alongside him as his life's partner and helper. Both were to reflect the divine image they bore. Clearly their origin was one of dignity and honor. With this basic foundation in view, some of the more specific laws and customs will now be discussed.

The Familial Structures and Regulations

As mentioned above, the ancient Near Eastern family structure was patriarchal in nature and was considered an integral part of the tribal clan. This was no less true for

the ancient Hebrews. As a nation, they were all related to one another as 'children of Abraham' and traced their ancestry back through their fathers. Loyalty and commitment to their 'father's house' or family was deeply impressed upon them from the earliest days. This can be seen from the frequent identification of an individual in terms of his ancestry or family units.¹ They did not think of themselves merely as individuals but also as members of an extended family. Life for them was one of corporate unity along family lines and their laws and customs assumed and reflected such an existence.²

Because of this commitment to, and even reverence for the patriarchal 'father's house' it is not surprising that a substantial measure of significance and authority surrounded the term 'father.' Within an immediate family or household, he was the uncontested ruler and head. This patriarchal mentality can also be seen from the Old Testament's use of the words לְיוֹצֵר (ruler, owner) and לְיוֹצֵר (to rule over, own) in reference to the husband.³

¹The Old Testament is filled with this type of identification. One example is found in Numbers 1:2 where the Lord tells Moses to 'Take a census of all the congregation of the sons of Israel, by their families, by their father's households. . .'. Verse 5ff identifies the 'father's households' as that of the twelve sons of Jacob who had been dead for a few hundred years. See also 1 Samuel 9:20-21.

²Hurley, Biblical Perspective, pp. 33-34.

³BDB, p. 127. See Deuteronomy 21:13, and 24:1 for two examples of these usages.

Within such a social structure it is understandable that the father would be the one to normally negotiate a marriage contract for his children. A good example of this can be seen in Genesis 24 where Abraham and Bethuel arrange a marriage between their respective children Isaac and Rebekah.¹ On the surface, it does not appear as though the young people had much say in the whole arrangement though they did consult Rebekah as to whether she wished to leave (Gen 24:55-58).²

The Mosaic code of law did not regulate the marriage rights in as much detail as was found in the Code of Hammurabi or the Assyrian Code. Rather they were laid out in more general precepts which might also explain why they needed so many judges to properly interpret and apply these broad guidelines to specific circumstances. Like the nations surrounding them, Israel's inheritance laws prescribed that the estate of the father would pass through the male line. However, in the event that there were no sons as in the case of Zelophehad, the inheritance was to pass to the daughters (Num 27:1-8). However, such daughters were then prohibited to marry outside of their father's tribe so that no inheritance would transfer from one tribe to another (Num 36:6-9). Later in Nehemiah, it appears as though such

¹In keeping with other ancient Near Eastern tribal societies, Rebekah's brother Laban is also found in the narrative as an 'interested party' who along with Bethuel consents to the marriage.

²Hurley, Biblical Perspective, pp. 33-34.

marriages were allowed provided the husband assumed the family name of his wife (7:63). Normally, however, the bride's dowry, at the time of marriage was her substitute share in the family estate. Widows, on the other hand, received no inheritance under the Mosaic law. Rather, they were to be cared for by the one(s) who inherited the estate --normally the sons. In the event, that there were no sons, the next of kin had the right to inherit along with a levirate mandate to raise up offspring to the dead husband. A prime example of how this worked out in practice is found in the book of Ruth (4:1-12). That this obligation to provide for needy relatives was often neglected in actual practice¹ can be seen from the numerous injunctions by the prophets to care for the widows and orphans.²

Looking at the laws regarding marriage itself it can be seen that there is no permission for dual or plural marriages. The Divine ideal for man is clearly a monogamous relationship (Gen 2:18-14). The deviation from this ideal by the Patriarchs can possibly be traced to their desire for children and customs of the day³ rather than any Divine

¹One example of this neglect right within the book of Ruth can be seen in the attitudes and neglect of the man who was closer to kin than Boaz (4:1-6). Genesis 38, with Tamar, Onan and Judah, provide another case of neglect.

²International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, 1939 ed, s.v. "Woman," by Dwight M. Pratt. See also Hurley, Biblical Perspective, pp. 37-38.

³An example of this may be seen in the life of Abraham who fathered a son from his wife's maid because Sarah had not borne any children to him (Gen 16:1-21).

approval.¹ Little is said about the standards for divorce in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 24:1-4 lays down some regulations for what appears to be an existing practice but is very ambiguous as to legitimate grounds for a divorce. It assumes that a man may divorce his wife if he finds "some indecency in her" and then proceeds to regulate what follows but gives little hint as to what this phrase really means. As such, interpretations have ranged from immorality to a mere loss of favor in the eyes of the husband.² Like the other Mesopotamian nations surrounding Israel, no regulations for a woman divorcing a man are recorded.

In contrast to the other nations, however, the Code of Moses exhibits a high moral regard for the sanctity of marriage and thus legislated against all forms of immorality on this ground. For example, in the case of adultery, the other above mentioned codes viewed this as an extremely serious offense against the clan or the husband's property rights but not inherently or morally evil.³ The Old

¹Kings were explicitly forbidden to "multiply wives" (Deut 17:17), though the language of Genesis 2:24 was plain enough.

²If this regulation was clear at the time of Moses, it certainly was unclear by the time of Christ. See Matthew 19:3-12.

³One case in point is the Assyrian law regarding a rape of a virgin. The law states that the seducer must compensate the father for the loss and must then marry the girl if the father consents. This, thus far, parallels Exod 22:16-17 but it continues with the additional stipulation that the seducer's wife was to then be "taken and prostituted in retaliation" for the offense. Such retribution

Testament Law, on the other hand, considered sexual offenses not only as a violation of property rights but more importantly as an act of sinful defiance against a holy God for He Himself prohibited adultery (Ex. 20:14).¹ The Lord then further delineates numerous abominable sexual behaviors which were prevalent in the surrounding nations but from which Israel was to abstain (Lev 18). The reason? "So you do not defile yourselves with them. I am the Lord your God" (Lev 18:30). The Lord was a holy God and his people were to be holy as He was holy (Lev 19:2). Another area of distinct contrast is that of prostitution. While the Mosaic Code explicitly forbade prostitution (Lev 19:29; 21:9) especially of an institutionalized nature (Deut 23:17-18), the Babylonian and Assyrian Codes only sought to regulate it. They had no moral objections to the practice per se, in fact, it was actually encouraged as a means of communing with their gods. This, of course, was completely antithetical to the revealed character of Yahweh or His law.²

would have been labeled adultery in the Mosaic Code. For further discussion see Hurley, Biblical Perspective, pp. 38-42.

¹The context of this verse clearly indicates that both men and women are in view here. Once again this is in contrast with the above mentioned cultures which defined adultery only in terms of the woman.

²Pratt, "Woman," p. 3101; Hurley, Biblical Perspective, pp. 38-41.

By way of quick review then, it can be seen that the familial structure in Israel was strongly patriarchal with the father-husband the undisputed head of the home. Not only was this in keeping with the surrounding cultures but was the result of God's plan from the beginning as noted above. This will also be examined more fully in chapter three. Inheritance was normally passed down from father to son though the daughters might be in line if there were no sons. Their dowry was their substitute inheritance. Marriage was honored and protected by law with the rights of the father-husband clearly delineated. It was also seen that many of these regulations had their parallels in above mentioned cultures but one significant area of difference was that of their understanding of sexual relations. Because the marriage relationship was to be a reflection of God's relationship with Israel, it took on a sacred dimension which would not tolerate any form of immorality on the part of the man as well as the woman. With these familial structures and regulations in mind, the next subsection will deal more with the social life of women in the Old Testament.

The Social Attitudes and Practices

For the average Israelite, marriage and family were probably the very center around which much of their lives revolved.¹ This was true of both sexes and hence very few

¹This can also be seen in the New Testament, both from the narratives as well as the pastoral instructions (cf. 1 Tim 5:11-16; Titus 2:3-5).

people are found in the Old Testament unmarried and without children. Hence, as might be expected, most of the descriptions found in the Old Testament concerning the women's activities are that of married women within the familial structure.

Probably one of the most important functions she had within this structure was that of bearing children to carry on the name and the inheritance. Ability to produce offspring, especially that of male, gave to the woman a position of real status and honor. The converse was, of course, also true. Barrenness was regarded as a curse from God and a corresponding depreciation in personal and even societal worth.¹ Along a parallel vein, another one of the woman's roles within marriage was that of meeting the needs of her husband sexually. The Creation narratives seemed to imply this, while Deuteronomy frequently discusses the sexual realm of a married couple's relationship (cf. Deut 21:10-14, 24:5). The love relationship described in the Song of Solomon or Solomon's admonitions to his son in the book of Proverbs (5:15-20) also lend support to the thought.

From the Mosaic Law, it can be seen that the mother of the home was to be honored (Exod 20:12), feared (Lev 19:3) and obeyed (Deut 21:18f). The book of Proverbs frequently admonishes the child to respect and obey the mother

¹See Gen 17:15, 30:1f; 1 Sam 1:12.

as well as the father,¹ while at the same time, contempt for either of them deserved the judgment of God.² Her esteemed position in the home can also be seen in the fact that she is the one who normally named the children as well as held the responsibility for educating them during their formative years.³

By and large, Hebrew women managed their household affairs with greater freedom and authority than did most other Mesopotamian women. She was not just some slave of her husband but held a true place of honor under his leadership. Her domestic responsibilities, while normally centered around the home, were nevertheless varied, independent, and often extensive, taking her both in and outside of the home. During the earlier or nomadic days, at least, daughters of even the wealthier families often tended their father's flocks (Gen 29:9; Exod 2:16). Women then took the wool, spun it and fashioned it into clothing for their families.⁴ In addition, she often used her weaving and needlework skills to contribute to the income of her family (Prov 31:14, 24), and possibly to charity (Acts 9:39). Some of

¹See Prov 1:8; 6:20; 10:1; 15:20; 20:30; 23:22.

²See Prov 19:26; 20:20; 30:11, 17.

³Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, s.v. "Women," by D. M. Lake; New Bible Dictionary, s.v. "Woman," by M. Beeching (nee Gray).

⁴See Exod 35:25-26; Prov 31:13, 19, 21-22; 1 Sam 2:19.

her needlework was very fine and highly valued.¹ Women of poorer families who did not have the benefit of maid servants spent much of their time grinding the grain (Matt 24:41), collecting fuel (Luke 17:10), and preparing meals for the family.² Women also spent considerable time drawing water for their household use (1 Sam 9:11; John 4:7) as well as for guests and their animals (Gen 24:15-20).³

The value of a wise and capable woman are discussed frequently in the Book of Proverbs (cf 11:16; 12:4; 14:1; 31:10ff), and her influence in the home was commensurably felt. For example, in monogamous households, she controlled the running of the home to the point of having the prerogative of inviting and receiving guests on her own accord.⁴ The effects of polygamy, however, often transferred the female influence in the household from the wives to the mother as in the case of some of the royal families though there no indication that this practice was widespread among the common people.⁵

Looking at her social status outside of the home environment, it can be seen that there is much evidence to suggest a high level of esteem if not equality. For

¹Exod 26:36; 28:39; Judg 5:30; Ps 45:14.

²Gen 18:6; 2 Sam 13:8; John 12:2.

³Pratt, "Woman," p. 3101.

⁴Judg 4:18; 1 Sam 25:18ff; 2 Kgs 4:8-10.

⁵Consider the prominence of the 'queen mother' in 1 Kgs 2:19; 15:13; 2 Kgs 10:13; 24:12; Jer 13:18; 29:2.

example, women often participated with the men at the great annual religious feasts (Deut 16:11, 14), at special festivities (Job 1:4; John 2:1-3), during family meals (John 12:3) and even at meal breaks out in the fields (Ruth 2:14). Instead of being secluded in a harem-like existence as some women had, most of the Hebrew women were generally free to mix with the men in public as they went about their daily tasks of ordinary life. In addition, there are several instances which suggest that women could appear in public with their faces unveiled.¹ The fact that an attack on a young woman in an open field was harshly punished (Deut 22:25-27), also seems to imply that it was not considered improper for her to move about unprotected. Beyond this, women participated actively in the public celebrations of the land. For example, Miriam led a group of women in song and dance to commemorate Yahweh's overthrow of the Egyptians (Exod 25:20, 21), and Jephthah's daughter welcomed her father with a victory reception (Judg 11:34). A little later the daughters of Shiloh are seen dancing publicly in the vineyards at one of the annual feasts (Judg 21:21). Of course, there were the women who celebrated in song and

¹Consider Sarah (Gen 12:11, 14), Rebekah (Gen 24:16, 65), Rachel (Gen 29:11) and Hannah (1 Sam 1:13). Pratt, "Woman," p. 3101, points out that the facial veil covering was not a Jewish custom during the OT period. Neither was it a custom in early Assyria or Egypt as seen from various archeological artifacts. Instead, the custom was introduced as a widespread phenomenon into the oriental lands under the influence of the Koran.