The politics of sex – Woman’s body as an instrument for achieving man’s aims

Shlomith Yaron  (Open University of Israel)\(^1\)

**ABSTRACT**

Most of the women in the Old Testament must have had second-rate public relations. Eve, for example, is depicted as light-headed and vulnerable. She was tempted into eating the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, thus bringing the wrath of God not only on her, but also on Adam, her so-called innocent partner. Why not see Eve for what she really was – brave, courageous and curious, open to new experiences and cultural progression? In Genesis Rabba, Eve is regarded as a woman with intelligence surpassing that of man. The Old Testament, written mostly by males and for males, sheds a negative and humiliating light on most females. The theme is: Beware of the strange and beautiful woman, for she is clever and dangerous; she will tempt you and then leave you miserable and naked. So you must tyrannise her and exploit her to attain your own goals. The Good Woman is not endowed with beauty. She works hard, never complaining. Her husband has lots of free time to sit with the other townsmen near the city gate – boasting about his hard-working wife.

\[^1\]Names and affiliations of all authors appearing on the title page must be submitted here along with the abstract. This information will be printed at the top of each page of the paper. It is important that your name is printed in the top left corner of the first page of the text."

**A THE POLITICS OF SEX**

What does it mean? How should it be defined? We understand the politics of sex to mean using allurement, seduction, exploitation and sexual violation of human beings, mostly of women, in order to achieve political, religious or economic gains for others, mainly males. It includes many aspects of the behaviour of a patriarchal society towards females. The pessimistic words of Koheleth,\(^2\) words that were true already some 2 500 years ago, ‘… There is nothing new under the sun’, describe the main points of this topic very well. Women in the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean area,\(^3\) like many women even today, were looked down on by the patriarchal society and regarded as second-rate human beings. From most ancient Near-Eastern written sources, including laws, usually written by men, it seems that women were considered property: first as children of their fathers, and later, after marriage, of their spouses. Females’ bodies were
viewed as having been created to satisfy not only the sexual desires of the male, but to enable him to achieve other aims as well, and women were born for, and educated towards, this role. This paper will not deal with different scholarly opinions as to when and where the Biblical stories were compiled, put in writing and edited, as our object is an overall discussion of the status and standing of women in ancient Near-Eastern patriarchal societies. It is important to remember that Old Testament literature—like most, though not all, ancient literatures—was usually written by men and for men, as was also the case in Egypt, Greece and usually in Mesopotamia. Thus, ancient writings, for the most part, presented the androgy nic viewpoint. The voices of women are not heard because their feelings, conceptions and attitudes were suppressed and rarely expressed. Nor are the names of many remarkable and distinguished women ever mentioned, though their deeds and achievements are described. Their silence cries out to us, and we have to speak for them.

We shall begin by examining the relationship between gods and goddesses in ancient myths. From there we shall turn to the laws regarding women; the ‘fine speech’ of the sages as reflected mainly in Koheleth (Ecclesiastes) and Proverbs. The unique women, who played important roles in state affairs, who took part in battles, political marriages, prophecy or religious matters will be discussed next. We shall analyse particular cases of women raped, molested and murdered, others who were offered by their spouses unto kings, or rogues, in order to save men’s lives, prevent homosexual rape, or even worse for economic gain. We shall also look at women who played the same ‘Politics of Sex’ game, and used feminine tactics to achieve their goals.

**B HOW ARE THE POLITICS OF SEX REFLECTED IN ANCIENT MYTHS?**

The first examples in the Bible are the two creation myths in Genesis, chapters 1 and 2. The first creation story mentions that male and female were created at the same time in the image of God. This concept of equality disappears in the second creation myth, the story of the Garden of Eden, which reflects a completely different view. According to this myth, God first created man, יִצְכְ, from the dust of the earth and put him in a specially designed garden in Eden, a garden full of luxuriant fruit-bearing trees. It took quite a while and the creation of all sorts of animals until God reconciled himself to Adam’s real needs and saw fit to operate
on him and create a new and improved human specimen from his rib. This new human version is a woman, הַוָּא (hwa), who later was named Eve (הֵוָה). So according to this myth, the first woman was not created from primary raw material, earth, but was molded from secondary and refined materials, man himself.

If until the appearance of Eve, Adam led a passive, innocent and obedient existence, spending his time in the Garden of Eden with God and his divine companions, having no special dietetic demands and only modest living conditions, the sudden appearance of Eve changed this situation. Eve was active, she experimented, and searched for new experiences including changes of diet. She accepted the challenge of the snake, tasted the forbidden fruit, and afterwards offered some of it to Adam. She neither compelled nor tricked him into eating it. Adam could have turned her down, but he preferred to accept her offer. By eating the forbidden fruit and not dying that same day, the woman discovered that God had not told Adam the truth about this special tree. When God demanded to know if Adam had eaten from the forbidden tree, Adam, instead of standing up to the angry God and taking some of the blame on himself, answered like a child: ‘The woman whom Thou gavest me to be with, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.’ Tasting the forbidden fruit brought to an end the life of idleness and laziness; the penalty for disobeying God’s order was banishment from paradise forever. This marks the beginning of day-to-day toil in the historic world. In the Mesopotamian myth about Gilgamesh and Enkidu, the woman is a representative of knowledge and culture and Man is presented as an untamed savage. Handsome, long-haired Enkidu, created by the gods in order to fulfil a special mission in Uruk as rival to Gilgamesh lived among the wild beasts. The task of civilized this nature boy and bringing him to Uruk was assigned to the harlot Samhat, who represents progressive, refined urban civilization. She succeeded in seducing and taming Enkidu. Pandora, the beautiful virgin created by the Greek gods in order to bring mishap and sickness unto human beings as punishment for receiving fire and enlightenment from Prometheus, brought with her not only misfortune and sorrow, but hope, as well. Pandora, like Eve, was simply an innocent, curious creature, unaware of the nature of the so-called gifts the gods sent with her. It was curiosity alone that made her unwittingly open the gift-box.

The Mesopotamian myth about Tiamat, the great mother-goddess who ruled the world before the universe and humanity were created, recounts how this omnipotent goddess was dethroned and destroyed by the young gods, of whom
Marduk was the most powerful. Tiamat is described as the negative stereotype of an older woman, a venomous and self-asserting virago. Although female, she is a formidable opponent in battle, and asserts her authority in a masculine way. Tiamat, like other Mesopotamian, Canaanite and Greek goddesses, such as Anat, Ištar and Athena, did not hesitate to go to war, either alongside males or against them. Being a female, she could not win the battle against Marduk. But Marduk, being male, could not create the world all by himself. He needed the goddess’s feminine body and her force of life to create the natural world. So in the end, even though Tiamat could not retain her supremacy among the gods, she retained her essence. She was destroyed, but she still exists, for the newly created universe was based on her demolished body.

Egyptian mythology depicts the creation of both the divine universe and that of human beings as taking place at the same time. In most Egyptian myths it was the interaction between the male and the female principles that set the creation in motion. The essence of divine beings, be they gods or goddesses, is manifested in their dual natures, at once benevolent and threatening.

As these examples show, most ancient societies depict females as ruinous to men, rather than as what they actually were, their benefactors. Although the writers are conscious of the feminine force being essential to creation, females even goddesses are painted in immoral and depraved colours. The writers emphasise the female’s curiosity, her exploration of her surroundings, and her contribution to civilization as indispensable for the development and progression of human society. But still, woman is represented as a danger to man, because of her non-conformity, activity, curiosity, and her willingness to experiment. It must have been very hard for the male Adam to accept the idea and acknowledge that only through Eve’s daring and constant search for better things, was he able to rise to a higher level of knowledge. What seems worse, from the Israelite theological point of view, is that it was Eve who discovered that the snake was telling the truth, while God had deceived his creation, man. Man himself did not realise it. This is Eve’s real and unforgivable sin.

C HOW DO HISTORICAL TEXTS RELATE TO THE OTHER SEX IN THE HUMAN SPHERE?

How were females portrayed in ancient Near-Eastern and Biblical law, in the
books of wisdom and of the prophets, and not less important by the ancient historiographers? Did ancient Near-Eastern women in general and Israelite women in particular, have any social standing or legal rights?

Let us begin with the law. According to Biblical law, daughters inherited their fathers’ estates only when there were no male heirs. When they inherited, they were obliged to marry within the family (endogamous marriage) so that the estate would not be transferred from the tribe and family. But it was not only land that could not be transferred to another family. The levirate marriage laws decree that a childless widow had to remain in her late husband’s family, and be impregnated by her late husband’s brother. Because of the extreme importance of begetting a son no such importance was attached to daughters, of course even the strict incest-taboo laws, especially those concerning sexual relations between a man and his brother’s wife, were set aside by the legislator in favour of the levirate law. And how does the law punish a woman who intervenes in a fight between her husband and another man, and ‘she puts out her hand and seizes him by his genitals’? Her punishment is ‘You shall cut off her hand’ (הַדְּרָכָה אֲשֶׁר מֵעָנָהוּ). No punishment is meted out to a man who does the same to his antagonist. What does the law decree about the wife whose jealous husband imagines she has been unfaithful? He brings her before the priest, who bares her head and places upon her hands a ‘meal-offering of jealousy’; the priest also makes her drink the ‘water of (יְרֵמָא טֶרֶם) that causes the curse’. There is no law concerning a faithless husband. There is a law that forces a rapist to marry the girl he raped if she was not betrothed, and he may never divorce her. In this case, the father is compensated. Why? Because she is now considered ‘damaged goods’. The girl has no opinion in this matter. For whom is it a greater punishment?

That a daughter was her father’s property is also evident in Leviticus 21:9, which deals with the daughter of a priest who degrades herself through harlotry: ‘… she profaneth her father and she shall be burnt with fire.’ Why? Because she disgraced her father, not herself. And a priest may only marry a virgin. All other women, widows or divorcees, are too impure, too defiled, too ‘damaged’ for him to marry.

Not only in Israel was the woman considered as the property of the male head of the family. In Mesopotamia the husband was the ruler of the house. If he died and the children were still young, his widow could be given the authority of ‘fatherhood’. In Sumer, as in Nuzi and Emar, which were influenced by
Sumerian customs, women including queens had legal parity with men, and daughters had the same rights as the sons. A Sumerian-Akkadian proverb points out that ‘A house without the owner is like a woman without a husband’. But the rights of the husband concerning his wife were limited. If he thought she was disloyal, he had to approach the court of law with his accusations. Only the judges could punish her.

Athenian law stipulated that if it was discovered that a girl had been seduced or raped, and was no longer a virgin, she ceased to be a member of the family and her father could sell her into slavery. The inevitable result of unauthorised sexual relations was total ruin for the girl, sometimes even a cruel death.

Surviving Egyptian legal texts seem to indicate that actual punishment for the adulterous woman was divorce, while the adulterous man was usually punished financially. Other Egyptian legal documents, and especially those from the New Kingdom, show that, at least in theory, men and women were equal before the law. Women could inherit and could also administer their estates. They had a degree of economic independence, and could distribute or increase their properties.

Returning to the Israelite law, let us examine the legal status of women and girls in wartime. According to Biblical law, if an Israelite soldier fancied a pretty girl from among the war prisoners, he had to let her mourn her parents for a month, and then they can cohabit and she will be considered his wife. If later on he has ‘no delight’ in her, he may not sell her, but must set her free. This seems very humane. But what means of existence and financial support does a foreign woman, an ex-prisoner of war, have? If no one will marry her, the only way to support herself is to become a harlot. In all fairness, it should be noted that the Greeks, for instance, behaved in exactly the same way. In the Iliad, Homer describes how the Greek heroes took female war-prisoners as concubines, even though these were Greek girls from Thebe, and not the daughters of the enemy.

What do Koheleth and the Book of Proverbs say about women, and how do they view the ‘second sex’? Koheleth says that the woman is ‘more bitter than death’, and the Book of Proverbs warns the young man against ‘the strange woman, Even from the alien woman that make smooth her words’. Why are these warnings necessary? Because ‘the lips of a strange woman drop honey, and her mouth is smoother than oil; But her end is bitter as wormwood, Sharp as a two-edged sword’. Why is she so dangerous to man? Because the woman ‘lieth
in wait at every corner’ for her prey, the lonely man; she seduces him, and then robs him.\(^{31}\)

Sometimes the beautiful and seductive foreigner is depicted as Lilith, a she-demon of Mesopotamian origin, who seduces men under cover of darkness. In Mesopotamia, this demonic family group who harassed young men, pregnant women and infants, consisted of two females, Lilitu and Ardat-Lili, and the male-demon Lilu.\(^{32}\) According to the prophet Isaiah, Lilith lives in the desert.\(^{33}\) Hieronymus identifies Lilith with the Lubian queen Lamia, whose children were taken from her (and were apparently killed) by the goddess Hera, the wife of Zeus. After this incident, Lamia avenged herself by stealing other women’s children.\(^{34}\) The ‘Woman of Valour’ (לָיְתָוָה) the chaste married woman, according to the Book of Proverbs, is really a super-woman.\(^{35}\) The description reflects the male’s conception of the ideal woman: in addition to her many virtues and qualities, to her day-long activity: ‘she eateth not the bread of idleness’, ‘riseth … while it is yet night’ and she ‘openeth her mouth with wisdom’ (though this is only mentioned after the list of her tasks). Her husband is proud of her; he sits leisurely at the gates with the elders while she works. Nothing is said about her beauty, as ‘grace is deceitful and beauty is vain’. But beauty was a very important issue when a search for a pretty girl was conducted throughout the Land of Israel just because King David was old and cold and needed warming up. The required ‘blanket’ suited to the king’s bed had to be young and beautiful.\(^{36}\) Usually, circumstances of seduction are imbedded in a beautiful appearance. David fancied the very good-looking Bath-Sheba whom he saw bathing.\(^{37}\) And Amnon, David’s son, fell in love with his ‘fair’ half-sister Tamar.\(^{38}\)

According to Athenian philosophers, who may have been misogynists like some of the Israelite prophets we shall mention, married women should not be seen or heard in public. Aristotle cites Sophocles as declaring that ‘silence is a woman’s glory’. The situation in Sparta was different; as a result, the male-Athenian view held that Spartan women had too much freedom and ‘behaved with a very masculine audacity’.\(^{39}\) One category of women, described in Egyptian wisdom literature,\(^{40}\) is the ‘strange woman’, of whom the man must be wary, as she is ready to ensnare him. This view is quite similar to that of Koheleth and Proverbs.

How did the Israelite prophets regard women, and what did they say about them? Some of the prophets use the image of the alluring and whoring woman as
a metaphor for the Israelite and Judahite nations. They call her the ‘Virgin of Israel’, or the Israelite Virgin, and paint her as the consort of Yahwe. But the image is not that of a virgin, but of an adulteress with ‘a harlot’s forehead’. This allegorical woman has dispersed her favours to ‘strangers under every leafy tree’. This behaviour is really a metaphor for worshipping other gods, for which the Daughters of Israel suffer numerous and severe penalties. The prophet Ezekiel describes her punishment in harsh words: ‘... I will gather all thy lovers ... and will uncover thy nakedness unto them ... they shall strip thee of thy clothes ... and leave thee naked and bare ....’ In another description, the prophet adds ‘... they shall take away thy nose and thine ears ... they shall also strip thee of thy clothes ... and shall leave you naked and bare ....’ The prophet Hosea also describes the Israelite nation as a prostitute, and, in order to demonstrate the relationship between the nation and Yahwe, he marries Gomer the daughter of Diblaim, whom he calls a whore (ךַּלְלָה, חָלָה), and gives the children she bears him offensive names, which he later changes. By changing the names he illustrates Yahwe’s future leniency towards his people. All these expressions, idioms and metaphors show a deep-rooted hatred of femininity, and bring to mind the possibility that these prophets, at least, must have been misogynists, like some of the Greek philosophers mentioned above.

How do the historiographers describe the Israelite women, their place and influence in patriarchal society? Are all women molded in the same mold, or can we find women holding important positions, or playing significant roles in high circles, in contrast to the image of women in the words of the prophets or the sages? Many of the women mentioned in the historical books of the Bible are anonymous. They have no names of their own, even when the story revolves around them. They are named in connection to their fathers or husbands, like ‘Jephtah’s daughter’, or ‘Lot’s wife’. Samson’s mother, who encountered the angel the messenger of God and spoke with him even before he ever spoke with her husband, is called simply ‘Manoah’s wife’, and the Philistine girl whom Samson married is just ‘Samson’s wife’. Sometimes a woman is identified by the name of the place where she lives; for instance, the prophet Elisha tells his servant to ‘call this Shunamite’ (a woman from Shunem). Joab, the commander of David’s army, conspires with ‘a wise woman from Tekoa’ to convince David to let his son Absalom return to Jerusalem. The prophet Isaiah says, ‘And I went into the prophetess and she conceived and bore a son.’ There is no way of
knowing if he is referring to his wife, or to another prophetess. The son has a symbolic name *Maher-shalal-hash-baz* (מהר שלל הָכָּב), but the mother remains nameless. It is not only the women who are anonymous: neither are men mentioned in the historical books named. But this is far more prevalent in the case of women. It seems that being rich, clever, courageous or famous and influential was not reason enough to call a woman by her given name.

What is known about the involvement of women in diplomatic relations? Treaties between kings or countries were usually signed and given official guaranty by the gods of the two sides involved. But in order to strengthen the bond between two royal families, a daughter of one king was given in marriage to the other king, or to one of his sons. Nobody ever thought of asking the girl if she agreed to this marriage. When Hattusili, the king of the Hittites, signed a peace treaty with the Egyptian king Ramses II, a young Hittite princess was given in marriage to Ramses II, who had reigned in Egypt for thirty-four years, and was no longer young.

The Biblical compiler, too, reports several cases of diplomatic marriages. The first is the marriage of Michal, the daughter of King Saul, who was given as a trophy to the young warrior David in return for defeating the Philistines. This is one of the rare cases where the Biblical author mentions that a woman loves a man. Michal loved David, and saved him from the justified wrath of her father. Did David love Michal? The compiler does not tell us. For David, marriage to Michal, the daughter of Saul, justified his ascendance to the throne of Israel after the death of Saul’s sons, so he demanded that she be returned to him, although she was married to another man, Paltiel the son of Laish. But David sired no children by Michal. What were Michal’s feelings towards David at that later date? When she saw him prancing before the Ark of Yahwe she treated him with contempt. Rarely, if ever, does the Biblical author describe so clearly how love turned to hate and contempt.

The relationship between David and Michal is not the only story that documents David’s complicated relationships with women. As mentioned before, David fancied the handsome Bath-Sheba, whom he saw washing while he was walking on the roof of his house. He slept with her, impregnated her, and then sent her husband, Uriah, to his death in battle. David certainly did not marry Bath-Sheba for her beauty alone. She belonged to a distinguished Jebusite or Hittite family from Jerusalem, and David needed the political support of the aristocracy.
When David needed political and financial support from his tribe, the tribe of Judah, he married Abigail, another handsome and clever woman, whose rich and influential husband also died a timely death, just ten days after David first encountered Abigail.\(^{58}\) Were Bath-Sheba and Abigail aware that they were manipulated by David like puppets on a string?

How did Solomon, David’s son, treat his seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines?\(^{59}\) He must have built a very big harem for them (which may explain why the building of the king’s palace lasted 13 years). But there are no love stories connected with Solomon, although the text observes that he ‘loved many foreign women, besides the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonites and Hittites’.

Having relations with so many women is not evidence of love, but of far-reaching diplomatic and commercial contacts.

If even queens and princesses suffered in the Israelite patriarchal society, what was the fate of other less highly placed women in this androcentric and sometimes misogynic environment? Virgins, and even some married women, were offered to strangers as sexual playmates to save men from this role. Others were offered as sexual objects in order to save the husband, or to add to his riches. One of the best-known incidents is that of Lot’s two nameless virgin daughters, who were offered by their father to the people of Sodom as sexual playmates so that they would not bother Lot’s male guests, the angels.\(^{61}\) The guests’ honour seems to have been more important than that of virgin girls. Only the intervention of the angels saved the girls. A similar but much more complicated story is the one about the men of Gibeah, of the tribe of Benjamin, who demanded to have sexual relations with a male guest, a Levite who arrived in their town. The Levite’s host instead offered them his virgin daughter and the Levite’s concubine, although she was also a guest. It seems that the laws of hospitality do not apply to women. When the vile townsmen refused this generous offer, the Levite himself pushed his concubine—a woman who had run away from him to seek asylum in her father’s house—into their hands. The concubine was raped practically to death all night long and in the morning the seemingly surprised Levite found her fallen on the threshold. He took her home and finished the job by slaughtering her, cutting her body into twelve parts and sending them to all the tribes of Israel.\(^{62}\) In revenge, the men of Israel gathered before God in Mitzpa, where they swore not to allow their daughters to marry Benjaminites, and set forth to fight them, a war that
almost annihilated the tribe of Benjamin, leaving only six hundred men. The tribe was
saved from annihilation when the Israelites decided to provide wives for the
Benjaminites from among the women of Jabesh Gilead, a quiet town which had not
been represented at Mitzpa. The Israelites killed all the people of Jabesh Gilead, save
the virgins, four hundred young girls, who were given as wives to the Benjaminites. For
the rest of the men, two hundred girls were kidnapped by the Benjaminites while they
were dancing in the vineyards during a feast of God in Shilo. Not even one voice of the
girls is heard. Their opinions, feelings, or willingness to marry their kidnappers are not
considered nor voiced.

The Bible recounts several cases of rape. Amnon, David’s eldest son, fell in love
with his half-sister Tamar, and raped her. Afterwards his love turned to hate, and he
refused to marry her and sent her away. David did not punish Amnon, as should have
been the case. Amnon was murdered two years later by his half-brother Absalom, Tamar’s full brother. Another case is that of Dinah, Jacob’s daughter, who was raped
by Shechem, son of Hamor. In this case the rapist fell in love with his victim, and
wanted to marry her. Dinah’s two sly and cunning brothers, Simon and Levi, murdered
Shechem and his innocent family and towns-people. The girl, Dinah, is just a trigger.
Her fate concerns nobody.

According to the Bible, not only virgin daughters but married women, too, were
given as sexual-playmates to strangers. Abraham told his wife Sarah to pose as his
sister, and let her be taken to the palace of Pharaoh. Another time Sarah was given to
Abimelech, king of Gerar. In both cases she was returned to her husband, who was
paid handsomely. Even Job, while protesting his integrity, offers his wife as sex-mate
to others if he is guilty of even thinking of committing adultery. Sarah, the virgin
daughters and the concubine are scapegoats, sacrificed to egotistic androcentry. This
kind of story is found only in the Bible.

Cases of rape, inter-tribal battles between countries spurred by the abduction of
women and girls, or taking female prisoners as slaves or concubines, are not
characteristic only of the Israelites. Greek myth and history are full of incidents of
similar cases of abduction and rape. The gods abducted or raped both goddesses
and human girls. Hades, the ruler of the Underworld, abducted Persephone, the
daughter of Demeter, and took her down to his domain, Tartarus. Zeus, the most
powerful Greek god, seduced, abducted and raped many goddesses and girls.
Similar stories are told about Apollo. Tereus, king of the Thracians (or of
Megaris), was enchanted by the voice of Philomela, his sister in law. He raped
her, and afterwards cut off her tongue so that she would not be able to tell her sister what happened. The war between the Trojans and the Greeks broke out because Paris abducted Helene and refused to return her to Menelaus, her lawful husband. Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, refused to give up Chriseis, his young and pretty prisoner of war concubine, even when her father, the priest, tried to pay her ransom. When his own soldiers forced Agamemnon to give up Chriseis, he took from Achilles the girl he had received as spoils. Herodot begins his History by commenting that the Phoenicians kidnapped Io and other women from Argos, and sailed to Egypt. The Greeks reacted by sailing to Tyre and kidnapping Europa. Then the Greeks stopped at Colchis and kidnapped Medea, the daughter of the King of Colchis. The chain of kidnapping continued with the abduction of Helene by Paris. Herodot also recounts that the Athenians who settled in Caria were womenless, so they kidnapped Carian women and killed their parents. Another tale is reminiscent of the abduction of the girls of Shilo. Herodot says the Pelasgeans used to rape the Athenian girls who went out of the town to draw water. So the Athenians drove the Pelasgeans out, and they settled in Lemnos. The Pelasgeans wanted to punish the Athenians, so they sailed to Braberon and kidnapped the Athenian girls during a feast to the goddess Artemis. Later, the Pelasgeans killed the Athenian girls. The Romans, too, abducted the daughters of the native Sabinians during a festival of the god Consus (or Neptune). So the Sabinians fought the Romans. The Daughters of the Sabinians made peace between the two peoples. According to Mesopotamian myths, the sweet-water god Enki raped his daughter, his granddaughter and his great granddaughter. The god Enlil raped the innocent Ninlil.

Were women able to better their situation, and if so, how? Childless widows must have suffered more than the married women, especially economically, as they had no man or children to support them. Biblical laws forced these women to have sexual relations with the nearest kin of their deceased husband in order to beget a son. And what happened if the next of kin did not fulfil his obligation? From three distinct cases we can see what means childless widows, or even girls, used in order to beget children. The first case is that of Tamar, the twice-widowed daughter-in-law of Judah. Tamar took matters into her own hands and cleverly seduced her father-in-law, without any real effort at seduction. She tricked Judah into leaving his seal, his cord and his staff with her. Thus, when her pregnancy became known, Tamar could identify her lover. The second case is that of the
young Moabite widow Ruth, who returned to Bet Lehem with her widowed mother-in-law Naomi. As Naomi had no other sons and was too old to remarry, Ruth had to have children by Naomi’s next of kin. She chose Boaz as her saviour and in order to convince him to fulfil his obligation, Ruth went to the threshing floor in the middle of the night, and delicately seduced him. Boaz took the needed legal steps, and married her. Thus Ruth and Naomi both regained the much-needed familial and economical support. Another case concerns the daughters of Lot, who were both almost raped when their father offered them as sex-slaves to the men of Sodom. What almost happened to them later happened to their father. They raped him twice, one night after the other, while he was in a drunken sleep. All these women are depicted as foreigners: Ruth is a Moabite, the daughters of Lot are not Israelite, and Tamar, too, may have been an alien, a Canaanite. All of them take their fate into their own hands and are not afraid to use their feminine seduction skills in order to better their lives. However, the story of Lot’s daughters may also reflect the attitude of the Biblical compiler towards women. While we know that they conceived, and can therefore assume that the sexual act took place, the physiological likelihood of two virgins being able to rape a drunk, sleepy old man, raises the question if, in fact, Lot did not rape his daughters, and not vice versa, and the story was told differently just to place the women in an unfavourable light.

Stories of incestuous relations and sperm-stealing can also be found in Greek stories. Myrrha (Smyrna), helped by her nurse, got her father Thaïas drunk and then had intercourse with him. The outcome of these relations was the god Adonis. In another story, Thyestes, who had to flee his country, wore a mask and raped his daughter Pelopia, a priestess in the Sicyon temple of Athena. Pelopia stole the sword of her rapist, and hid it in the temple. Several years later, when Thyestes returned, Pelopia found out who her rapist was, and committed suicide.

Some Israelite and Judahite women played an important part in royal, prophetic or religious circles. Two of the most distinguished and outstanding queens in the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah were Jezebel and Athalya, mother and daughter. Jezebel, daughter of the Sidonite king and high priest, and wife of Ahab, the king of Israel, was brought up as a Phoenician princess, and did not succumb to the Israelite dictum towards women. After her marriage, she continued to worship the Phoenician gods, was very influential in the Israelite court, and was empowered to act in the king’s name and use his stamp. Her assertiveness and
independence caused her to be hated in Israelite priestly circles, and she is portrayed in a negative manner. Her queenly dignity is apparent in her preparations for her upcoming execution, and in the disdain she shows towards Jehu, the murderer of her son, Yehoram.75 Athalya, her daughter, married the Judahite king Yehoram, and was the mother of king Ahazyahu. After her son and all his brothers were murdered, Athalya seized the reign of power and ruled the Kingdom of Judah. Her sovereignty very greatly annoyed the temple’s priests, even though the Kingdom of Judah must have prospered during her reign and no wars broke out at that time. In the seventh year of her reign, the Jerusalemite priests and their followers rebelled, and murdered the queen.76

The Hittite queen, whose title was Tawannanna, had a strong independent position. Queen Puduhepa, the wife of King Hattusili III, had her own official seal, played a prominent part in the state religion and in affairs of state, and corresponded with the Egyptian queen.77 Egyptian society was male-dominated, as were most ancient Near-Eastern societies, and usually women had no official standing in the king’s court or government. But from the thirteenth dynasty onwards, Egyptian queens begin wearing headdresses reminiscent of gods and goddesses, linking them to divine origin, which was believed to be the origin of the Egyptian king as well.78 Few women ever held the office of Kingship in Egypt, and they usually ruled for a short time. These were queens Neitiqerty, Sobekneferu, Tawosret and Hatshepsut. Only Hatshepsut assumed the traditional titles of the king. Her period of reign was prosperous and successful, and she also successfully fought Egypt’s enemies.

Prophetesses mentioned in the Bible are Miriam, the sister of Aharon;79 Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth;80 Huldah, the wife of Shalum;81 and Noadiah.82 Jewish prophetesses functioned until the end of the Second Temple period, and several of them are mentioned in the New Testament.83 Even these outstanding women are designated as ‘sister of …’ or ‘wife of …’. Did they enjoy the same status as the prophets? It is hard to determine. When Miriam, together with her brother Aharon, complained about the tyranny of Moses and about his taking a Cushite woman, only Miriam was punished by God.84 The prophetess Huldah was involved in the religious reform organised by King Josiah. It was she, and not a prophet, who explained the significance and implications of the context of the holy book found by the renovators in the Jerusalem temple. Moreover, two of the gates in the wall that surrounded the temple were named after her an honour no other
person was granted. The prophetess Deborah went with the Israelite general, Barak, son of Abinoam, to fight the Canaanites. The Israelites won the battle after another dangerous foreign woman, Yael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, killed Sisera, the Canaanite general. Yael lured Sisera into her tent with promises of drink and food, gave him milk and then killed him with a tent-pin as he slept ‘between her legs’.\(^85\)

And Rahab, the Canaanite harlot, saved the two Israelite spies that visited her house in Jericho.\(^86\)

The archetype of Semitic heroines may have been Pughat, the Ugaritic princess who avenged the death of her brother Aqhat and killed his murderer, Yatpan, who was sent on this mission by the goddess Anat.\(^87\) The genre of Israelite or alien war-heroines is also evident in other Biblical stories. Two nameless women killed two renowned men. One was the woman from Thebez, who threw a millstone on Abimelech’s head and broke his skull. Close to death, Abimelech asked his servant to kill him with his sword, so that it should not be said that a woman killed him (shameful for a king).\(^88\) Another nameless wise heroine saved the town of Abel Beit-Maacha from being destroyed by the Judahite army by advising the townspeople to kill the rebel Sheba the son of Bichri, and throw his head to the besiegers as evidence.\(^89\) Two other stories show how a clever, courageous, and seductive woman could manipulate and save the nation. Esther succeeded in her mission by cleverly using her feminine charms.\(^90\) Judith began her mission of rescue by using seductive feminine measures, too, and ended it by beheading Holofernes by herself.\(^91\) Other incidents of foreign women who lured men and brought about their deaths are reported by the Biblical compiler. Two of the stories concern Samson, a man whom women could easily entice to make him divulge his secrets. The first was his (unnamed) Philistine wife, to whom Samson told the answer to his riddle and she disclosed it to his Philistine friends.\(^92\) Then there was Delilah, who seduced and harassed Samson until he told her the secret of his strength, and she sold him into the hands of his Philistine enemies.\(^93\) Another kind of \textit{femme fatale} was the Midianite Cozbi, the daughter of Zur, who allured and seduced Zimri. The Israelite man and the Midianite woman were both executed by the fanatic priest Pinchas, the son of Eleazar.\(^94\)

Queens, prophetesses-diviners, priestesses and poetesses, and also female-scribes, are known from historical texts of Mesopotamia and Mari. Prophetesses were very highly regarded in Mari.\(^95\) Several prophetesses, among them Innibana and Addu-duri, forecast the outcome of military expeditions planned by king
Zimri-Lim of Mari, and warned him whenever there was danger for him, his family or his army. Women worked as scribes and held high positions in Mari’s administration. Queen Šibtu, the wife of king Zimri-Lim, ruled Mari when her husband was away on military campaigns, and had great influence in the cultic, domestic and state affairs of Mari. Enheduanna, the daughter of Sargon I of Akkad, who lived around 2300 BCE, was the first head-priestess of Nanna, the imminent god of Ur, and wrote poetry and liturgical hymns. For more than a thousand years, royal Babylonian princesses filled Enheduanna’s role. During the Neo-Assyrian period (1000-612 BCE), it was customary in Assyria to turn to prophetesses, who are usually mentioned in connection with specific gods or goddesses and temples. The prophecies that have survived were mainly those sent by the prophetesses serving the goddess Ištar of Arbela to Esarhaddon (680-669 BCE) and to Ashurbanipal (668-633 BCE). Some of these prophetesses are even mentioned by name: Ištar-la-tashiat, Baia, Sin-qisha-amur, and Rimute-allate.

Most scholars think that the historiographic texts of the Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians and the Hittites reflect a mixture of myths and historical events. They exhibit in their own special way a picture of the ancient civilizations, although this historical picture is shrouded in myth. These ancient Near-Eastern texts, and the Biblical tales as well, encompass the pre-history and infancy of these nations. All in all, they reflect the relationship between men and women, between females and males. Human beings attributed their own fears and conduct to the gods, so divine societies and human societies tend to have similar behavioural traits and values. Most of the transcendental gods are presented as stronger and their status higher than that of goddesses, and in the historical world, the status of the males is higher than that of females. Gods raped goddesses and human females alike, especially in the Greek myths, and human males did the same. According to monotheistic beliefs, Yahwe raped no woman and had no female consort, theoretically. But archaeological finds from the eighth or seventh century BCE imply that the Ashera was the consort of Yahwe. According to the Israelite prophets, the consort of Yahwe is the Israelite nation itself, drawn in the image of a female, sometimes a virgin, but usually a harlot. This virgin/harlot must remain faithful to Yahwe, otherwise she is brutally punished by the misogynous God or his faithful helpers, men. In all the societies examined, women were designated to serve men in all capacities. But in some of these civilizations, such as the Hittite and in Egypt, women enjoyed more equality than in the other
societies. It is clear from the sperm-stealing tales that to have a certain value in patriarchal society, a woman had to be a mother. Women were usually regarded as sex objects and had several sexual functions, aside from motherhood: sometimes by being given to strangers, they enriched their lords and masters, or saved them from being abused by other males, by being raped instead of them, though not of their own free will. But who asks the women or harks to them? More cases of abduction, rape, abuse, kidnapping, and murder, are found in Greek myths and the Biblical narrative than in Mesopotamian or Egyptian tales. Why? The roots are hidden in the unwritten past. So to the question ‘why’, there is no specific answer. Women are different from men, and this is why they are debased, blamed and punished. The reasons behind the degradation must be psychological. Women in general are ‘the Other’. In Biblical narratives, the alien woman is the Quintessential Other. Marduk has to kill Tiamat in order to create the universe, otherwise no universe is possible. Eve and Pandora are depicted as having an adventurous and exploring spirit. Men ‘do not seek this knowledge’; they stick to the instructions given by God in the Garden of Eden: ‘Stay ignorant or seek knowledge at your own risk.’ The *gnosis*-seeking Eve changed this situation, and forced Adam to grow up and take responsibilities. She is paying for it to this day.

NOTES

1 Paper read at The Annual Meeting of the Old Testament Society of South Africa, University of Potchefstroom, 4-7 September 2001, on the theme Suffering Bodies in Religious Discourses. Research Associate in the Institute for Theology and Religion at UNISA for the duration of the project.


3 By ‘ancient Near East and the Mediterranean area’ we are referring to the status of women as reflected in the Hebrew Bible, with references to Mesopotamia, the Land of the Hittite, Egypt and Greece. The economic relations with ancient Greece throughout the 2nd and 1st millennia BCE, and the migration of the ‘Sea People’ during the second half of the 2nd millennium BCE and their settlement in various key-points around Canaan, makes the Greek viewpoint important as well.

4 Gn 1:27.

5 Gn 2:7-23.


8 About the role of the prostitute – *Harāntum* in Babylonian-Assyrian, and supposedly also the *naditu* – in Mesopotamia, and especially in this epic, see Lambert (1992:127-157).

9 Hesiod, *Theogony*, tr by Rowe (1978:lines 565-569). Zeus punished the human beings not because they have sinned, but because Prometheus stole the Divine fire and gave it to them. This way of thinking characterises not only Zeus but the goddess Hera, too. She punishes the poor girls raped by Zeus, instead of punishing the real culprit, Zeus.


14 Nm 27:1-11; 36:2-12.

15 Dt 25:5-10.

16 Lv 20:11-12, 17, 19-21.

17 Dt 25:21-22.

18 Nm 5:12-31.


22 Very little is known about Sumerian customs, but from the few existing Sumerian texts, it seems that women were equal to men. See Kramer (1976:11-17) and Hallo (1976:23-40).


26 Dt 21:11-13. Hallo (1991:97) states that the treatment of the female captives according to Dt 21:1-9 – which directs them to shave their hair, clip their nails, and change their garments before entering their new role of wife of the captor, is in keeping with the symbolic role which hair, nails and garment play elsewhere in the Bible and in the earlier Near East. They are, in effect, according to Hallo, the personality in effigy or in miniature. In Mesopotamia, fingernails and fringes were used to validate a contract (in the absence of a seal), and the hair and fringes to ‘identify’ a witness who experienced an illness or reported a dream of ominous significance to the court. Requiring slaves to shave part of their hair was also an element in the ceremony of manumission. We view these demands as reflecting the *rites of passage* – the liminal stage between the status of free women and the status of slaves. If the captured foreign woman is also some kind of ‘sorceress’, she is left without the ability to perform her witchcraft, as hair contains a person’s strength (see Samson, for example), and nails and fringes are also connected with divination and magic.


28 Ec 7:26.

29 Pr 2:16.

30 Pr 5:3-4.

31 Pr 7:8-23; 23:28.
33 Is. 34:14-15.
34 Graves & Patai (1964:chap 10); Graves (1977:§ 61).
35 Pr 31.
36 1 Ki 1:1-4.
37 2 Sm 11.
38 2 Sm 13:1.
41 Jr 18:13.
42 Jr 3:3. According to Lm 1, Jerusalem is a widow, ‘princess among the provinces’.
46 Hs 1:2. This changing of the names may have magic connotations, but this is beyond the scope of this paper.
47 The misogynic and gynephobic (fear of women) viewpoint is found not only in the Bible, but in the Wisdom of Ben Sirach and in a scroll fragment from Qumran. This fragment from cave 4 is known as the ‘Wiles of the Wanton Woman’, and it reflects fear of and contempt for women, using passages similar to those in Proverbs. Broshi (1983:54-56) finds a certain sense of humor in the descriptions of Proverbs, but not even a hint of humor in the wording of the Qumran text, where the tempting woman is regarded as ‘a veritable Satan’. In Charlesworth (1983) there is the story of Reuben, Jacob’s eldest son, who tells his sons that when Bilhah, his father’s concubine, was washing in a hidden place, he saw her and desired her. The image of her naked body taunted him, and he couldn’t rest until he’d had her. When his father wasn’t around, he went to her tent, where she was sleeping, unclothed and drunk, forced himself on her, and left her sleeping unaware of what had passed. Though Bilhah did nothing to entice him, and was unaware of having been seen, Reuben warns his sons to beware the wiles of bad, shameless women.
48 2 Ki 4:12.
49 2 Sm 14:1-24.
50 Is 8:3.
51 For example, according to 1 Ki 13, the man who comes to Bet-El and prophesises its destruction is just the ‘man of God’ (ḥyhlah vya), and the prophet mentioned in that story is nameless as well. The husband of the above-mentioned woman of Shunem is also an unnamed ‘old man’ (2 Ki 4:14).
53 1 Sm 17:25; 18:17-27.
54 1 Sm 18:20; 19:11-17.
55 2 Sm 3:16.
56 Another story that relates to love that turns into hate is that of David’s children, Amnon and Tamar, which will be dealt with below.
57 2 Sm 11.
58 1 Sm 25.
59 1 Ki 11:3.


Jdg 19. From the story one cannot tell if the concubine was already dead when she was cut up. Exum (1985:65-90) points to the psychological fear embedded in this story: the male fears the female’s sexual femininity, and therefore destroys her. He also sends a violent message to the independent woman, who runs away from her husband, because a woman who is sexually independent is a threat to the male, and should be punished severely. On women as spoils and sexual objects for the conquering army, see Nm 31:6-18. From several Old Testament stories, and in Greek sources as well, it is clear that abduction and rape were considered privileges of conquering armies.

2 Sm 13. Bach (1997:150-151) finds that the rape of Tamar and the episode of David and Bath-Sheba support the ideology of the Biblical text, as can be seen from the use of Leitwörter throughout the relevant Biblical chapters.

The murder of Amnon brought Absalom closer to the throne of Israel, as Amnon was the eldest son of David, and Absalom – the second.


Gn 12:13; 20:13. Moore (1966:418) comments that the Israelites were concerned more about themselves than about their wives: ‘And not only the proffer of Lot, but the favorite episode of the patriarchal story, in which a wife is surrendered by her husband out of fear of harm to himself, shows that the ancient Hebrews were far from possessing the chivalrous feeling which we find among the old Arabs.’

Job 31:9-10. See also Harris (1984:61-62).

According to another version, Europa was kidnapped by Zeus. Herodot, History, 1:1-3.


The Hebrew description of what Ruth did to Boaz when she came to the threshing floor is not ‘uncovered his feet’, but more like ‘a part of the body near the feet’, which is a euphemism for genitalia, and is reminiscent of the way an important vow was taken, as described in Gn 24:2-3 and 9, when Avraham makes Eliezer swear, and in Gn 47:29, when Ya’akov tells Joseph ‘put your hand under my thigh ....’ Sarna (1989:162) explains that ‘interpreters are unanimous that the thigh refers to the genital organ’. It can also be gleaned from the equivalent to ‘his own issue’ or literally ‘that came out of his loins’ in Gn 46:26 – wkry yaxwy, meaning descendants. The uncovering of the ‘wing’ of the coat, or the cloak, means incestual relations, as depicted in the laws of Dt 23:1and chap 27:20. Taking shelter ‘under the wing’ (of the coat or the cloak) of a man or of God can also mean marriage, even symbolic marriage (see Ezk 16:8).

Myrrha (or Smyrna) was the daughter of Thaias the Assyrian (in other versions he is Kyniros king of Cyprus, or Phenix king of Byblos). Graves (1977:§ 18h).

Graves (1993 § 111 h, l). Thyestes was forced to give up the kingship of Mycenae and to transfer it to his brother Atreus. The theme in this story is reminiscent of the story of Tamar and Judah.

1 Ki 16:31.

2 Ki 9:30-34. Another queen whose dignity is prominent is Queen Vashti, as depicted in Es 1:11-12. See also Daube (1972:14-16).
76 2 Ki 11. Women were not meant to govern, as can be seen also from the writings of Josephus (1976:411-432). He thinks that Queen Alexandra – Shlomzion to whom her husband bequeathed the royal power, and who was loved by the Judaean people, was not fit to reign, even though she kept the nation at peace and ‘shows none of the weakness of her sex’. All because she was a woman who desired power and ‘things unbecoming a woman’.

79 Ex 15:20.
80 Jude 4-5. Lappidoth may also be a nickname connected with torches, or with Barak, meaning lightening, who is Deborah’s partner-in-war, and not a man’s name.
81 2 Ki 22:14-20; 2 Chr 34:22-28.
82 Neh 6:14.
83 Lk 2:36-37; Ac 21:9.
84 Nm 12.
85 Jude 4:18-21; 5:24-27. Knapp (1997:63-66) marks that by using the word ‘feet’ when telling where Sisera fell, the author meant it as a metaphor for sexual organs. She also finds that Yael’s behaviour ‘attests to the freedom women enjoyed both politically and religiously’. On this subject see Bal (1988:59-60). Sisera may have raped Yael, as was the usual behaviour towards the enemy’s women, and that was why she killed him (see also note 26).
86 Jos 2:1-16.
87 Gruber (1999:115-152).
88 Jude 9:53.
89 2 Sm 20:16-22.
90 Es 5-7.
92 Jude 15:15-17.
93 Jude 16.
94 Nm 25:6-7.
95 Zimri-Lim reigned in the 18th century BCE. The translation is by Dossin (1941-). See also Charpin (1992:21-22).
100 About the Bible as folklore see, among others, Dundes (1999).
101 Fuchs (2000:25) comments: ‘The Bible is a compilation of writings spanning over a thousand years .... The Biblical text is itself an interpretation of historical circumstances as well as oral or written texts ... it is valid to read it as a unitary text.’
102 For women’s religion in Ancient Israel and the supression of these beliefs, see Bird (1987:397-419). Married women often continued to worship their former gods, as can be seen in 1 Ki 11:1-9, for example, where the author tells that King Solomon built temples for his foreign wives. On women’s rituals, see Ackerman (1989:124-129). For more information about the goddess in Ancient Israel and in Ugarit, see Hadlay (1997:360-399).
103 Nolan Fewell & Gunn (1993:9-10).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Dossin, G (tr) 1941-. Archives Royales de Mari (Textes cunéiformes, Musée du Louvre). Paris.


Harris, K 1984. Sex, ideology and religion, the representation of women in the Bible. New Jersey: B&N.


Shlomith Yaron, Department of History, Philosophy, and Judaic Studies, Open University of Israel. *E-mail: shlomit@oumail.openu.ac.il*