

# DEPICTION OF THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN ISRAEL DURING THE IRON AGE

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The reconstruction of the status of women in the Israelite<sup>1</sup> society during the Iron Age is a task generally undertaken in two opposite directions. One direction militates for a balanced social life between men and women in light of social rights and customs of that ancient time.<sup>2</sup> The opposite direction proposes that in the Levant, women had no legal status in society; they were marginalized, subordinated to men, and confined

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<sup>1</sup>In this paper, the term Israelite designates the descendants of Jacob who formed the nation of Israel, consisting of the twelve tribes, from which ten were deported to Assyria (721 B.C.) and two to Babylon in 586 B.C.

<sup>2</sup>Ismar J. Peritz, "Women in the Ancient Hebrew Cult," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 17 (1898): 114; P. Tribble, "Woman in the OT," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrate Encyclopedia*, Supplementary volume (IDBSup), ed. Keith Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 964-65; Belinda Khalayly, "Polemics and Irenics," *Biblical Archeologist* 42 (1979): 7; Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 207-08; Walter Harrelson, "The Hebrew Bible and Modern Culture," in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. Douglas A. Knight and Gene M. Tucker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 494; Phyllis Bird, "The Place of Women in the Israelite Cultus," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. P. D. Hanson, P. D. Miller, and S. D. McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 397-98; Christopher J. H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land, and Property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 291-316; Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 49-53; Daniel I. Block, "Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel," in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 61-69.

to the domestic sphere.<sup>1</sup> The contention between the two camps can be illustrated by the following two opposite statements. Kaiser, one of the proponents of the balanced view, submits:

Women were not chattel to be ordered about and used as man pleased in the Old Testament, ranking slightly above a man's ox or donkey! They were fellow heirs of the image of God, charged with tasks that exhibited the originality, independence, and management ability of the "woman of valor" in Proverbs 31 and were called to **enter holistically into sharing all of the joy and labors of life.**<sup>2</sup>

Phillips, supporter of the opposite view, contends that "they [women] had no legal status, being the personal property first of their fathers, and then of their husbands."<sup>3</sup> The two camps are far from reaching a consensus. Hence, the issue over the reconstruction of the ancient social status of women in the Levant, particularly in Israel, is still an object of debate.

### **Statement of the Problem**

On the one hand, Syro-Palestine archeological research shows that some

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<sup>1</sup>Susan Ackerman, "Women in the Ancient Near East," in *Near Eastern Archaeology. A Reader*, ed. S. Richard (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 150; Carol Meyers, "The Roots of Restriction: Women in Early Israel," *Biblical Archeologist* 41 (1978): 91-92; Idem, *Households and Holiness: The Religious Culture of Israelite Women* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 2-3; Phyllis Bird, "Women's Religion in Ancient Israel," in *Women's Earliest Records from Ancient Egypt and Western Asia*, ed. Barbara S. Lesko (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1989), 290; R. Harris, "Woman in the ancient Near East," *IDBSup*, 960; Victor H. Matthews, "Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East," in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 2; Anthony Phillips, *Ancient Israel's Criminal Law: A New Approach to the Decalogue* (Oxford: Blackwood, 1970), 15.

<sup>2</sup>Kaiser, 207-08.

<sup>3</sup>Phillips, 15. The same view is developed by Paul Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 86-90.

women have played a significant role in the Levantine history just like certain men. On the other hand, it refers to aspects of power and prominence associated with men, and presents women as having executed only inferior role subordinated to that of men. This contrast stimulates one to investigate the depiction of women's status as it is reflected in Syro-Palestine archaeology.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This paper attempts to portray the status of women during the Iron Age in the Levant, especially in Israel.

### **Method and Procedure**

This study seeks to reconstruct the status of Israelite women through the examination of the material culture (iconography and archaeology/household) and the text, that is, the Hebrew Bible. Though the study focuses primarily on the Iron Age, it also gleans some data from the Bronze Age to get a broader depiction.<sup>1</sup> The work comprises four major parts: introduction, women depiction in material culture, women depiction in the Hebrew Bible, and conclusion.

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<sup>1</sup>E. D. Fleming, "Emar: On Road from Haran to Hebron," *Mesopotamia and the Bible. Comparative Explorations*, ed. M. W. Chavals and K. L. Younger, Jr. JSOTSup 341 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 225, asserts that cultural patterns of the Bronze Age are a baseline to evaluate the life of Israelite people of the Iron Age (1200-600).

## CHAPTER 2

### DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN MATERIAL CULTURE

This section attempts to analyze the role and status of women in Israel as depicted in iconography and household elements during the Iron Age.

#### **Portrait of Women in Iconography**

The reconstruction of ancient life of women in Israel through iconography is limited. Remains pictures of Israelite women are rare for two main reasons: the general lack of wall painting in Israel compared to other ANE regions<sup>1</sup> (for instance Egypt and Mesopotamia), and the heavy concentration of Syro-Palestinian archaeology on monumental architecture such as palaces and temples which are not many in Palestine<sup>2</sup> and do not reveal much about the life of ordinary people who constituted the majority of the community. Hence, this section builds its reconstruction of the status of Israelite

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<sup>1</sup>Ernest S. Frerichs, "Introduction to Ancient Israel," in *Women's Earliest Records from Ancient Egypt and Western Asia*, ed. Barbara S. Lesko (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1989), 264.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Family in First Temple Israel," in *Families in Ancient Israel*, ed. Leo G. Perdue et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 48-49. One should also note the "issue of ideology in art" and many other limitations of ANE iconographic data as concisely pinpointed by Gerald A. Klingbeil, "Methods and Daily Life: Understanding the Use of Animals in Daily Life in Multi-Disciplinary Framework," in *Daily Life in the Ancient Near East*, ed. R. Averbeck, D. B. Weisberg and M. W. Chavalas (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2003), 408-11.

women through the common depiction of women from Egyptian and Mesopotamian iconography as well as some figurines and wall reliefs found in Syria-Palestine.

### Women Depiction in Egyptian and Mesopotamian Iconography

Egypt and Mesopotamia are old ANE civilizations which conserved many temples, palaces, and tombs containing paintings and other iconographical data. From these, one can glean a general picture of the status of women in Syria-Palestine.

The examination of picture remains and epigraphic data from tomb chapels concerning non-royal women's daily life in the Old Egyptian Kingdom suggests that while men were primarily leaders of the community, women actively carried out many important activities in society and could possess their own property.<sup>1</sup> Apart from their significant role in temple services and funerary ritual activities, many women were stewards of different companies, inspectors, and "overseer of doctors."<sup>2</sup> Some of their ordinary activities were weaving, baking bread and beer-making which they did in cooperation with men.<sup>3</sup> Very often, wives enjoyed the companionship of their husbands<sup>4</sup> and "religious beliefs concerning the hereafter of the deceased applied equally to men and women."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Henry G. Fischer "Women in the Old Kingdom and the Heracleopolitan Period," in *Women's Earliest Records*, 23.

<sup>2</sup>Fischer, 18-21.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 13.

In the Middle Kingdom, women are not depicted as holding managerial posts in the government, either at the local level or at the national level. However, they held some subordinate positions in the priesthood which should not be interpreted as “low social status” occupation since priesthood service was very important in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this particular limitation are not elucidated.

In general, non-royal women in the Middle Kingdom were more devoted to indoor activities that did not require much physical energy.<sup>2</sup>

Monuments of New Kingdom of Egypt give the impression that women performed some outdoor activities and worked together with men in the fields.<sup>3</sup>

According to Barbara S. Lesko, Egyptian tomb chapels, wall pictures, portrait statues, and funerary and dedication stelae provide a general impression that ancient Egyptian women of various classes “were respected and that they fully mingled in society, playing many roles, whether in the household, the temple cults, or the economic realm.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>William A. Ward, “Non-Royal Women and their Occupations in the Middle Kingdom,” in *Women’s Earliest Records*, 37, 43.

<sup>2</sup>Ward, 43, prudently adds that this is a partial depiction since very little is known about peasants’ daily life.

<sup>3</sup>Gay Robins, “Some Images of Women in New Kingdom Art and Literature,” in *Women’s Earliest Records*, 115, 116, cautions that monument records need careful interpretation because they were men’s premeditated work.

<sup>4</sup>Barbara S. Lesko, “Women’s Monumental Mark on Ancient Egypt,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 54 (1991): 4-5, 6, 15. Some women were involved in politics. In Egypt, Hatshepsut, Tiy, and Nefertiti are known for their political leadership. In Mesopotamia, Ku-Baba founded the Third Dynasty of Kish, and many other queens played important roles in various governments of Mesopotamian states. See Harris, “Woman in the ancient Near East,” *IDBSup*, 963.

Data from Mesopotamia show that in Sumer women were actively involved in the economic life of society at different levels;<sup>1</sup> they could interact with men or be alone because their activities were at a certain degree extended beyond the family house.<sup>2</sup> In Nuzi, they were allowed to write wills, adopt children, “inherit their father’s entire property and pass on their name to their sons.”<sup>3</sup> In Babylonia, some women were scribes, a sign that they received a high education.<sup>4</sup> They were also allowed to appear before a civil court to give testimony, and in case a husband wanted a divorce “for no fault of his wife, he usually had to pay a fine.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, after a long absence of a husband, a wife could be allowed to divorce and marry another man.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Marc Van De Mieroop, “Women in the Economy of Sumer,” in *Women’s Earliest Records*, 66.

<sup>2</sup>Jean-Jacques Glassner, “Women, Hospitality and the Honor of the Family,” in *Women’s Earliest Records*, 88-89, notes that “obviously, there are still numerous gaps, and we could gather only scraps of information which are not enough to come to a precise definition of women’s status.” For this reason, Rivkah Harris, “Independent Women in Ancient Mesopotamia?” in *Women’s Earliest Records*, 145, declares that “the study of women’s lives in ancient Mesopotamia is in its infancy” and, therefore, he suggests a different view from that of Glassner: “In ancient Mesopotamia the center of woman’s activities was in the domestic sphere just as the locus of men’s activities was community and society wide” (Ibid.)

<sup>3</sup>Katarzyna Grosz, “Some Aspects of the Position of Women in Nuzi,” in *Women’s Earliest Records*, 180. The same situation was found in Ugarit society during the Late Bronze Age. See L. M. Muntingh, “The Social and Legal Status of a Free Ugaritic Female,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 26 (1967): 110-12.

<sup>4</sup>Harris, “Woman in the ancient Near East,” *IDBSup*, 963, mentions the princess Enheduanna who was a high priestess of the moon-god Nanna, and author of many hymns and other literature for which she is described as a “systematic theologian.”

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 61-62.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

The depiction of women in Egypt and Mesopotamia gives a general impression that women had some rights and played some important roles in society. However, this is a partial picture since it is limited to some premeditated paintings which may not reflect a comprehensive picture of women particularly those of ordinary life.

### Depiction of Women in Syria-Palestine Iconography

In Syria-Palestine iconography of the Iron Age women were mostly portrayed by terracotta figurines, a large number of which have been found.<sup>1</sup> Terracotta figurines are source of information concerning the life of women in the biblical era because they depict different aspects of their activities,<sup>2</sup> usually with “a sense of nobility and vitality.”<sup>3</sup> As an illustration, we want to examine one type of these clay statuettes, the terracotta figurines representing female musicians. The terracotta figurines of female musicians are small clay statuettes representing a female standing and holding a hand-drum.<sup>4</sup>

Some biblical passages refer to hand-drum as an instrument related to female musical

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<sup>1</sup>A. Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible: 10000-586 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 501-02; Carol L. Meyers, “Of Drums and Damsels: Women’s Performance in Ancient Israel,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 54 (1991):17. Terracotta figurines are small clay statuettes of men and women.

<sup>2</sup>Meyers, “Of Drums and Damsels: Women’s Performance in Ancient Israel,” 18.

<sup>3</sup>Pauline Albenda, “Western Asiatic Women in the Iron Age: Their Image Revealed,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 46 (1983): 82.

<sup>4</sup>Meyers, “Of Drums and Damsels: Women’s Performance in Ancient Israel,” 18. Meyers, 19, suggests that the lack of ornament may indicate that these female musicians were ordinary people.



tradition.<sup>1</sup> These biblical references and the many terracottas of female musicians suggest “the existence of a women’s performance genre of drum-dance-song” in Israel which was held during some important events like the celebration of a military victory, or any other public celebration performed before the leaders of the nation.<sup>2</sup> The public performance of music by women and their association with national celebrations indicate that in Israel, such women achieved a high degree of social status to which were attached power and prestige, and which was acknowledged by the leaders of Israel.<sup>3</sup> Hence, if one agrees that these women were mostly ordinary people, then their public “drum-dance-song” performance may connote that in general, Israelite women were not exclusively tied to the

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<sup>1</sup>Exod 15:20; Judg 11:34; 1 Sam 18:6; Jer 31:4.

<sup>2</sup>Meyers, “Of Drums and Damsels: Women’s Performance in Ancient Israel,” 23.

<sup>3</sup>Meyers, “Of Drums and Damsels: Women’s Performance in Ancient Israel,” 24-25. It is strange that the above statement comes from the same author who accuses Israelite people to have promoted the ideology of female inferiority that has affected many parts of the world. In fact, in her article, “The Roots of Restriction: Women in Early Israel,” 91, Meyers contends that “during the Late Bronze Age, wars, famines, and plagues created a demographic crisis which intensified the role of women in domestic affairs and childbearing. When the crisis passed, the restriction of women to domestic circles was ingrained in Israelite society and ultimately became the basis for their subordination through the remainder of the biblical period and on into modern times.” She insists on the same opinion on p. 98. But as Khalayly, 7, observes, to consider the Bible as the source of restriction for certain women in the modern world is to be sidetracked because from the biblical perspective (Proverbs 31) women activities though most of the time were carried in domestic sphere, were very “crucial to the stability and maintenance of society.” Khalayly, 7, assumes that current women’s struggle lies in the fact that many modern “state-run institutions have taken over many of the traditional functions of women,” without providing a substitution but forcing them into unemployment which generates a dysfunctional society. Hence, in the same line of thought, it can be considered that the modern feminist issue over women’s social rights is more a problem of current social, economical, and political world rather than a biblical responsibility.

domestic sphere or debased but honored and respected in society.

Another source of information for the depiction of women in Syria-Palestine during the Iron Age is the wall reliefs of the royal Assyrian palaces.<sup>1</sup> These wall reliefs portray Assyrian military expeditions which often were accompanied by deportation of several men and women. Some information concerning the social conditions of Israelite women can be gleaned from the examination of wall reliefs portraying Israelites and other war captives taken by Assyrian soldiers from various regions of Syria-Palestine.

A quick look at the wall reliefs show that unlike men, the hands of women were not tied during the long journey of captivity, nor were they stripped naked. Women's dresses are depicted with a sense of decency, and they do not carry any heavy load. Albenda notes that in a mixed group of captives, women marched behind men and soldiers did not mistreat them as they did with their male counterparts -their journey was more safe.<sup>2</sup>

She also informs that wall reliefs depicting *corvée* reveal that "women were not among the large labor forces acquired for construction projects undertaken by Assyrian kings."<sup>3</sup>

Assyrian wall reliefs give a general impression that though Assyrian soldiers were commonly known to be cruel, they had a certain degree of respect toward women which may have been a prevailing attitude in the Levant. Hence, Israelites may have had

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<sup>1</sup>Albenda, 83.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 86, their passive role during the war may have assured their safe journey.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 87.

also some regard toward women which probably was higher than that of Assyrian soldiers.

### **Portrait of Women in Household**

The major concern in this section is to look at the issue of domestic work in order to find out whether Israelites perceived it as an inferior activity indicating low status in their society as Meyers claims that early Israel confined women's energy to domestic affairs, and this limitation "became the reason for the ideology of female inferiority" throughout history.<sup>1</sup>

The household can be understood as a domestic environment that includes a house with all what it contains and its residents. It has to do with how people use the space of their house and their interactions with one another as related to the share of daily life activities.<sup>2</sup>

Archaeologists refer to the Israelite domestic building of the Iron Age as

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<sup>1</sup>Meyers, "The Roots of Restriction: Women in Early Israel," 91, 100. The same view is shared by Ackerman, 150. Elsewhere, Carol Meyers, "Engendering Syro-Palestinian Archaeology: Reasons and Resources," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 66 (2003): 186, submits that much work of Syro-Palestinian archaeology focuses on palaces, temples, and fortifications and neglects the study of household of peasant people which could have revealed much about the life of women. It is true that the reconstruction of Syro-Palestinian peasant daily life is still challenging for archaeologists. Yet, what archaeologists have done so far in urban setting (palaces, temples etc) gives the impression that women were not debased in the Levant.

<sup>2</sup>Amos Rapoport, "Spatial Organization and the Built Environment," in *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. by Tim Ingold (London: Routledge, 1994), 461; Meyers, "Engendering Syro-Palestinian Archaeology: Reasons and Resources," 186.

the “four-room house.”<sup>1</sup> This was a house made of four rooms among which the central room, called “courtyard,” was a large unit used for several household duties such as grinding of cereals, cooking or baking of bread. It also served as a home industry for processing agricultural products like oil and wine, and manufacturing cloth, shoes, perfume, etc.<sup>2</sup> Among many household artifacts, grinding-stones have been discovered in several Iron Age settlements.<sup>3</sup> Ethnography and ethnohistory associate grinding-stones with grain-processing, a task usually carried out by women.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the fact that sometime many grinding-stones were discovered together in one location of a house

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<sup>1</sup>Mazar, 341; Shlomo Bunimovitz and Avraham Faust, “Building Identity: The Four-Room House and the Israelite Mind,” in *Symbiosis, Symbolism, and the Power of the Past: Canaan, Ancient Israel, and Their Neighbors from the Late Bronze Age through Roman Palaestina*, ed. W. G. Dever and S. Gitin (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 411, 420.

<sup>2</sup>Mazar, 488-91; Blenkinsopp, 48. Shlomo Bunimovitz and Avraham Faust, 415-18, remark that besides some physical benefits offered by the four-room house structure, it also conveyed certain social-ethic messages: it facilitated its dwellers to maintain purity and privacy among themselves since each room had only one door opening to the central room, i.e., one room could not serve for transit to another room. The central room facilitated interaction among the occupants while the remaining rooms assured privacy or mutual respect. The four-room house fostered the attitude of togetherness, since by living under the same roof dwellers knew each other and could care for one another.

<sup>3</sup>Carol Meyers, “Material Remains and Social Relations: Women’s Culture in Agrarian Households of the Iron Age,” in *Symbiosis, Symbolism, and the Power of the Past: Canaan, Ancient Israel, and Their Neighbors from the Late Bronze Age through Roman Palaestina*, ed. W. G. Dever and S. Gitin (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 430.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 431. R. Harris, “Women: Mesopotamia,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:949, mentions that in some regions of Mesopotamia, grinding-stones might have served as a part of a woman’s dowry.

could indicate a trace of female team grinder-workers.<sup>1</sup> It is possible to deduce that women organized themselves in a sort of network groups intended to share knowledge about food-processing or crafts production.<sup>2</sup> Women's control over food consumption gave them power and prestige in society.<sup>3</sup> The household activities like grinding and, particularly the education of children, connote that domestic work was a well respected role rather than being perceived as an indicator of inferiority.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in early Israel, while women were active in domestic and agriculture work, men were often involved in heavy community activities especially warfare for the safety of their society.<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that even domestic activities were not exclusive work of women, because some activities like animal-tendering, pottery-making, and so forth were shared by men and

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<sup>1</sup>Meyers, "Material Remains and Social Relations: Women's Culture in Agrarian Households of the Iron Age," in *Symbiosis, Symbolism, and the Power of the Past*, 431.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 435-36. Edesio Sánchez, "Family in the Non-narrative Sections of the Pentateuch," in *Family in the Bible: Exploring Customs, Culture, and Context*, 39, remarks that the analysis of the kind of tasks held by women in Iron Age forces one to consider that they developed a "greater technological expertise" to accomplish their work as it is praised in Proverbs 31.

<sup>3</sup>Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 147.

<sup>4</sup>Gordon J. Wenham, "Family in the Pentateuch," in *Family in the Bible: Exploring Customs, Culture, and Context*, ed. Richard S. Hess and M. Daniel Carll R. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 22-23; Blenkinsopp, 78.

<sup>5</sup>Sánchez, 36, 38-39; Carol Meyers, "Women and the Domestic Economy of Early Israel," in *Women's Earliest Records*, 273.

women.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, there was a complementarity of roles between men and women to assure the prosperity of the community.<sup>2</sup>

The limited knowledge of Israelite material culture, particularly the household during the Iron Age shows that domestic work was not reserved for low status people. The warfare situation and various economic hardships led people to work in unity while at the same time they diversified activities. Men generally took care of heavy work like warfare, drainage and water system (digging of well), digging of terraces for agriculture, and so on. Women focused on different domestic activities such as food processing, manufacturing of various goods, and the education of the children. Many activities inside and outside the house needed the support of both men and women. Complementarity and team work were *sine qua non* for the success of families and the entire nation. Therefore, by being more involved in domestic work, women were not debased but respected for their valuable contribution to welfare of the community. In short, iconography as well as household analysis depict Israelite women of the Iron Age as respected human beings.

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<sup>1</sup>Meyers, "Engendering Syro-Palestinian Archaeology: Reasons and Resources," 186.

<sup>2</sup>Meyers, 277, suggests that social complementarity existed in early Israel society and declined during the monarchy Period. However, as it was noticed in the section related to Israelite women musicians, women continued to be respected during the Monarchy since they were invited to perform some music-dance-song during public celebrations before the leaders of the nation of Israel.

## CHAPTER 3

### DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

The main task in this section concerns the reconstruction of the status of ancient Israelite women as portrayed in the Hebrew Bible.

#### **Issue over the Source of Information**

The Hebrew Bible is considered to be the richest source of information in regard to the life of women in Syria-Palestine during the Iron Age. This is because the archaeological data relating to women in this Period are very meager.<sup>1</sup>

Despite its abundant information, some scholars claim that the Hebrew Bible is deficient in its depiction of the place and value of women,<sup>2</sup> and that it can not be considered as a reliable source due its various biases towards women.<sup>3</sup> Meyers maintains that since the

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<sup>1</sup>Ackerman, 151.

<sup>2</sup>Harrelson, 494, asserts that supporters of this view turn to various alternatives for a probable solution. They either reject biblical religion in favor of some new Judaism or Christianity not built on the Bible, or abandon Judaism and Christianity for some other approaches.

<sup>3</sup>Meyers, "Women and the Domestic Economy of Early Israel," in *Women's Earliest Records*, 266-68, enumerates the following points among what she considers to be reasons why the Bible should be seen as a biased source of information about women: (1) "The fact that the Bible was written almost entirely by males;" (2) The Hebrew Bible is generally a "chief public document," a "result of male literary" concerned with "public and/or national life" which highlights more male life; (3) The Bible is generally a product

Hebrew Bible is not reliable for the reconstruction of the life of Israelite women in early Israel, one should turn to social scientific analytical approach and archaeology for a probable solution.<sup>1</sup> However, scholars who take seriously the Hebrew Bible as a valuable source of information concerning women and family during the Iron Age recognize that both Syro-Palestinian archaeology as well as the Hebrew Bible have incomplete data and do not provide details about Israelite family daily life.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is fair to consider the Hebrew Bible as a nonexhaustive source of information rather than an unreliable document concerning the reconstruction of the life of Israelite women. Moreover, it is not evident that gender issues were a main concern for Bible writers and their contemporary society.

### **Status of Women in the Hebrew Bible**

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of urban life, and because of this, it does not address properly life of rural people who formed the majority of Israelite population. The question one may ask in light of all these arguments is whether biblical writers were necessarily bound to address gender issues. If the answer is yes, then they should have been expected to address other specific modern issues, but this is not the case. It seems to be misleading to try to reconstruct life of ancient Israelite women in light of modern society.

<sup>1</sup>Meyers, "Women and the Domestic Economy of Early Israel," in *Women's Earliest Records*, 270-71. The use of social sciences can be helpful, but one needs to be careful in the choice of social model to apply in interpreting the Bible because some social science presuppositions can distort biblical data.

<sup>2</sup>Blenkinsopp, 48-49. Leo G. Perdue, "The Household, Old Testament Theology, and Contemporary Hermeneutics," in *Families in Ancient Israel*, 244, asserts that the portrayal of family in ancient Israel is partial and due to this limitation, "much about the family in the Hebrew Bible must remain the object of supposition and intelligent guesswork." Matthews, 1, expresses the same concern that the information for the study of the family in the ancient Near East is also much fragmentary and can lead only to partial conclusions.



Three points can be highlighted among the many arguments used to justify the alleged Hebrew Bible marginalization of Israelite women: (1) the consideration of a woman/wife as a property of a man/husband based on the interpretation of the Hebrew word *בעל* “owner, husband” and the tenth commandment (Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21);<sup>1</sup> (2) men’s control of women’s sexuality;<sup>2</sup> and (3) the exclusion of women from religious and cultic affairs.<sup>3</sup> Before I begin the discussion of the above three arguments, I would like to make a brief note concerning the Israelite social structure.

Israelite social structure was made of four levels: the family or “father’s house,” clan, tribe, and the nation.<sup>4</sup> All the four levels were united, and each had a leader (man) empowered to serve the interests of those who were under his jurisdiction.<sup>5</sup> The family was the basic unit of Israelite nation. This basic unit “was the focus of the religious, social, and economic spheres of Israelite life and was at the center of Israel’s

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<sup>1</sup>Daniel I. Block, “Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel,” in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 62-63.

<sup>2</sup>Ackerman, 151, explains that illicit intercourse on a woman’s side was seen as a crime against her father if she was not married (Deut 22:20-21) or her husband if she was married (Lev 20:10). A similar point of view is held by Mary J. Evans, *Woman in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 24.

<sup>3</sup>Friedrich Heiler, *Die Frau in den Religionen der Menschheit* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1977), 73; Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 158-59.

<sup>4</sup>Block, 35.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 44.

history, faith, and traditions.”<sup>1</sup> For this reason, the leader of the family, called אב “father,” had a crucial role for the stability of the community. He was mainly expected to provide protection and security for his family.<sup>2</sup> It is in light of this social setting that the Hebrew Bible depiction of women will be discussed.

The noun בעל “owner, possessor, husband, Baal” comes from the Hebrew verb בעל “possess, own, rule over, marry.”<sup>3</sup> The term בעל “husband” derives from a common Semitic root meaning “lord, master” with a connotation of “be lord (husband) over.”<sup>4</sup> In marital setting, it may be understood as “to assume authority over [a woman] rather than to own [a woman];” and in non- marital context it expresses the idea of “to rule, to exercise authority over, rather than to own.”<sup>5</sup> As for the usage of בעל as “owner,” it reflects more the idea of possessing animals or things.<sup>6</sup> The listing of neighbor’s wife

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<sup>1</sup>King and Stager, 39.

<sup>2</sup>Block, 43.

<sup>3</sup>Bruce K. Waltke, “בעל,” *Theological WordBook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke vol. 1 (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:119.

<sup>4</sup>Brown, Francis, with S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic*, based on the lexicon of William Gesenius (1952), s.v. “בעל.” It expresses the idea “to marry” (Gen 20:3; Deut 21:13; 22:22 24:1; Isa 54:1; 54:5; 62:4; 62:5; 62:5; Mal 2:11); “be married” (Pr 30:23 Is 62:4); “to rule over” (1 Chr 4:22; Isa 26:13).

<sup>5</sup>Block, 62.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. It is used to refer to an owner of ox (Exod 21:28; 21:29; 21:29 22:10; 22:11; 22:13; 22:14); pit (Exod 21:34; 21:36); house (Exod 22:7; Judg 19:22; 19:23); debt (Deut 15:2); land (Job 31:39); ass (Isa 1:3); goods (Eccl 5:10); riches (Eccl 5:12);

along with other possessions in the tenth commandment (Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21) does not imply that a wife is a property. Wright notices that “the common denominator in the entries in the list is not that they are items of property but that all are elements of a person’s household that male neighbors typically covet.”<sup>1</sup>

In light of the above analysis, it can be concluded that the term **בַּעַל** used in relationship to men and women in the Israelite society, may be understood as referring to a leader (male) empowered to rule over those who are under his jurisdiction in order to protect not to harm them. Hence, to use the word **בַּעַל** as evidence that the Hebrew Bible favors the concept of women inferiority is misleading.

Ackerman asserts that Israelite men controlled women’s sexuality in the sense that illicit intercourse on a woman’s side was considered to be a crime against either her husband or father (Deut 22:20-21; Lev 20:10).<sup>2</sup> But as it can be observed, illicit intercourse was neither a privilege on a man’s side. It was condemned by the law for both men and women (Lev 18). Adultery was punished by death (Lev 20:10). In case of suspicion, the trial-by-ordeal ritual was resorted to (Num 5:11-31). Again, one should remember that this ritual was held in a society which considered the husband as protector of his family. Therefore, since adultery was a serious danger that threatened the stability

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one to whom good is due (Prov 3:27); evil gain (Prov 1:19).

<sup>1</sup>Wright, quoted by Block, 62.

<sup>2</sup>Ackerman, 151.

of the community, “a major crime not only against the husband but also against God,”<sup>1</sup> the husband needed to make sure it was tackled even at the level of suspicion. Once understood in this context, the trial-by-ordeal ritual (Num 5:11-31) can not be seen as an anti women text but as a ritual that met the interest of women because it restrained arbitrary divorce, cleared the accused wife from suspicion, and provided a new opportunity of life for a guilty woman who should actually be put to death by the community. The intent of the ritual of Num 5:11-31 was not to humiliate or punish women but to protect and defend them.<sup>2</sup> In other words, it “does not reflect a lower valuation of women than of men but underscores the motivation to protect the weaker members of society from oppression and abuse.”<sup>3</sup> As Roy Gane remarks, the trial-by-ordeal ritual of Num 5:11-31 was an exceptional case in the entire ancient Israelite legislation where God himself intervened to render justice in a supernatural way and it should be noticed that “the right to such a Supreme Court trial belongs only to women.”<sup>4</sup>

Women’s participation in Israelite religious affairs is another issue over the Hebrew Bible depiction of women. It is suggested that the Hebrew Bible gives the

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<sup>1</sup>Baruch J. Schwartz, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), s.v. “Ordeal of Jealousy.”

<sup>2</sup>Jacob Milgrom, “A Husband’s Pride, A Mob’s Prejudice: The Public Ordeal undergone by a Suspected Adulteress in Numbers 5 Was Meant Not to Humiliate Her but to Protect Her,” *Bible Review* 12, no. 4 (1996): 21.

<sup>3</sup>Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 245, 352-53.

<sup>4</sup>Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, NIV Application Commentary, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 526.

impression that women were either simply excluded from religious activities,<sup>1</sup> or their participation was very limited.<sup>2</sup> However, texts such as Deut 12:12; 31:10-12 and Nehemiah 8 show that men and women as well as children or, as Deut 31:11-12 puts it, “all Israel,” were invited to rejoice before the Lord at the place he would choose for worship. Moreover, though they were not involved in official religious leadership (priesthood),<sup>3</sup> they were engaged in many religious activities: they exercised prophetic roles (Exod 15:20; Judg 4:4; Isa 8:3; 2 Kgs 22:14; Neh 6:14), presented gifts for the construction of the tabernacle (Exod 35:20-29), participated in religious processional dance (Ps 68:25), played musical instruments and sang in the temple (1 Chron 25:5-7; Ezra 2:65; Neh 7:67), served at the entrance to the tent of meeting (Exod 38:8; 1 Sam 2:22), celebrated the Passover (Exod 12:43-51), and so forth.

In light of the above discussion, it appears difficult to assert that the Hebrew Bible depicts Israelite women as having been simply property of their fathers or husbands, debased and deprived of any legal status. Despite some abuse they might have

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<sup>1</sup>Judith Romney Wegner, ““*Coming Before the Lord*”: The Exclusion of Women from Public Domain of the Israelite Priest Cult,” in *The Book of Leviticus: Composition and Reception*, ed. Rolf Rendtorff and Robert A. Kugler (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 464-65, argues that based “on male fears of potential cultic contamination by females” the Israelite priestly system did not allow women to come into the presence of YHWH and disqualified them from “ritual or cultic activities.”

<sup>2</sup>Mayer I. Gruber, “Women in the Cult According to the Priestly Code,” *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Baruch A. Levine, and Ernest S. Frerichs (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 35.

<sup>3</sup>Besides the aspect of religious leadership, some Israelite women were involved in public affairs political: Miriam (Exod 15:20-21; Num 12), Deborah (Judg 4-5), Jezebel (1 Kgs 21:1-13), Athaliah (2 Kgs 11:1), and Noadiah (Neh 6:14).

suffered due to the general fall of humanity, the Hebrew Bible favors the view that Israelite women were treated with dignity in society.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

The issue addressed in this paper concerned the status of women in Israelite society during the Iron Age. The task consisted of finding out whether Syria-Palestine archaeology depicts women as having been debased or dignified in Israelite society.

The analysis of iconography and household related to the problem under study reveals the following:

1. Iconography and household face some limitations in reconstructing the ancient life of women in Israel during the Iron Age Period. Remains of Israelite women pictures are rare because of the general lack of wall painting in Israel and the heavy inclination of Syro-Palestinian archaeology on monumental architecture, that is, palace and temples which are not many in Palestine and do not even reveal much about the life of ordinary people who constituted the majority of the community. Hence, the available

data offer a limited depiction.

2. The limited iconographical data give a general impression that women were respected and not debased in society. This depiction is particularly expressed by the examination of some terracotta figurines of female musicians, and certain Assyrian wall reliefs. As an illustration, the fact that Assyrian wall reliefs depict captive women with a certain degree of dignity may indicate that Israelite men might have had high regard for women than the cruel Assyrian soldiers.

3. Women were more involved in domestic work but this was not considered as an exclusive activity for inferior people. By managing carefully this demanding sphere of life, women showed a sense of great responsibility for the welfare of the community. By developing skills related to, among many other things, food processing, manufacturing of various goods, and child education, women gained honor and respect in the Israelite society. Moreover, household work was not the only task of women. Some activities were shared by both men and women, hence complementarity seems to have been the prevailing picture of Israelite social life. Generally women took care of less demanding activities while men were engaged in more difficult tasks such as war, digging of cisterns, and construction of canals.

The investigation over the Hebrew Bible's depiction of women indicates three aspects:

1. The Hebrew Bible is a nonexhaustive but reliable source of information about the life of women.

2. Women were not considered as men's property, but were respected, protected and secured by men.

3. Being part of "all Israel" (Deut 31:10-12), women participated in religious activities as full members of God's people.

In light of all this search, it appears correct to assert that despite the limitations of available data concerning the life of women during the Iron Age, one may conclude that women were not debased but dignified in Israel society during the Iron Age Period.

Finally, further archaeological research dealing with burial and civil court practices may also shed some light about how women were treated in the Levant.

Besides, more excavation of rural sites is also needed to enhance the depiction of the ancient status of women in Syria-Palestine.



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DEPICTION OF THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN  
ISRAEL DURING THE IRON AGE

A Research Paper  
Presented in Partial Fulfilment  
of the Requirement for the Course  
OTST 632 Archaeology of the Biblical World

by  
Paluku Mwendambio

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