

Rosemary Kuehner - "Images of Women in the Bible"

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based almost exclusively on sex. In the limited roles open to her however, the ancient Israelite woman contributed more substantially and more significantly to the welfare of family and society than the modern Western woman in the same role. She was in simply a consumer but a primary producer or manufacturer: much of the essential goods required by the household; in addition she had charge of the basic education of the children. She apparently had considerable power, authority and freedom of decision in this important realm that she managed,<sup>81</sup> and she could make significant decisions about her own life and that of her children (by religious vows, specifically)—though her husband (or father) was granted veto power in some cases.

While in certain limited circumstances a woman might be thought of only as a sexual object (Judg. 5:30; 1 Kings 1:2-4; also Gen. 19:8; Judg. 19:24), nonsexual attributes predominate in most Old Testament references to women; in particular, intelligence, prudence, wisdom, tact, practical sense and religious discernment recur in numerous characterizations of women, often placing or preceding descriptions of physical appeal. The women of these texts are not depicted as silly or frivolous, except perhaps in the prophetic caricatures of the harlot or of the pampered ladies of the upper class (Isa. 3:16-4:1; Amos 4:1). Women may be portrayed as unscrupulous, but they are rarely, if ever, characterized as foolish.

Despite the family locus of most of the woman's activity, her knowledge and abilities of women were not confined to the family circle or limited to expression in strictly female activities. The possession of special gifts and powers beneficial to the larger community was recognized and acknowledged in women as well as men, with the result that some professional specialization was possible for a few women along with their primary occupation as wife and mother. Most of these involved the exercise or employment of special kinds of knowledge: practical wisdom (the "wise women" of Tekoa and Abel); ability in deciding legal disputes (Deborah as judge); power to receive divine communication (Deborah as prophetess, Miriam, Huldah, and possibly Noadiah); and ability to call up spirits from the dead (the medium of Endor). Judged by economic criteria or in terms of interest in continuity of house and name, the woman of the Old Testament was

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regarded inferior to the man. In the realm of the cult her activity was restricted. And from the viewpoint of the law she was a minor dependent, whose rights were rarely acknowledged or protected. These several systems in which woman's roles and status have been described represent in large measure cultural givens, which cannot be ignored. They mark the base line for any discussion of the image of Old Testament woman; but they do not describe all situations or all points of view.<sup>82</sup> In many situations a woman was in fact and/or in theory an equal, despite manifold combined pressures to treat her as an inferior.<sup>83</sup> She was recognized as equal (or superior) in the possession and employment of certain kinds of knowledge and in religious sensibility and sensitivity. In love she might also be an equal,<sup>84</sup> and could exploit (Judg. 16:4-22) as well as suffer exploitation. She was in general charged with the same religious and moral obligations as men, and was held responsible for her acts.<sup>85</sup> Man in the Old Testament recognizes woman as one essentially like him, as a partner in leisure and labor, one whom he needs, and one who can spell him out or woe. From his point of view—the only point of view of the Old Testament texts—the woman is a helper, whose work as wife and mother is essential and complementary to his own. In a sense she completes him—but as one with a life and character of her own. She is his opposite and equal.

THE IMAGE OF WOMAN IN THE ACCOUNTS OF CREATION

Against the multitude of Old Testament references to women, great and ideal, contemporary and past, the Bible has set two accounts of the first woman. Each belongs to a larger creation story, and each shares many common features with similar accounts from the ancient Near East. In the mythopoetic world that was Israel's cradle, accounts of origins did not simply explain what happened in the beginning; they were statements about the nature of things as they "are" (or as they should be). In the tradition or re-enactment of the myth the original drama of creation was repeated and the present order maintained through re-creation. Thus the Babylonian account of the creation of the

world was a central feature in the liturgy of the New Year celebration, serving to insure that the forces of order (the created, present order) would prevail for another year over the forces of chaos (associated especially with the spring floods), and the account of the creation of mankind was the text of an incantation, recited by a midwife to assure a good birth.<sup>86</sup> The primary concern of a myth is not with the past but with the present.

Israel's accounts of creation draw heavily upon the myths current at their times of composition. The same basic theme occur, the same developments—even the same language is used in some cases. But the meaning of the biblical accounts differs radically from that of their prototypes, because the context of their employment is different. The Genesis accounts are no longer myths but history—or a prologue to history. Creation has become the first of a series of events that extend on down to the writer's own day. That intervening period is never wholly collapsed in the biblical view. Creation stands always and only at the beginning—remote, complete, unrepeatable, the first of God's works. The God who performed that work continues to labor and to act, but in new ways. History is the drama of the interaction of God and the world that he created, the world to which he gave a life and a will of its own. The creation stories tell of man's place in that created world of nature and of his-her essential character. This is spelled out in Gen. 3 by an account of the first acts taken by that autonomous creation.

While the two creation accounts of Genesis differ markedly in language, style, date and traditions employed, their basic statements about woman are essentially the same: woman is, along with man, the direct and intentional creation of God and the crown of his creation. Man and woman were made for each other. Together they constitute humankind, which is in its full and essential nature bisexual.

The well-known word of the Priestly writer (P) in Gen. 1:27 is eloquent and enigmatic in its terseness: "God created mankind (*'ādām*) in his own image . . . male (*zākār*) and female (*nēqēbāh*) he created them." Two essential statements, and that is all. No exposition is given, no consequences stated, only the prefatory statement in verse 26 proclaiming the intentionality of this creation. The first statement has as its primary point the

assertion that the human animal is distinguished from all others in being modeled or patterned after God himself ("in his image" is an adverbial clause describing the process of fashioning). In contrast to the other creatures, man's primary bond is with God and not with the earth; man's purpose in creation is to rule the earth. The second major statement is an expansion and a specification of the first. It does not relate a subsequent act of creation but only a subsequent thought of the narrator; and it does not explicate the meaning of the image. It simply makes the essential point that the genus, *'ādām*, is bisexual in its created nature.<sup>87</sup> There is no androgynous original creation in P.

The older, Yahwistic (J) account of creation in Gen. 2-3 is of a wholly different genre—a narrative. Here the art of the storyteller is seen in a work of great beauty and pathos, a narrative of beguiling simplicity, filled with yearning, compassion and dramatic tension—the "soul" version of creation, in contrast to the cool, cerebral account of the priestly writer. In J's account the creation of man (*'ādām*, deliberately ambiguous here)<sup>88</sup> is the beginning and the end of the story, with all of God's other creative acts bracketed in between. Here God's primary creation remains incomplete until, by a process of trial and error which populates the earth with creatures, that one is finally found for whom the man has waited and longed, namely, woman. With the creation of woman, man is finally his true self, a sexual and social being (*īš*). J's account is a drama of the realization of the divine intention in creation.

The man in this creation drama recognizes the woman as his equal, as a "helper fit for him" (2:18). She is emphatically not his servant. "Helper" (*'ezer*) carries no status connotations, while the Hebrew expression translated "fit for" means basically "opposite" or "corresponding to." The statement simply expresses the man's recognition (the story is told from his point of view exclusively) that he needs her and that she is essentially like him. She is the "other" that confronts him and the other that completes him. The story represents her as derived but not inferior. The fact that she is formed directly from the man is meant to emphasize the essential identity of man and woman. Woman is not a separate order of creation like the animals, each of which was created, like *'ādām*, from the earth. The scientific and symmetrical language of P, with

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his concept of one genus ('*adam*) in two sexes ("male" and "female"), is not used here, but the same idea is expressed in dynamic and dramatic language. The essential oneness of the two distinct persons (identified by the sociosexual terms "man" and "woman") is proclaimed in the man's recognition of and emotional response to the fact: "This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh."<sup>90</sup>

In J's work the drama of creation forms part of a larger story of origins. The Yahwist's word about man and woman in their essential nature is not finished with the simple statement of their existence or of the "original" state of their existence; it is spelled out, as the account of creation itself, in the language of events. The true nature or character of man and woman is revealed only as they begin to interact with each other and with their environment as feeling, rational and responsible beings. In this action/interaction their latent capacity for judgment, for disobedience and for self-interest is actualized, and the pain and frustration that the author knows as a mark of human existence becomes a part of the history of the first couple and of mankind.

The author of this well-known and often misinterpreted account shared the age-old notion that misery is a sign of sin or guilt. Mankind's suffering was therefore conceived as punishment. The crime that the Yahwist depicts is the crime of disobedience, a crime committed by both man and woman.<sup>90</sup> The order of their transgressing is unimportant for the question of their guilt; the consequences of their acts (knowledge, shame—and pain) are described only when both have eaten the forbidden fruit.<sup>91</sup> The manner and the explanation of the responses of the pair is also inconsequential for the question of their guilt and punishment. Each individually and knowingly disobeys the divine command. But the way in which the response of each is portrayed may be understood to indicate something of the author's—or the tradition's—view of the character of man and woman. The woman in this portrait responds to the object of temptation intellectually and reflectively, employing both practical and esthetic judgment. The man, on the other hand, passively and unquestioningly accepts what the woman offers him.<sup>92</sup>

In their common act of disobedience the man and woman become fully human, identifiable with men and women of the

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author's own day. Losing their original innocence, they become knowledgeable, responsible, and subject to pain and the contractions of life. The "punishment" described in the poem of 3:14—it simply represents the characteristic burdens and pain of man and woman as traditionally perceived in Israelite society. Ample testimony is offered by other Old Testament texts that the pangs of childbirth were viewed as the most common and acute pain suffered by women. They were at the same time indicative of the woman's primary and essential work in the society—procreation. By no means an inclusive definition of her work, it was nevertheless that to which all other work and all other roles were subordinated. The man's pain is described analogously as related to his work—gaining a living from the soil. The work of the pair is here simply described as the work of survival, biological (the work of the female) and material (the work of the male). But it is not simply the pain of toil that the author describes, it is the pain of alienation in that toil. The ground, the source of the man's life and work, has become his antagonist rather than his helper, and the man, the source of the woman's life and work, has become her ruler rather than her friend.<sup>93</sup>

The words of Gen. 3 are descriptive, not prescriptive. J's story of the first couple is heavily etiological; it offers an explanation for the primary characteristics of the human situation as Israel knew it. And this minimal statement shows substantial agreement with the fuller account gleaned from other Old Testament writings. But it is not normative. Israel did not use this legend to justify the existing order or to argue for woman's subordination. She did not need to. She understood the status described—for both man and woman—as given. J's view was larger than the common one, however, and marked by a profound sense of the wrongness of this order: given, but not willed, the tragic consequence of man's exercise of his/her God-given reason and will. This was also not J's final word about the human situation. In its present setting the story has lost much of its etiological significance, for it is no longer simply a description of things as they are but is the first act in a world-historical drama that the historian has created as the context for Israel's history. For J, the central figure in that drama is Yahweh, God, who continues to will, to act and to create. Adam and Eve are the beginning of his works, not the end. Yahweh goes on in a

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play of many acts to create a new people and to enter into a new relationship with them.

It is with that same understanding of the dynamic character of history that the prophets speak of God's continued action in their own day, an action portrayed typically as judgment upon a people who had replaced theological norms with sociological ones (security, status, wealth, etc.). Neither the prophets nor the theologians, such as J and P, succeeded in wholly escaping the culturally determined understanding of male and female roles that they had inherited. And their greater egalitarianism should not be too sharply contrasted with the overtly discriminatory laws and practices recorded in other Old Testament literature, since there, too, male-dominated language and structures disguised to a considerable degree the actual power, freedom and respect of women in the society—respect based largely, though not solely, upon complementarity of roles. But distinctions of all types lend themselves to exploitation and to the creation of differential ethical standards. The historians of the Old Testament look behind the present state of division and alienation to an original and intended equality and harmony in creation, while the prophets focus upon the existing state of inequality and exploitation, addressing it with a concept of justice manifested in judgment—justice understood as a new act that God will perform to purge his creation, an act of retribution and rectification. The proud will be abased (Isa. 4:17), and the "men of distinction" will head the exile train (Amos 6:4-7); but she who is now an outcast in men's eyes will not be punished for her sin (Hos. 4:14).

Some among the prophets saw beyond the present day, beyond the present order and the impending judgment. They looked to a new act of God in creation, to a new order with new possibilities for human existence, radical possibilities that would abolish the present alienation and exploitation based on distinctions of species, age, sex and social status. These prophetic visions speak of the knowledge of God in every heart, requiring no class of teachers to expound it (Jer. 31:31-34); of God's spirit free to all, so that old and young, male and female, bound and free shall prophesy (Joel 2:28-29); of lion and lamb, wild beast and helpless child living together in harmony and without fear (Isa. 11:6-9); and the

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reversal of the prevailing sexual roles: "a woman protects a man" (Jer. 31:22).<sup>94</sup>

The statements concerning the first man and woman must be read together with the statements of God's interaction with the world of his creation, his promises and his demands, his sending of avengers and spokesmen (both male and female), his judgments, his forgiveness and his new creation. Israel's best statements about woman recognize her as an equal with man, and with him jointly responsible to God and to humankind. That Israel rarely lived up to this vision is all too apparent, but the vision should not be denied.

## NOTES

1. The term "patriarchy" is appropriate to designate such a society, but it is avoided here because of the fact that widespread indiscriminate use of the term has led to the blurring of significant social and cultural distinctions among various "patriarchal" societies. Whatever the terms employed, however, the characterization of ancient Israel as a male-centered and male-dominated society is meant as a descriptive statement. The aim of this essay is not to decry or to advocate but simply to record the perceptions of women found in the Old Testament writings and to analyze them in terms of their sources and consequences in ancient Israelite society and religion. Speculation concerning origins is renounced, and *Nachgeschichte* (the subsequent history of the ideas) is left to students of more recent periods in the tradition.
2. Exceptions to this latter rule are invariably deemed noteworthy by commentators. The extent and the meaning of gynomorphic language applied to the Deity has still to be assessed. See Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchizing in Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* XL1 (1973), pp. 31-34. Whether the Old Testament use of feminine metaphors for God (always "mother" images, never "wife") is the product of Israelite monotheism or is a more general characteristic of language about certain types of deities (e.g., creator gods or tutelary deities) also needs to be explored.
3. See E. Deen, *All the Women of the Bible* (New York: Harper, 1955).
4. All citations are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible (RSV) unless otherwise noted.