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Women in the Jewish-Biblical Tradition

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WOMEN IN THE JEWISH-BIBLICAL TRADITION¹

Asher Finkel

1. Story of Creation and the Rabbinic Understanding of it

The opening chapters of the Jewish Bible offer key views on the relationship between man and woman. They appear as stories of creation focusing on the condition of human existence, and as such they provide the necessary paradigms of Biblical thought. In turn they generate particular laws of the Pentateuchal codes that affect human behaviour. These laws govern Jewish covenantal life and give rise to rabbinic value-judgements and legal formulations. In the rabbinic view, there exists an effective association between the narrative of the Pentateuch and its laws. The narrative represents the "*Haggadah*" and the laws the "*Halakhah*"². The former is beyond the hermeneutical measure of the latter. For the "*Halakhah*" is structured and determined legalistically, whereas the "*Haggadah*" generates theological and ethical reflection. In Biblical stories the ideal type or concept is located and through a dynamic application of the Biblical laws the norm is established. Accordingly, an examination of the key paradigmatic stories will shed light on how the

¹ This article was originally published in *Journal of Dharma*, XIII.1 (1988).

² Refer to articles on said terms in *Encyclopedia Judaica* and to G. Vermes, "Bible and Midrash", in the *Cambridge History of the Bible* (ed. P. Ackroyd and C. Evans) vol.1.

rabbis essentially viewed women in the religion. It will also provide a particular insight into Jesus' teachings and his ministry in relation with woman.

In the first creation story of the Pentateuch (Gen 1:1-2:4), the person is perceived as a free being endowed with a God-like quality. "He was created in the image of God" (1:27). This anthropological concept was revolutionary and distinct at a time when the Biblical tradition was first formulated³. For in the Near East, centuries before the Christian era, the civilized world was permeated with mythopoeic thought and nature worship. Human life was viewed to be subjugated to a cosmic divine order from the beginning.⁴ In the Biblical tradition, the very nature of the person is rooted in freedom, a free will that can enjoy a responsible partnership with God in creation. God has created both the cosmos and the person, but it is the human creature alone who dominates and shapes his future and the destiny of his natural environment. "Fill the earth and dominate it" becomes a blessing formulation by God for humanity that is in His image. The rabbinic tradition⁵ views the scriptural statement (Gen 1:28) as the first commandment of the Pentateuch.

³ See Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1970), p. 60 and refer M. Greenberg's translation of *Religion of Israel* by Y. Kaufman, Chicago University of Chicago, 1960, ch. 4.

⁴ See H. Frankfort, *Before Philosophy* (Baltimore, 1981) and refer to M. Eliade, *Cosmos and History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952).

⁵ See *Sefer Hahinnukh* ed. H. Chevel (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1986), p. 55 and refer to G. Appel, *A Philosophy of Mizvot* (New York: Ktav, 1975, ch. 2).

The human creature is commanded to fulfil God's primary purpose on earth. "For God did not create (the world) without purpose but for the sake of habitation" (Isaiah 45:18). Both man and woman are equally responsible and in the opening story of the Bible, the person (*Adam*) is described as a dual being of two genders. These two complements can enter into a union as equal partners to guarantee procreation. The first story anticipates the focus for the second story on marriage. Yet, the first story is so framed to relate a prior concern that deals with existential reality as experienced in time. Human existence can maintain its creative purpose within secular time through a free but responsible action in the created world. However, on the Sabbath day the human creature can enjoy an elevated and more blessed experience in relating to God the Creator, through a conscious withdrawal from any secular involvement.

The first paradigmatic story offers a primary understanding on how man and woman individually enjoy the same opportunity to fulfil their human purpose. This generates specific legislation for the Sabbath that will guide the people of Israel in a covenant relationship. The Decalogue (Exod 20:8-11) formulates the prescription for work during the six days of the week and the proscription of work on the Sabbath. It clearly associates its purpose with the creation story and later (Deut 5:15), it places the stress on the primary historical experience of Israel, at their genesis as a people, to explain the law of the Sabbath. Both man and woman equally share in this Sabbath experience, but significantly the woman enjoys a specific role in welcoming the Sabbath through fight.

2. The Pentateuchal Paradigm of Marriage

The act of marriage, not just mating, is a sign of social life that governed by a civilized code of behaviour. The second story of creation (Gen 2:4-24) relates how Adam (man) should mate only with his own kind and the desired union should be with a partner in a facing position (*kenegdo*). This paradigmatic story generates Levitical prohibitions against bestiality and homosexuality (Lev 20:13,15,16). Mainly, the story of Adam and Eve offers the ideal model of matrimony. It is a monogamous union, a desired form to be adopted by Moses and Aaron, Isaiah and Ezekiel in a society that allowed polygamy.

Marriage is a covenant of agapic union before God and the community. It is not a contractual arrangement between partners or social license to mate. It is a sacred union that generates deep feelings of caring, responsibility, faithfulness and honesty. It gives rise to a lasting fellowship of love through life, that is shared in God's presence. For this reason the human experience of the marital covenant becomes the psycho-dramatic metaphor of prophetic speech for God's relationship with Israel⁶. Ezekiel describes the history of Israel before God as a covenant of love and marriage (ch.16). Hosea views his own marital relationship as the affective form to explain separation and restoration of Israel before God (chs. 1-3). The covenant between God and Israel is rooted in a nuptial commitment "You will be my people and I will be your God". This is reflected similarly in the

⁶ See A. Neher. *The Prophetic Existence* (London : Yoseloff, 1969, part 3,2).

matrimonial phraseology, "You will be my woman (*'ishah*) and will be your man (*'iysh*)".

The second story of creation (Gen 2:23) recalls the nuptial commitment. "This one will be called woman (*'ishah*) for this one was taken of man (*iysh*)". "Taken" is the Biblical expression for "married"⁷. Thus the story ends in the ideal lesson on marriage. "Therefore, a man will leave his father and mother and attach himself to his woman and they shall become one flesh". Rabbi Meir insightfully explains⁸ that the very union of *iysh* and *'ishah* share a common linguistic root. The additional letter of Y and H, spell out God's name. For a covenant of marriage is blessed with God's presence. However, when marriage lacks this experience of God, it results only in the root letters that are commonly shared in Hebrew for man and woman. This spells out *'esh* (fire); namely, it is a marriage of conflict and ongoing tension due to the clashing of individual wills. This human condition results in the "hardness of the heart" that makes a bill of divorce necessary according to the Mosaic legislation (Deut 24:1).

In a debate with the rabbis, Jesus acknowledges their position on issuing a divorce in accordance with the Mosaic commandment (Mark 10:2-5). For in their view, divorce is granted only when the very love that binds the two is so shattered that it is no longer possible for the couple to relate to each other daily through the basic

⁷ So is the wording in Deut 24:1 and refer to Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 11b.

⁸ Pirkeide R. Eliezer, ch. 12 and it is transmitted in the name of Rabbi Meir of the 2nd century (Pesiqta Zutrathi).

commandment of "Love thy neighbour as thyself" (Lev. 19:18). However, it was Jesus who upheld the ideal form of marriage to govern the marital life of his followers, as it is presented in the story of creation. He also taught that the principal interpersonal commandment of love includes even one's enemies.⁹ The very mark of Christian life is to be determined by the way Jesus loved the person (John 15:12), i.e., including sinners. Thus, divorce is proscribed for his followers who must learn to love one another despite conflict and ill feeling.

Both the rabbis and Jesus maintained the equality of man and woman in marriage. They recognize their equal worth and dignity before God that elicits special respect and agapic love from one another. Both realized that the dynamics of human relationship may affect the principal bond of love between people under God. Jesus pointed at the *Haggadic* paradisaal ideal and the rabbis indicated the *Halakhic* possibility of the Biblical law. A reluctance to issue a divorce also affects rabbinic legislation that comes to restrict the persons involved in issuing it and the rabbis are also cautious about the way it is effected. For both share the common prophetic understanding of the paradigmatic story of creation. So Malachi says, "God attests between you and the wife of your youth, the wife whom you betrayed although she was your partner and the woman of your covenant. Did he not make (you) one?.... Do not betray the wife of your youth. For I hate divorce,

⁹ Matt 5:43. 44. For Jesus reads the *Hebrew Rocakha* (enemy) and not *Recakha* (neighbour). The exegetical difference is based on hearing God's word, which is written without vowels in Hebrew.

says the Lord, God of Israel" (2:14-16). It is wrong to assume that the Judaeo-Christian tradition developed a negative view due to superior male outlook¹⁰. For the particular statements, liturgical or legal formulations, should not be examined out of context. They should be viewed in light of the paradigmatic understanding of the anthropological reality that governs the mind setting of the rabbinic and early Christian works.

3. The Condition of Man and Woman after Paradise

The final paradigm on the eviction of Adam and Eve from Paradise (Gen 2:25-3:21) offers a realistic understanding of the present human condition affecting the relationship. This basic understanding results in an ambivalent attitude towards women. On the one hand, she is an equal partner who enjoys the same quality of being in God's image. On the other hand, she is a rival of man, whom she can entice and appeal to his desires. A woman¹¹ can become a help mate ('ezer) or she can be an antagonist (*kenegdo*). These two images of woman are pronounced in the wisdom books, for example in Proverbs. On one hand, she is the ideal help mate, so described in Prov 31:10-31. On the other hand, she is the enticing woman of the night

¹⁰ On woman in Judaism. refer to Susannah Heschel, *On Being a Jewish Feminist; A Reader* (New York : Schocken, 1983) and contrast the penetrating study of Menachern M. Brayer, *The Jewish Women in Rabbinic Tradition* (New York: Ktav, 1986). He also develops the theme of the three commandments principal to women, Ch. 6.

¹¹ Babylonian Talmud Yebamoth 63a; Bereshith Rabba, Ch. 17 and Pirkei de R. Eliezer, 12.

(7:8-23). This stress on the sexual drive resulting in the entrapment of man as the negative side of woman is parallel to the stress on the aggressive side of man's nature to commit murder. It appears in the following Genesis story about Cain and Abel, where the first act of homicide is described. The Biblical stories seem to relate to the very way man and woman behave. Man is driven by a more aggressive drive, while woman remains more receptive. Our concern is here with the condition of woman's life as depicted in the story of the 'Fall from Paradise.'

4. The Three Fundamental Acts of Women in the Rabbinic Tradition

The so-called curses in the account of the Fall come actually to describe the existential condition affecting the person since creation. Man and woman receive distinct curses, and although both are mortal, this curse is reserved for man alone. For woman faces this reality earlier in life by the fact of giving birth. Although it is an experience of joyous pain that only a woman can know. She can be mortally threatened by the event, especially in early times. Woman alone faces death upon giving birth to new life. The so-called curse of Eve focuses on her pain in giving birth and her very name spells out the distinct attribute of woman, becoming the "mother of all life".

Another aspect unique to the biological function of reproduction for a woman is her menstrual cycle. It indicates that conception of life within her did not take place. Significant then is the Levitical legislation that formulates the prohibition against relations with a menstruant (Lev 20:18). Only after her immersion in

living waters, symbolic of the renewal of life, can she reunite with her husband (Lev 15:28). This becomes the ongoing Jewish practice of marital purity, adopted willingly by women in accordance with Rabbinic legislation¹². It comes also to maintain the continuity of life within a scheme of opportune days for ovulation. These rules of purity affect the woman principally in relation to man, as the potential mother of life. For this reason in the rabbinic tradition a child's identity with his/her covenantal people is determined by the mother. The child may be uncircumcised or of a non-Jewish father. For it is the mother's acknowledged act of purification that prepares her for conception and marks the child's birth.

The rabbinic Mishnah (Sabbath 2,6) stipulates that "for the sake of three things, women do not die at time of giving birth; for they are cautious in observing *Hallah*, *Niddah* and *Hadlakath Haner*". *Hallah* signifies the apportionment of dough in time of baking. *Niddah* designates the rules of marital purity. *Haner* represents kindling light to usher in the Sabbath. We have already indicated how *Niddah* and *Haner* relate to the paradigmatic stories. *Hallah*, as prescribed in Num: 15:17-21; is essentially connected with the curse of Adam. "With the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread". The husband provides the food items for the wife to prepare at home. It is the wife's unique position, in the Biblical and rabbinic view, to bring blessing, joy and warmth to the family. She remains the pillar at home in raising the

¹² Compare the reference to publicly accepted norm among Jewish women, Babylonian' Talmud Niddah 37b.

children and in maintaining a religious household¹³. Thus, she is responsible for sanctification of life through the rule of purity and for welcoming the Sabbath at home through the kindling of light. In the same way, she blesses the food by apportioning the bread to share with others.

Phenomenologically, it appears that the rabbis of the first centuries had viewed these three ritualistic acts of *Hallah*, *Niddah*, and *Haner* to be principally connected with the way a woman rectifies her own condition from the time of Eve's fall from Paradise¹⁴. As the guarantor of the continuity of life, the woman enjoys greater freedom Halakhically in the observance of positive commandments. She is dismissed from performing religious acts that are bound by time¹⁵. For her, time is so occupied with the greatest task of preservation of the family and the maintenance of life at home, which her actions come to sanctify and bless. The rabbis have reserved the ritualistic acts that are determined temporally for man alone. However, sanctifying the Sabbath at meal-time can be done by women with the blessing over the wine (*Kiddush*)¹⁶. In addition, the ritualistic act to be

¹³ See on the position of women in Jewish education in the *History of Jewish Education* by Nothan Drazin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1940. ch.7).

¹⁴ See the discussion in Jerusalem Talmud Sabbath, 2.6. The Talmud refers to rectification for the Fall of Adam, who is depicted metaphorically as the blood of the world, the light of the world and the bread (*Hallah*) of the world.

¹⁵ Mishnah Kiddushin 1,7.

¹⁶ Babylonian Talmud Pesahim 106a on the Halakhic meaning of "Remember the Sabbath day" (Exod 20:13) and its implication. See Maimonides' Code. Hilkhoth Sabbath, 29,30.

performed in time, that in itself was rabbinically instituted, namely kindling the light to usher in the Sabbath, was reserved for a woman of the household.

This distinction clearly explains why man offers a daily blessing upon rising that "he was not made a woman"¹⁷. For he alone enjoys a different ritualistic role in the daily performance of temporally designated actions, such as putting on the phylacteries and donning the *tallith* (a four-cornered garment with fringes). The blessing comes to acknowledge living before God, that upon awakening generates an awareness of ritual obligations in their transpersonal relationship. A woman, however, who is free from these obligations can declare in the daily blessing that God "made her according to His will"¹⁸. For she acknowledges God's will in her life through acts of blessing, purity and sanctification, *i.e.* *Hallah*, *Niddah*, and *Hadlakath Haner*. That is why the rabbinic Midrash views the story on the union of Rebecca and Isaac (Gen 24:41-47) as the model for ideal marriage. "Isaac brought her to the tent of his mother Sarah and he married her (Hebrew: *laqah*, he took). She became his wife and he loved her" (24:47). The Midrash¹⁹ notes that after Rebecca assumed to observe the above three acts "in the tent of his mother Sarah", their sacred union of marriage was sealed in agapic love.

¹⁷ Tosefta Berakhoth 6, 18 ed. Lieberman (New York : Bloch, 1957), 1. p. 38.

¹⁸ See *Daily Prayer Book* ed. Hertz, p. 20, 21 and see note in I. Abrahams, *Companion to the Daily Prayer Book* (New York: Hermon Press, 1960), p. 17.

¹⁹ Pirkei De Rabbi Eliezer 32 and Targum Onqelos.

5. Woman and Jesus

The role of women in the ministry of Jesus and ultimately in Christian faith assumes special significance in addition to the doctrinal view of the Fall of Adam. Christian faith centres on two key events, the crucifixion and the resurrection. According to the Synoptic Gospels, both events were witnessed mainly by female disciples. They alone were present at the cross and they alone came to the tomb at Sunday dawn to find it empty²⁰. However, their testimony was not welcomed by the male disciples, for they did not believe them. It is not surprising for in the mind of the Jewish disciples the testimony of women was not acceptable, except in matters concerning their own marital fate²¹. Yet, it is their presence at the crucial events that is remembered. Moreover, women were welcomed as disciples during the ministry of Jesus. This contrasted sharply with the Jewish practice. The accepted norm in the life of religious teachers was to abstain from private and physical contact with woman²². Judaism, in the ambivalent view of woman in the Bible, restricted such association with woman and has restricted the witness of woman, for her place was at home.

In light of the above rabbinic understanding of the ritualistic role of a woman to rectify the condition effected by Eve, woman in the life of Jesus came to signify a

²⁰ See Mark 15:40, 41, 16:1, 2.

²¹ See M. Brayer, *The Jewish Women, Halakhic Status*, vol. 2. 8.

²² See Babylonian Talmud Aboda Zarah 36b. Privacy is prohibited since the Hasmonean period.

soteriological meaning. They are involved in sharing through *agape*, bringing light to the world and becoming a purificatory source of life. The Gospels seem to focus on these themes. For in the evangelists' view, redemption comes now only through Jesus, after the human predicament was determined by the Fall of Adam through Eve. In the stories about Jesus and the women, the reversion of the Fall is demonstrated and the acts of rectification are described in the three critical areas affecting women.

A woman performs the good deed of anointing him before he dies. Concerning that act, Jesus says: "What she has done, a beautiful act will be told also in remembrance of her" (Matt 26:106, 13). This beautiful act manifests *agape*. For this reason, the Gospel of Luke (7:47) depicts the redemptive condition of this anointing by a woman in a parallel tradition. "Her many sins must have been forgiven, or she would not shown great love". Such great love is *agape*.

Women are present at the tomb of Jesus at Sunday dawn. They come at a time when light breaks out and they give witness to the redemptive light. The Gospels portray Jesus typologically as the light of the world (Matt 4:16; Jn 8:12). For this role of the women, who greet Jesus as the groom, is transmitted in the parable of the Kingdom (Matt 25:1-10). They assume the role of preparing the light in welcoming Jesus as the resurrected Messiah. He is described as the groom, a matrimonial expression of psycho-dramatic speech of the Prophets. Thus Isaiah (61:10-62:5) speaks of the future final redemption.

A woman is with a flow of blood for twelve years and a girl of twelve dies prior to her first menstrual flow. Both are restored to life of fertility by Jesus (Mark 5:22-44). Both are purified to bear children again as the renewal of life is made possible through Him.

The women are so associated with Jesus; for they are caught up the process of rectification, from the Gospels' perspective. When women enter his life, they enter into a life of sharing in the performance of a good deed like the act of *Hallah*. They prepare the light and are witnesses to its eternal meaning. They are purified now by faith to enjoy a renewal (life). For these women are involved in rectification after the Fall of Eve when the period of redemption begins.

The understanding is explicitly preserved in the Gnostic tradition. The Gospel of Thomas (*logion* 22) records a saying of Jesus on rectification "when you make the male and the female into a single one, so that male will not be male and the female not be female... then shall you enter the Kingdom". The Gospel ends climactically (*logion* 144) with this significant theme²³. Peter wanted to send Mary away "because women are not worthy of life. Jesus said: See, I shall guide her so that I will make her male. For every women who makes herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven".

²³ See Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random, 1979), who draws parallel to feminine liberation themes today. See also M. W. Mayor, "Making Mary male: the categories 'male' and 'female' in the Gospel of Thomas". *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985) p. 554-570.

This understanding seems to be shared by the canonical Gospels who relate the birth of Jesus with reference to Mary His mother. She was a virgin, who became a purificatory vessel for the very conception of the Messiah. The Gospels intend to tell us something special about the role of woman in light of rectification. Jesus born out of Mary, who was not affected by the curse of Eve, became the heavenly bread, the light of the world and the pure one. For in their Christological view, Jesus himself came to reverse the role of Adam.