

UNIT 3

WOMEN IN ISRAEL

I/ The Biblical Ideal

Genesis 1:27	So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.
Genesis 2:24–25	Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.
Exodus 20:12	“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.
Leviticus 19:3	Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father, and you shall keep my Sabbaths: I am the LORD your God.
Proverbs 6:20	My son, keep your father’s commandment, and forsake not your mother’s teaching.
Proverbs 18:22	He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the LORD.
Proverbs 19:26	He who does violence to his father and chases away his mother is a son who brings shame and reproach.
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Proverbs 23:22, 25	Listen to your father who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old...Let your father and mother be glad; let her who bore you rejoice.
Song of Songs 6:3	I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine; he grazes among the lilies.

“Women are more like men than anything else in the world. They are human beings.” –Dorothy L. Sayers

“Eve was not taken out of Adam's head to top him, neither out of his feet to be trampled on by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected by him, and near his heart to be loved by him.” –Matthew Henry

II/ Patriarchy?

III/ No Female Priests?

IV/ Polygamy?

CASE STUDY: Deuteronomy 21:15–17

“[15] If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him children, and if the firstborn son belongs to the unloved, [16] then on the day when he assigns his possessions as an inheritance to his sons, he may not treat the son of the loved as the firstborn in preference to the son of the unloved, who is the firstborn, [17] but he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the firstfruits of his strength. The right of the firstborn is his.

V/ The Bride-Price?

VI/ Sexual Violence?

Deuteronomy 22:23–29

[23] “If there is a betrothed virgin, and a man meets her in the city and lies with her, [24] then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones, the young woman because she did not cry for help though she was in the city, and the man because he violated his neighbor’s wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

[25] “But if in the open country a man meets a young woman who is betrothed, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. [26] But you shall do nothing to the young woman; she has committed no offense punishable by death. For this case is like that of a man attacking and murdering his neighbor, [27] because he met her in the open country, and though the betrothed young woman cried for help there was no one to rescue her.

[28] “If a man meets a virgin who is not betrothed, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are found, [29] then the man who lay with her shall give to the father of the young woman fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife, because he has violated her. He may not divorce her all his days.

Deuteronomy 21:10–14

[10] “When you go out to war against your enemies, and the LORD your God gives them into your hand and you take them captive, [11] and you see among the captives a beautiful woman, and you desire to take her to be your wife, [12] and you bring her home to your house, she shall shave her head and pare her nails. [13] And she shall take off the clothes in which she was captured and shall remain in your house and lament her father and her mother a full month. After that you may go in to her and be her husband, and she shall be your wife. [14] But if you no longer delight in her, you shall let her go where she wants. But you shall not sell her for money, nor shall you treat her as a slave, since you have humiliated her. (ESV)

Texts That (Allegedly) Promote Female Inferiority

Now it's time to look at some of those potentially embarrassing passages that put down women.

The Trial of Jealousy: Numbers 5

Let's summarize the theme of this text. If a man suspected his wife of adultery, he could bring her before the priest to accuse her. In this case, two or three witnesses weren't available (Deut. 17:6-7); the only "witness" was the husband's suspicion that his wife had been cheating on him. Critics charge that this would have been a terrifying ordeal: a cheating wife's abdomen would swell and her thigh would shrivel after drinking "the water of bitterness." Critics raise the question, "Why couldn't *a woman* bring her husband before the priest if she suspected that *he* was guilty of adultery?"

As it turns out, critics have chosen a poor text to illustrate oppression of women. For one thing, consider the context, which gives us every reason to think that this law applied to *men* as well. Before and after this passage, the legislation concerns both men and women: "Israelites" (Num. 5:2 NIV), "a man or woman" (Num. 5:6), "a man or a woman" (Num. 6:2). It wasn't just the husband's prerogative to call for this special trial; the wife could as well.

Second, this priestly court was actually arranged for the protection and defense of women, not to humiliate them before proud husbands or prejudiced mobs.

This law protected women from a husband's violent rage or arbitrary threat of divorce to get rid of his wife cheaply. And if the woman happened to be guilty, then she'd *rightly* be terrified by a supernatural sign affecting her body. In fact, as with the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in the early church (Acts 5), the Israelites would have a sobering warning regarding God's attitude toward adultery.

Some critics have compared this event to "the River Ordeal" practiced in non-Israelite ancient Near Eastern cultures (Babylon, Assyria, Sumer). How did this work? When criminal evidence was inconclusive, the accused would be thrown into a bitumen well—that is, a natural petroleum tar commonly used as a sealant and adhesive and as mortar for bricks. In Sumer, this tar "river" was the abode of the god *Id* (which means "river"). Sometimes these "jumpers" and "plungers," who went "into the god," were overcome by the liquid and its toxic fumes; most survived (they were "spat out" by the river god), but it was still a nightmare to endure. If one was overcome by the "river," he was guilty since his death was the river god's "judgment." If he survived, he was innocent and the accuser was guilty of making false charges.

There's a big difference between this "ordeal" and Numbers 5, though. The river ordeal was the general treatment for inconclusive criminal evidence *across the board*. In the Mosaic law, however, a charge couldn't be established unless two or three witnesses were available; otherwise, the prosecuting side didn't have a case—end of story. (In the unique trial of jealousy in Numbers 5, though witnesses weren't available, it's understandable that certain clues might tip off a husband or a wife to something fishy going on with a spouse—strange behavior, irrational reactions, breaking out into sudden sweats, or simply the husband's belief that he wasn't involved in his wife's conception of a child.)

Second, if the accused couldn't swim and get out of the tar, he looked guilty even if he were innocent! Not so if an Israelite wife (or husband) was falsely accused. A telltale supernatural sign was provided to prove guilt. Third, the river ordeal assumed guilt until innocence was proven; in the trial of jealousy, the court assumed innocence unless guilt was exposed by a divinely given miracle.

Impurity at Childbirth: Leviticus 12:1-8

This passage, some claim, implies female inferiority: the woman is ceremonially impure for forty days (7 + 33 days) after giving birth to a *boy* but eighty days (14 + 66 days) after giving birth to a *girl*. Surely this reveals a lower social status for females.

Again, not so fast! Various sensible explanations have been proposed. Some scholars argue that more days for the female actually indicate a kind of protection of females rather than a sign of inferiority. Others suggest the motive may be to preserve Israel's religious distinctiveness over against Canaanite religion, in which females engaged in religious sexual rites in their temples.

In general, a Jewish mother's lengthier separation from the tabernacle (or temple) after giving birth to a girl made a theological and ethical statement. In ancient Near Eastern polytheism, the strong emphasis was on fertility rites, cult prostitution, and the dramatization of the births of gods and goddesses. The distance between the birth event and temple worship—especially with baby girls—was carefully maintained.

Another plausible explanation focuses on a natural source of uncleanness—namely, the flow of blood. Verse 5 refers to the reason: it's because of "the blood of her purification." The mother experiences vaginal bleeding at birth. Yet

such vaginal bleeding is common in newborn girls as well, due to the withdrawal of the mother's estrogen when the infant girl exits the mother's womb. So we have *two* sources of ritual uncleanness with a girl's birth but *only one* with a boy's.

Notice also that when the time of purification is over, whether "for a son or for a daughter," the mother is to bring the identical offering (whether a lamb, pigeon, or turtledove); this is to be a *purification* offering (12:6)—not technically a sin offering—and its purpose is to take away the ritual (not moral) impurity.

Levirate Marriage: Deuteronomy 25:5-10

If a man died without a son to carry on the family name, then his unmarried brother could marry his widow in order to sustain the family name. Legally, the firstborn son from this union was officially the deceased husband's son. Since the first husband was deceased, this wasn't considered incest (sexual relations with an in-law). The term *levirate* comes from the Latin word for "husband's brother" or "brother-in-law," *levir*. This legislation sounds quite strange to modern ears, and it certainly does reflect a patriarchal background. A similar practice was carried out by the Hittites. Their law stated that if a man has a wife and then dies, his brother must take the widow as his wife.

While levirate marriage was an admittedly patriarchal arrangement, we should keep certain things in mind. First, if the widow did marry her deceased husband's brother, this would help keep the widow's property (which she may have brought to the marriage) within the family. Marrying *outside* the family meant running the risk of losing it. Second, although the man could refuse, this was discouraged. And if he refused to comply, the widow herself could exert her role and her rights in the shaming "sandal ceremony." So the widow had a certain natural advantage in this arrangement.

It's instructive to place this levirate scenario next to the story of Zelophehad's daughters (Num. 27:1-11). In the ancient Near East, there existed patriarchal laws of primogeniture—the firstborn's right to receive property and inherit family headship from the father. Deuteronomy 21:17 reveals that this meant a double portion for the firstborn over his brothers. Yet primogeniture is subtly overturned at various points in the Old Testament. Though Mosaic legislation operated within patriarchal structures of the ancient Near East, the Old Testament reveals a certain dynamism and openness to change. The daughters of the deceased, sonless Zelophehad appealed to Moses regarding the male-favoring inheritance laws. In light of the women's particular circumstances, Moses took this matter before God, and the daughters' appeal was granted.

When humans sought to change social structures in light of a deeper moral insight and a determination to move toward the ideal, we witness an adaptation of ancient Near Eastern structures. Even earlier in the Old Testament, various narratives subtly attack the primogeniture arrangement; the younger regularly supersedes the elder: Abel over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Joseph/Judah over Reuben. This biblical sampling reveals a subversive and more democratic ethic; though not ideal, it's a drastic improvement over other ancient Near Eastern laws.

Your Neighbor's Wife: Exodus 20:17

"You shall not covet" is the tenth commandment. It prohibits longing for what rightfully belongs to another. What's included in this prohibition? A neighbor's house, wife, male or female servant, ox, donkey, and "anything that belongs to your neighbor." Critics complain that a wife is unflatteringly and inappropriately viewed as property—in the same category as a neighbor's house, ox, or donkey!

One big problem: just a few commands earlier (Exod. 20:12), children are commanded to give their mother honor *equal* to that of the father. A mother was to have equal authority over her children. (Check out the string of verses cited earlier in this chapter.) Another big problem: women in Israel weren't saleable items like houses, oxen, or donkeys. A further revealing fact is that in other cultures in the ancient Near East, the mother was often under the control of the son. Yet the Mosaic law presents a striking contrast in this regard. Leviticus 19:3 commands a son to revere mother and father alike—and the mother is even listed first.

Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?*