

Biblical Women—Jewish Literary and Religious Ideals

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The Basis of an Approach

During the past two decades the new awareness of women has developed from a diffuse protest to conscientious and ambitious research. The fact that the new wave of awareness at least to some extent was initiated by Jewish women is not a unique phenomenon in Jewish history.

On account of their position Jews have always strongly identified with different revolutionary movements and stood up for leadership in them. Jewish women have experienced themselves as a double minority because their international Jewish world has not developed from patriarchalism to wider perspectives as rapidly as their external non-Jewish society.

The feminist movement had its stronghold in the middle class women of the United States. Betty Friedan projected her analysis of the feminine mystique on the semi-secularised Jewish middle class women, a parallel phenomenon to Freud's generalisations based on his Jewish patients in bourgeois Vienna. Freud's limitations have been debated and Friedan's universality questioned.¹ Is it possible to generalise on the basis of such a special minority group? Without answering the question it can, however, be stated that this small very special group called the Jews has ever since the introduction of monotheism had an impact on its environment which far surpasses its domains.

The new feminine perspective has also reached religious studies. During the first years neo-feminist authors accused Judeo-Christian culture for having introduced and fostered pa-

triarchalism, i.e. a system based on masculine values. Western culture was described as divided into Technological and Aesthetic Modes by Shulamith Firestone, herself Jewish, and one of the pioneer theoreticians in the new feminist movement. According to Firestone women have been excluded from the Technological Mode.²

The debate has advanced from accusations to a more profound analysis of western culture. The analysis has become a special field of theological research focusing on the feminine perspective. This research is called feminist theology. According to the Danish theologian Lone Sjørup the aim of feminist theology is to study and criticise the history of the origin and impact of Christianity in view of women's position and to study its dogmas and ethical representation in order to disclose theological and philosophical concepts which are discriminating to women. It can in its next phase also formulate an independent theology, Sjørup says.

According to Sjørup there are four elements in feminist theology as well as in other studies with a feminine perspective. It criticises existing theological research for having oppressed women by making them invisible and for having pursued concepts, categories and generalisations with masculine norms. Feminist theology collects empirical knowledge about women and it is developing a theory on the character of women's oppression and thus also the conditions of liberation. Its basis is

praxis, i.e. it compares existing theological research with its practical consequences. The sphere of experience is the total situation of women. Thus it exceeds the traditional ranges of theology. Like all women's studies it is interdisciplinary and must hence cooperate with and use scientific methods from other disciplines, Sjørup says.³

Interdisciplinary Women's Studies

The first concept in Sjørup's definition is interdisciplinary in view of women's studies in general and feminist theology as part of it. Sjørup's appeal for cooperation between different disciplines and the use of different methods in feminist theology makes it possible also for non-theologians to deal with subjects which traditionally have belonged to the field of theology. It is a subject of debate when a literary historian or a historian treats a biblical subject, but it is no longer a unique phenomenon.

Lacking Paradigms for Jewish Feminist Research

The other specification, the use of Christian norms in reference to feminist theology is problematic to the Jewish scholar. If feminist theology is defined on a Christian basis it excludes fundamental patterns in the debate on Judeo-Christian culture. A Jewish scholar cannot accept a theoretical framework which ignores Judaism as an independent concept with its own value system. Christian feminist theology is thus useless except in general projects with general scientific methods.

Without going into detail it seems that Christian feminist theology has adopted traditional anti-semitic clichés partly from Christian theology and partly from the pseudo-Christian debate that has been pursued in the feminist movement. Two examples: The polarised debate on the impact of Judaism in Jesus' activities as concerns women and the introduc-

tion of monotheistic patriarchalism by the Jews to replace the worship of the Great Mother (i.e. matriarchalism).

Letty Cottin Pogrebin writes in an article on anti-semitism and feminism how Judaism has become analogous to women's discrimination. The claim that Jesus was a feminist omits all discrimination against women which has taken place in the name of Christianity, such as the lack of female apostles, opposition against female priests and patriarchal liturgy etc. Letty Cottin Pogrebin gives as examples of new anti-Jewish clichés her confrontation with a Christian theologian, who said that the Jews had killed the pagan worship of women and replaced it with the patriarchal God of Abraham. "We 'Christ-killers' had become 'God-dess-killers'", she says. Another example of the same theme is Elisabeth Hermodsson's thesis that Jesus should be considered a counter-figure to the patriarchal God, the Jewish Father, and instead be seen as the son of the Holy Mother analogous to the Great Mother. She also says that the idea of equality between all human beings is based on the matriarchal system whereas the patriarchal (i.e. the Jewish) system has created hierarchy and class distinction.⁴

Letty Cottin Pogrebin's examples show how easy it is to use distorted and simplified Jewish concepts to polarise the debate in an anti-Jewish direction. These simplifications omit the influence of Hellenism with e.g. Plato and Aristotle and also the fact that Jews and Christians do not interpret the Hebrew texts identically. Jewish texts are not seen as separate entities but as first drafts to Christian experience, if at all. These simplifications under pseudo-scientific pretexts are frequent on other levels as well. Anti-Jewish scholars do not consider that Judaism is not a monolithic religion although it is not divided into churches. There are no monolithic concepts about women in Judaism, but only divergent interpretations.

Anti-Jewish Biblical expressions are quoted without reference to their historical or theological contexts. Paul's negative opinions on women are connected to his Jewish origin and his positive activity to Christian influence. A more moderate feminist theological concept ac-

knowledges Jesus' Jewish origin, but as a comparison in order to assert Jewish anti-female opinions it uses Talmud and not Torah. It should be kept in mind that there is no conformist view on women in Talmud which moreover is not comparable with Jesus' activities even as to its timing. Talmud was not finished (if it can be considered finished ever) until the sixth century C.E. Not even the Rabbinate was created as an institution until after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. and it took decades for the Rabbis to agree and represent more than a minority opinion within Judaism.

Jewish women cannot accept such populist quasi-theological argumentation based on anti-semitic sources. The new polarisations are in fact old anti-semitic clichés in a new progressive cover. Jewish scholars and feminists are thus facing a dilemma. The new feminist theology is partly based on fixed opinions on Judaism and cannot be used in Jewish research.

If these paradigms cannot be used, where can we find new ones? The fact that Jewish women have had the opportunity of studying Jewish sources only for a short period of time gives Christian feminists and scholars the front position. The new Christian egalitarian theology which is supposed to form the basis of future research has adopted old anti-semitic concepts from the patristic tradition, Martin Luther and modern theology. Jewish scholars must thus first develop the paradigms of their own argumentation in order to progress.

The Conflict of Jewish Feminine Images

Blu Greenberg offers four principles for a theology of woman as Jew:

1) A woman of faith has the same innate vision and existential longing for a redemptive-covenantal reality as a man of faith. She has the same ability and need to be in the presence of God alone and within the context of the community. Such a woman is sufficiently mature to accept the responsibilities for this relationship and the rights that flow from these

responsibilities. If these spiritual gifts do not flow naturally from her soul, she can be educated and uplifted in them in much the same fashion that Jewish men are.

2) Jewish women, as much as men, have the mental and emotional capacities to deal directly with the most sacred Jewish texts and primary sources. Jewish women are capable of interpreting tradition based on sources. They can be involved in the decision-making process that grows out of the blending of inherited tradition with contemporary needs.

3) Some women, as some men, are capable of functioning in the positions of authority related to the religious and physical survival of the Jewish people.

4) Women as a class should not find themselves in discriminatory positions in personal situations. In such matters as marriage and divorce, a woman should have no less control or personal freedom than a man, nor should she be subject to abuse resulting from the restriction of freedom.⁵

These general and fairly easily acceptable principles have turned out astonishingly difficult to implement. Blu Greenberg says that Halacha limits women's activities. In some cases, she says, Halacha hampers women's development both as Jews and as human beings.

Greenberg is, however, loyal to her fundamental Jewish religious principles and says that Halacha in fact contains the prerequisites of equality. The Ten Commandments and Jewish ethics contain high moral values which should not be ignored. How is it possible that Judaism with its highly developed ethical values cannot accept basic feminist principles?

Greenberg's explanation is that it depends on an insufficiently developed tradition, the traditional division of labour which all known civilisations have enhanced. In a civilisation where the primary needs could not be surpassed by any other needs for the cause of survival and where the primary functions did not mean discrimination the division of labour was understandable.

But Greenberg also asserts that in a tradition where all interpretation has been pursued by men and where hence the grossest abuse

of women could have been the normative pattern, it did not appear. On the contrary, in the rabbinical history of tradition one can find constant sympathy and concern for women.

Today when the external conditions have changed women no longer need the excessive concern which the old interpreters of Halacha represent. Women have knowledge and capacity to find out by themselves and interpret their faith as well as resources to share the task of interpretation.⁶

According to Greenberg it is thus not necessary to abandon Halacha in order to make women equal in Judaism. The basic prerequisites are already there. The question is to find them.

Greenberg interprets the task of Halacha in accordance with the Jewish orthodox tradition that she represents. Halacha is to her not only a collection of laws, it is a way of life. Halacha gives to the Jews directives for every aspect of life, also for external and internal relations to God and other people.

Contrary to Jewish fundamentalists Greenberg does not consider Halacha perfect, only "nearly" so. Greenberg states that Halacha reflects reality, different realities in different times. Halacha is a dynamic system constantly in development in order to give the Jews the basis of survival. Self-evidently survival here means both physical and religious continuity.⁷

Greenberg's analysis does not give the answer to the historic question: If Halacha has been a dynamic system, when did it cease to develop and become conservative, even reactionary in view of the status of women? And another question which follows is: If Halacha has stagnated, can it continue to maintain the function it has had for the Jews? The latter question is outside the framework and competence of this paper and will not be dealt with in detail.

The first rather provocative question will not be answered directly either. But there are nevertheless certain historical indications which can no longer be ignored and which Jewish scholars have discovered and asserted. One is the fact that the division of religious obligations which both the tradition and Halacha have developed no longer serves its purpose. It

has led to direct discrimination in some vital questions such as divorce, participation in religious courts and decision-making in religious issues in general. Women are not "counted", even if they have reached the highest positions in society, even led the Jewish state.

Judaism is not only Halacha, but also traditions based on Halacha with their roots in Midrash. Judaism is also Aggada. Examples of aggadic narratives can be found in Talmud (both in Mishna and Gemara) and also in the collections called Ein Yaacov in Hebrew and Tzena Urena in Yiddish. The further they deviate from the Bible, the more evident is the impact of period-fixed culture and woman becomes the Other, to use the Jewish theologian Judith Plaskow's term, who borrowed it from Simone de Beauvoir.⁸

A simple conclusion is that in order to create justice for women one should go back to the origin, to the Bible, to Torah, to the whole collection of books and narratives called Tanach. In order to understand Tanach, i.e. both exegetic techniques and also more literary methods can be used (Close Reading). The exegetic method is based on comparative texts, whereas Close Reading is based on authorised texts.⁹

From a literary and feminist point of view it is obvious that Tanach has undergone the same process as all other Jewish literature. The scriptures that we today consider authorised are a selection, the result of a process and in order to understand them we must accept that they reflect development both in culture and society. Attempts to prove by means of data technique that they were written by the same person and within a very limited period of time may prove as fruitful to the literary point of view as has been the everlasting debate on who wrote Shakespeare's plays.

For Tanach as well as for all other literature the fact remains that the further we proceed from the origin the more evident become the differences in attitudes towards women and men, the double standards.

For a fruitful analysis of the position of women and solutions for increased equality we shall thus go back to Tanach without considering Talmud and the younger aggadic and halachic literature. In order to develop a Jewish

theology that satisfies women today we shall hence skip thousands of years of development.

No, it is not as simple as that. Parellel to original research we must also study other Jewish material in order to find new pro-feminine interpretations in accordance with the pluralistic tradition that Judaism offers. Talmud, Rashi and other Jewish theological literature is in fact protocols of discussions, conclusions of debate. The talmudic method is based on questions and counter-questions. Today with the increased awareness of women, also women master it and contribute to it. The Jewish debate is never finished. In our time it has found new dimensions, e.g. as a discussion of the position of women.

Biblical Images of Women Versus Jewish Law

The number of women mentioned in Tanach is smaller than that of the men. Children are in general mentioned as the offspring of their fathers. Only for special reasons is the mother mentioned by name. Mothers and daughters of some important men are mentioned if they have a special function which is also the case with some wives and concubines.

From a literary point of view it is natural that already in view of literary economy persons important to the theme or the intrigue are emphasised. The question to be answered is whether the persons mentioned are representative of their culture and society or if they are a tiny élite. It is a literary problem still very much debated also in general terms but as concerns the Bible it might not be a major problem after all. Let us put the hypothesis that all persons in the Bible are exeptional but simultaneously also representative examples. It is a historic paradox, if such exist. But if we consider that narratives in the Bible are moralities with a specific purpose it becomes more understandable. In order to get the message through examples are needed, both idealised and realistic.

One of the major discussions in literary

research with a feminine perspective has been the existence of double standards in the value system for men and women and the fact that for every positive female image there is a negative one which seems to prevail in society, history and literature. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim that the basic images of literature have been created by men, that images of women are moulded by the same male principles the main female images being the angel and the monster.¹⁰ Thus follows that the women in Tanach are quite remarkable characters in view of their civilisation, probably even more so than the men. It means that in order to be included in the Bible the women had to distinguish themselves more than the men both in the positive and the negative sense.

It has been pointed out in this paper that Tanach is not a homogenous collection of texts in the literary sense. It describes civilisations, interpretations of the law and events which focus on a variety of issues in the course of time. Also the attitudes towards women differ. The development in Tanach is towards an increasing passivisation and mythification of women. One example is the image of Esther. In Megilat Esther her image is that of a human being with fears, anxieties and doubts, virtues and vices, which all culminate in a personal triumph. In the Apocrypha Esther is more an instrument in God's hand, more passive, more mythical. She has lost her characteristic of personal initiative.

There is also a clear conflict between the laws and the narratives of the Bible. According to the traditional interpretation of the laws the passive role of the women is emphasised. In biblical society the men were active and had the power of decision. The women were hidden from the eyes of strangers. When guests ask for Sarah, Abraham answers that she is in her tent.¹¹ But these women behind the tent-cloth exercised power and influence which the narrator did not find important enough to mention.

Despite all this Tanach tells about active courageous women who are even ready for armed battle when needed. It is also to be noticed that the women approach God in the same direct manner as the men. God is also the God of women.

What does it mean? Does it mean that able women could display their capacity in spite of fettering laws and traditions? Does it mean that biblical narratives are viewed in a way to show male dominance only? Does it mean that women were not so ignored as the biblical narrators want us to understand? Or does it mean that the Bible is written by men who had little concern for the just contribution of women?

Biblical Images as a Basis of a New View on Women

The biblical account of the creation has been used as an argument for women's submissiveness. But according to Jewish belief it is the basis of equality between man and woman. Arguments used against it are the notions of Adam being created before Eve, Eve being created from Adam's rib and Eve having led Adam to forbidden amusements. But there are Jewish interpretations pointing out the opposite.

Eve and Adam's rib: According to Jewish interpretation it is important that Eve was created from an organ which was closest to the heart, not e.g. from a foot or a hand. God created woman and man in His image. They were given the same prerequisites and woman was further bestowed with the task of bearing life.

The question of who was created first can also be discussed. Adam is the name of man, Adama in Hebrew means soil, Adom is Hebrew for red. The soil is red in Israel, but red is also the colour of life and light. According to the account of creation God created light and dark, land and water before man. It means that a female creature Adama was created before man Adam.¹² Who came first is not of crucial importance, but decisive is that both man and woman were created in God's image.

Ish and Isha: Ish in Hebrew is man and isha woman. Esh in Hebrew is fire. These words have the letters aleph and shin in common, i.e. fire, and the two remaining letters jod from ish and hei from isha are an acronym for God. There is thus God's fire in both woman

and man. They are equal to God.¹³

God is male and the imagery of God is masculine. According to recent research there is also feminine imagery of deity in Jewish theology.¹⁴ But it is again not of crucial importance to debate if God is male or female. In Judaism God is a spirit with both male and female characteristics (if such a pragmatic division is really necessary). The question of Mother God is thus less relevant for Jews. Moreover the Bible gives innumerable examples of how women have approached God directly, independently without male advisers or intermediaries. This is a dichotomy compared to the submissive position of woman in Jewish society. Woman is good enough for God but not good enough for man. Who is right, man-made society or God who is superior to the system?

One of the most flagrant examples of this dichotomy or more precisely the idealisation of women versus real women are the female images of Proverbs 31:10ff and the woman of the Song of Songs. The ideal woman is the Eshet hayil whose virtues are enumerated in the Proverbs. Rabbi Julia Neuberger has pointed out that this woman of valour contains a lot of sarcasm. Which woman dares claim to be the perfect woman of Eshet hayil. This idealised picture of woman is the creation of the author's mind, not a real woman.¹⁵ It is thus not a coincidence that she is anonymous, nameless, without identity, not of flesh and blood but stuffed with ideals and myths which no human creature can live up to.

As a contrast to Eshet hayil stands the loving woman of the Song of Songs. The dialogue between the two lovers is pursued on an equal basis and is in fact a monologue, probably written by a woman from a woman's point of view.¹⁶ The imagery is sex-identified but does not contain depreciation of either party. The description of emotions is passionate and both the man and the woman express their feelings freely. The concept of God, frequent in the text, is emphasised through eroticism which is experienced as a divine creation. The poem does not contain sharp polarisations between sin and delight or remorse. It is a homage to love on equal conditions and therefore important to the self-esteem of women.¹⁷

Biblical Women—from Matriarchs to Disobedient Queens

The importance of Vashti, King Ahasuerus' first wife, who was expatriated and replaced by Esther in the Book of Esther, has been pointed out by several scholars, both Jewish and non-Jewish.¹⁸ Vashti has become the counter-image of Esther, the traditional Jewish heroine. Vashti is seen as the warning example of what happens to a woman who stands up against her husband and master. On the other hand her traditional image has undergone considerable modification in recent research and she is also seen as the female counterpart to Mordocai. Mary Gendler points out that Vashti in fact shows the same characteristics as Mordocai, the hero, i.e. dignity and independence, but in Vashti's case they are considered negative values because she is a woman.¹⁹

Another interesting pair of opposites is naturally Eve and Lilith, mentioned in the Alphabet of Ben Sira. Her struggle for equality is punished and she too (cf. Vashti) is replaced by a more obedient woman, Eve, as Adam's mate.²⁰

There are matriarchs like Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel in the Bible, all childless until high age, a strange ideal for the Jewish people! There are also manipulating women using women's traditional means like Jael and Bathsheba. And there are nice women like Hannah.

There are only two women who have a book named after them in Tanach, Esther and Ruth. The relationship between Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth is not the commonplace cliché image so often viewed in literature.

There are also women prophets in Tanach, Mirjam, Deborah, Hulda and a nameless prophetess.²¹ The most interesting character in view of literary development is Deborah, whose value and position as a prophet and judge has been depreciated by Jewish male interpreters throughout the ages. Adin Steinsaltz offers one of the most balanced interpretations calling Deborah a political prophetess and recognising her personal qualities as her own without attaching them to common concepts of women's behaviour.²² Compared to the classic

Louis Ginzberg he shows a modified attitude. Ginzberg displays the traditional attitude to independent women in saying about Deborah: "Prophetess that she was, she was yet subject to the frailties of her sex."²³ This is a reflection of the Talmudic interpretation of Deborah.

Conclusion

In order to enable Jewish women to remain within Halacha new angles of research and thought must be accepted which include the women's point of view. Jewish women are obliged to return to biblical sources for ideals and images as it seems that the further the female images in Judaism deviate from the biblical image the more they reflect depreciation of women in historical time. These distorted fixed female images cannot be accepted by Jewish women of today.

NOTES

1. See **Betty Friedan**: *The Feminine Mystique*, Dell, New York 1982 (1963).
2. **Shulamith Firestone**: *The Dialectic of Sex*, The Women's Press, London 1979 (1970), pp. 166-170.
3. **Lone Sjørup**: *Kvindeteologi—en introduktion*, *Fønix* (3) 1980, København 1980, pp. 185-186.
4. **Letty Cottin Pogrebin**: *Anti-Semitism in the Women's Movement*, Ms, June 1982, p. 70; **Elisabeth Hermodsson**: *Vems son var Jesus?* *Dagens Nyheter*, 25.6. 1985, p. 5.
5. **Blu Greenberg**: *On Women and Judaism—a View from Tradition*, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia 1981, pp. 39-40.
6. *id.*, p. 40.
7. *id.*, p. 43.
8. **Simone de Beauvoir**: *Le deuxième sexe*.

Gallimard, Paris 1949, Introduction.

9. For a closer study on the Close Reading method see **Michael Fishbane**: *Text and Texture—Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts*, Schocken Books, New York 1979.

10. **Sandra M. Gilbert** and **Susan Gubar**: *The Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven and London University Press, Second Printing, New Haven & London 1980, p. 16.

11. Gen. 18:9.

12. Gen. 1. The Hebrew Bible gives Aretz for land and Adama has the meaning of soil.

13. For a somewhat different interpretation see Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation by **Phyllis Trible** in **Elizabeth Koltun** (ed.): *The Jewish Woman. New Perspectives*, Schocken Books, New York 1976, pp. 221ff.

14. See **Rita M. Gross**: *Steps toward Feminine Imagery of Deity in Jewish Theology* in **Susannah Heschel** (ed.): *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, Schocken Books, New York 1983, pp. 234ff.

15. **Julia Neuberger**: *Women in Judaism: the Fact and the Fiction* in **Pat Holden** (ed.): *Women's Religious Experience: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, Croom Helm and Barnes & Noble Books, London, Canberra and Totowa (New Jersey) 1983, pp. 133–134.

16. This fact was pointed out to me by Raymond Westbrook, Lecturer in Ancient Law at the Hebrew University (Jerusalem) during an interview for the Finnish Radio in Jerusalem in January 1986.

17. Similar ideas have been expressed by **Phyllis Trible**, *op.cit.*, pp. 228ff.

18. See e.g. **Karin Friis Plum**: *Kvindehistorie og kvindehistorier i det gamle testamente*, Hans Reitzel, København 1983, pp. 72–73;

Mary Gendler: *The Restoration of Vashti* in **Koltun**, *op.cit.*, pp. 241–246; **Susan Weidman Schneider**: *Jewish and Female*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1984, pp. 105–106.

19. **Gendler**, *op.cit.*, pp. 246–247.

20. **Aviva Cantor**: *The Lilith Question* in **Heschel**, *op.cit.*, pp. 40ff.

21. Talmud names seven, but modern theology recognises four. See **A. Cohen**: *Everyman's Talmud*, Schocken Books, New York 1975, p.

123.

22. **Adin Steinsaltz**: *Biblical Images. Men and Women of the Book*, transl. Yehuda Hanegebi and Yehudit Keshet, Basic Books, New York 1984, pp. 99–105.

23. **Louis Ginzberg**: *Legends of the Bible. The Jewish Publication Society of America*, Philadelphia 1979, p. 520.

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