



The Status of Women in the Old Testament

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Abstract

The Bible, the holy scripture of Christianity, has exerted a profound influence on Western society. It is the resource of discrimination against women. This thesis mainly focuses on the status of women in the Old Testament. It analyses Hebrew women's miserable lives and low status through the illustrations from the Old Testament.

Key words: Old testament; Women; Status; Subordinate; Misery

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The Bible, the holy scripture of Christianity, has a profound influence on the whole world, especially on the Western society. It possesses an important place in the history of the world's culture, for it has been translated into nearly 1800 languages and its distribution is the largest one in the world. Both the Christians and many non-Christians read it for different purposes. The former ones read it as the scripture while the latter ones tend to acquire some knowledge of different aspects, such as philosophy, ethnics, history, literature, art. From the very beginning of the holy Bible, women were discriminated. It has laid the theoretical basis for the discrimination against women. Therefore, this thesis will mainly focus on the Hebrew women's status in the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew women's lives are miserable and their social status is extremely low. But to a certain degree, it can be said that their position has an

attribute of duality. They are secondary and obedient to men. Meanwhile they are indispensable to both family and society. At the very beginning in the Old Testament, women are defined as a companion of men. In genesis, 'The LORD god formed man from the dust of the ground.' And then he put the man-Adam in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner. Thus he took one of his ribs and made it into a woman-Eve.' Women were regarded as the very person who caused human's sorrowful fate. In Genesis, Eve is the first to disobey the LORD God's orders. She was tricked by the serpent and ate the fruit. Then she gave the fruit from the same tree to Adam and he ate it. As a result, human was driven out of Eden. Although women are biased, they are indispensable since their appearance. A family or a society without women is incomplete. In Hebrew society, women play different roles in family and society.

First, women are a companion and a helper of men. In Genesis, we can see this from the purpose of God's creation of women. The LORD God wants to find a helper as Adam's partner. In the Old Testament, there is some appraisal of wives which describes what women do in order to be a capable wife (Proverbs, 31, pp.10-31). In this ideal picture, the wife is the defender of family's interest, whom the hearts of husband trust in. She works at home and offers great help to her husband. She spins and weaves, makes clothes, administers her servant-girls, manages the housework, and so on. This is the very capable wife that a man seeks for, but it is still a good reflection of women's helping and accompanying role.

Second, women are regarded as a tool for reproduction in the Old Testament. It was still at the end of the primitive society or in the slavery one. The power of a country and the prosperity of a clan depend on its population. Like in any ancient civilization, admiration for reproduction holds a quite important place in early Hebrew culture. In the Old Testament, God blesses people

with the words like “be fruitful and multiply”, “make your offspring like the dust of the earth and the stars in the sky.” So do people to each other with words of the same kind. Therefore, women’s capability of reproduction is a key yardstick to decide women’s position in the family. Sarai, Abraham’s wife, bore him no children. Thus she gave her Egyptian maid Hagar to her husband for a wife. Yet, when Hagar was pregnant, she looked down upon Sarai. Then as soon as her own son was born, Sarai drove Hagar and her son out.”(Genesis, pp.16 & 21) Here, women’s position changes with the topic “reproduction”. Due to sterility, the wife has to take a concubine for her husband. The maid became arrogant when she was pregnant. Then the wife recovers her authority as a result of her son’s birth. Jacob’s wife Leah and Rachel, who are two sisters, launched a competition of reproduction. Leah had bore Jacob six sons, but she still gave her own maid to her husband as a wife in order to exceed her sister, because according to local customs, the maid’s sons were also counted as hers. At first, Rachel bore no children. But after she bore Jacob a son, she said, ‘God had disposed my shame.’(Genesis, 30) it can be seen that sterility is a shame at that time. The laws also stipulate definitely, ‘When brothers reside together, and one of them dies, and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband’s brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband’s brother to her, and the firstborn she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother. (Deuteronomy, 25, pp.5-10) That is to say, whether willing or unwilling, the wife will get married with her husband’s brother in order to produce a male heir to continue her husband’s family line.

Third, women are men’s private property and accessory. Women’s destiny is determined by men. Just like Chinese women living in a society where men hold authority, Hebrew women in the Old Testament are subordinate to men. An unmarried woman is subordinate to her father and a married one is to her husband. Before marriage, women were their father’s private property, thus having no right to choose their husbands. They could be sold or sent to other people as gifts. In fact, Leah and Rachel were sold by their father, because Jacob worked without receiving salaries in order to marry Leah and Rachel. Leah was unfortunate, for his father knew that Jacob loved Rachel but he still married Leah to Jacob. In Judges, Caleb said, “whoever attacks Kiriath-sepher and takes it, I will give him my daughter Achsah as wife.” (Judges, 1, pp.12-13) Fathers could randomly give their daughters to others and what women could do is to obey their fathers’ decision. After marriage, women were accessory to their husbands. Generally speaking, husbands wouldn’t sell their wives or gave them to other persons. Therefore, they can have many wives at the same time. For instance, Jacob has two wives and two concubines; David had married three wives before he became a king.

Wives were required by social conventions to absolutely submit to their husbands. In Esther, when King Ahasuerus was merry with wine, he commanded his eunuchs to bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing the royal crown, in order to show people and officials her beauty. But the Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king was enraged at this and disposed her royal position.” (Esther, 1, pp.10-20) It is obvious that women can be showed off by their husbands at any time, like a horse, a dog or a piece of clothing. No matter her husband’s position is high or low, no matter his requirement is proper or not, what women should do is only to follow his orders.

Fourth, women are always the scapegoat and victim of plight. Men possess and take advantage of women when they need them, but men throw women out to protect themselves when plight appears. In Genesis, Lot met two angels. At that moment, the men of the city, Sodom surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.” Lot went out, shut the door and said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.” (Genesis, 19, pp.1-10) But in Judges, a similar thing took place. A Levite and his concubine put up for a night in the old man’s house. When they were enjoying themselves, the men of the city, a perverse lot, surrounded the house and started pounding on the door. They said to the old man, “Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may have intercourse with him.” Then the man, master of the house, went out and said to them, “No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Since this man is my guest, do not do this vile thing. Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do whatever you want to them, but against this man do not do such a vile thing.” But the men would not listen to them. So the man seized his concubine, and put her out to them. They wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until it was light. (Judges, 19) The ancient Hebrew women’s life is extremely miserable. Compared with men, they can’t be counted as human. Otherwise which father will ask others to rape her daughter in order to save a stranger? For sake of one’s own safety, men choose to sacrifice their own daughters. Then it is not strange that the Levite’s concubine was sacrificed as a scapegoat by the master of the house and her husband. The life of the Levite’s concubine is the most miserable in the Bible. After being ravished to death, she was cut into twenty pieces to become an excuse and tool for her husband’s revenge. The Old Testament shows that the Hebrew women at that time have no guarantee of their personal safety and their lives at all. Men are certain to be superior to women. Whether having blood relationship with men or not, whether rich or poor, women commonly led tragic

lives. They have neither superiority nor any right to choose their own life, but to do what men ask them to do.

Although in the Hebrew society where fathers and husbands hold the authority, the Hebrew women's places are humiliating. However, to a certain degree, the Old Testament displays some respect for women and ensures some of their rights. In Proverbs, sons are persuaded to be faithful to their own wives, rather than get close to the wanton women and others' wives. "Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. May her breasts satisfy you at all times; may you be intoxicated always by her love." (Proverb, 5 and 6) We can see the dislike of divorce and violence to women in Malachi. "So look to yourselves, and do not let anyone be faithless to the wife of his youth. For I hate divorce, says the LORD, the God of Israel, and covering one's garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless." (Malachi, 2, pp.15-16) The laws of Moses, there are some articles ensuring women's rights. According to Deuteronomy, "When a man is newly married, he shall not go out with the army or be charged with any related duty. He shall be free at home one year, to be happy with the wife whom he has married." (Deuteronomy, 24, p.5) "Suppose a man marries a woman, but after going in to her, he dislikes her and slanders her that she's not virgin. The parents of the young woman shall submit the evidence of the young woman's virginity to the elders of the city at the gate. Then the elders will take the man and punish him; they shall fine him 100 shekels of silver. She will remain his wife; he shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives." (Deuteronomy 22, pp.13-19) This kind of provisions, irrespective of the justice or injustice of the judgement, ensures that husbands couldn't treat their wives by violence randomly.

The Hebrew women also possess a subordinate place in social life, but they are indispensable. In the Old Testament, women are not restricted to their own house. They have freedom to attend the social life. They can go out whenever they want to and they don't need to avoid meeting men or strangers. Abraham's servant asked Rebekah for water to drink. She not only gave him water but talked with him. (Genesis, 24, pp.15-27) Rachel kissed Jacob at their first meeting when she was keeping her father's sheep. (Genesis, 29, p.11) Hebrew women also took part in the productive activities. From the descriptions of the Old Testament, we can know that they attend a lot of activities, like fetching water (Genesis, 24, p.13; Samuel, 9, p.11), pasturing the flock (Genesis, 29, pp.6-12; Song of Solomon, 1, p.7), gleaning in the field (Ruth, 2, p.2), gathering a couple of sticks (Kings, 17, p.10), keeping the vineyard (Song of Solomon, 1, p.6), being a midwife (Genesis, 35, p.17), selling the articles of family handicrafts (Proverbs, 31, p.24) and so on. However, these activities are in the primary place during the whole productive activity. Hebrew women

also play a role in the political life. Some women had effect on the political life and were prophetesses of Jew. Miriam was not only the leader of women (Exodus, 15, p.20), but enjoyed the equal position with Moses and Aaron (Numbers, 12, p.1; Micah, 6, p.4). Deborah was named as a prophetess and judge of Israel and recognized as a mother of Israel. As prophetess and judge, Deborah advised her people, planned a military strategy against the Canaanites, appointed a general and then led the victorious battle. (Judges, 4-5) But those stateswomen who encroached on men's interests were always described with bias on them in the Old Testament. The description of Athaliah's reign over Judah is a good illustration. (Kings 2, 11)

Judaism in "the era of Bible" is open to women. They had a wide attendance in the religious activities. Miriam and Deborah were influential prophetesses. In Moses' Tabernacle, women also made contributions actively. They spun with their hands, and brought what they had spun in blue and purple and crimson yarns and fine lines; all the women whose hearts moved them to use their skill spun the goats' hair. (Exodus, 36, pp.25-26) Women could attend the religious ceremony as singers. However, due to the biological factors, women are excluded from presiding religious rituals. In Leviticus, there are provisions of women's purity or impurity. "When a woman has a discharge of blood that is here regular charge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days... Everything upon which she lies during her impurity shall be unclean; everything also upon which she sits shall be unclean." (Leviticus, 15, pp.19-25) "If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days...her time of blood purification shall be thirty-three days; she shall not touch any holy thing, or come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are completed. If she bears a female child, she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation; her time of blood purification shall be sixty-days. (Leviticus, 12, pp.2-5) After her menstruation or maternity period, they would get a burning offering and a sin offering. They would be clean again after the priest made atonement on her behalf. According to these rules, women cannot enter into the sanctuary to attend the religious ceremonies during her impurity. Those who touch them are also unclean. And the time of impurity of those who bear a female child doubles that of those who bear a male child. All above, although Hebrew women are allowed to join the religious ceremonies, they are still treated unequally. They are still in a subordinate position.

Hebrew women's miserable life and low social status are ascribed to many factors. There are subjective factors and objective factors which influence Hebrew women's status. Most authors of the Old Testament are male and it is written in the view of men. The social background is the main factor. The Hebrew nation has a history of transition from clan society to slavery society. Matriarchy

was replaced by patriarchy. Therefore, the patriarchic culture became the dominating one of that society. The bible describes a beautiful and touching world created by men. In this world, men are the center of this world and everything is decided by men. Women have no right to decide the values of their own destiny. In the Old Testament, there are altogether 1426 names, yet only 111 of them are female. Besides, the influential women images are usually understated. The Old Testament's records of them are very brief, while its records of the influential men are extremely detailed. There is no account of the women's life story. But the accounts of men could extend to several generations and any tiny detail wouldn't be excluded. The sharp contrast shows that women and men receive different treatments in the Hebrew society. Women's social status is much lower than men's. However, we could not just see this fact superficially, for it has deep social and cultural reasons. Only when we put the issue in its own social environment, we can see it clearly.

From all the above, the Old Testament holds a view on women which comprises a unity of opposites. As a literature with high historical value and a product of human civilization, it is an objective reflection of women's low status and miserable lives. There are some points reflecting the equality of men and women, though not much. On one hand, the Hebrew women are subordinate to men; on the other hand, they are an indispensable part

to both families and society and they cannot be ignored. There is no doubt that the Hebrew women's lives are miserable and their social status is extremely low. But that is closely related to the contemporary social and cultural background. The Old Testament is a source of western Christianity culture's bias on women.

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