

Men and Women in the Books of Moses

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Preface by Joseph Tkach

Many of the practices, events and laws contained in the Old Testament might seem strange to us. However, the Old Testament is part of the Bible, and in our survey of what the Bible says about the relationship between men and women and God, we need to examine what this part of Scripture says. We do not want to sugar-coat what it says, nor to dismiss it.

We will see many things that we would not want to imitate, but we will also see positive examples. And we will see that some biblical laws are purposely set in specific cultures to address specific cultural issues, and as such, may not be intended to be followed blindly.

This two-part survey of the Old Testament will also provide a contrasting backdrop for the following study, which will be about Jesus and women.

Joseph Tkach

In our previous paper, we surveyed the teaching of Genesis 1-3. In this paper, we will survey the rest of the books of Moses. Because of the large volume of material involved, we will be brief at many points.

There are numerous interpretive difficulties in this material. Much of it is narrative – it tells the story of what happened without commenting on whether it was good or bad. Other parts give laws about men and women – but even these (such as laws about divorce) may be an accommodation to culture rather than a timeless principle.

Moreover, many of the Old Testament laws are obsolete. Why then should we even examine these passages about an ancient society, when we are asking about a different situation – roles in the church? Many scholars believe that roles in the church are assigned by God in a way that is consistent with God-assigned roles in society. We therefore want to see what the Bible says about male and female roles in general – even if some of that instruction is now obsolete. We will learn, for one thing, that biblical commands are often set in their particular cultural

situation. This survey will also provide background for verses in the New Testament, some of which refer to Old Testament passages.

Throughout this survey, we cannot conclude that just because something happened, it therefore presents an example we should follow today. We do not assume, for example, that Abraham is the ideal husband, nor Rebekah the ideal wife. We evaluate behavior based on New Testament principles, rooted in Jesus' command to love your neighbor as yourself. That command also existed in the Old Testament, yet certain laws of Moses required that men *not* treat women the way they treated one another.

Genesis

The early chapters of Genesis tell us little about women: We are told that Adam slept with Eve and she had sons (4:1-2, 25). Cain slept with his wife and she gave birth to Enoch (4:17). Lamech married two women, Adah and Zillah (v. 19). In one of the most debated verses of the Bible, we are told that the “sons of God” slept with “the daughters of men and had children by them” (6:4). Noah's wife and his daughters-in-law were saved in the ark (7:13). Genealogies rarely mention women, though it is noted that various men had “sons and daughters” (11:11 etc.).

Abram married his half-sister Sarai, and Abram's brother Nahor married their niece, Milcah (11:29). Abram, Sarai, and Lot moved to Canaan, and then to Egypt (12:5, 10). In Egypt, Abram and Sarai assumed that Pharaoh would take Sarai because of her beauty; the only question was whether Abram would survive. So Abram said that Sarai was his sister, and Pharaoh indeed took her into his harem (vv. 15, 19). After God punished Pharaoh for this, Pharaoh gave Sarai back and sent them all away.

Later, Abraham did a similar thing with Abimelech, king of Gerar, saying that Sarah was his sister, and Sarah said that Abraham was her brother (20:2, 5). God warned Abimelech, so he stayed away from Sarah (vv. 3-4), and Abraham explained that Sarah was his half-sister (v. 12). Abimelech acknowledged that he had offended Sarah, but gave money to Abraham to cover the offense (v. 16). Abraham had told a “half-truth,” and Pharaoh and Abimelech were right to protest Abraham's attempts to deceive them.

Sarah told Abraham to sleep with Hagar, her maidservant (16:1-2).

According to ancient custom, any resulting children would then be treated as if borne by the wife. Sarah said, “Perhaps *I* can build a family through her.” Later, Rachel did a similar thing and said, “Sleep with her so that she can bear children *for me* and that through her I too can build a family” (30:3).

“Abram agreed to what Sarai said,” and Hagar became pregnant (16:2-4). Then there was tension between Sarai and Hagar, and Sarai unjustly blamed Abram for the problem (v. 5). Abram let Sarai do whatever she wanted with Hagar, and Sarai mistreated Hagar so much that she fled (v. 6). An angel told Hagar to go back and name her son Ishmael. And Hagar gave a name to God: “She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: ‘You are the God who sees me’” (v. 13).¹

When God told Abraham that Sarah would have a son, Abraham laughed and (apparently lacking faith in the promise) suggested that Ishmael might be blessed instead (17:17-18). But no, God’s promise was for Sarah just as much as it was for Abraham (vv. 16, 19). Later, God again said that Sarah would have a son, and Sarah laughed (18:12). “Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, ‘I did not laugh’” (v. 15).

In chapter 19, Lot set a horrifying example. When the men of Sodom wanted to have relations with Lot’s visitors, Lot offered the men his virgin daughters (even though they were pledged to someone else) to “do what you like with them.” Lot felt more obligated to protect his visitors than his own daughters! But the angels rescued Lot and his daughters. Lot reached safety in the village of Zoar, and God destroyed Sodom. Lot’s wife looked back and was killed. Lot and his daughters moved to the mountains, and there his daughters got him drunk and became pregnant by him. It is a tragic story.

Sarah gave birth to Isaac, and when he was weaned, she told Abraham to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael (21:10). Abraham was concerned about Ishmael, but God

¹ “Nowhere else in ancient Near Eastern literature is it recorded that deity called a woman by name, yet the angel of the LORD does just that twice in the case of Hagar (Gen 16:8; 21:17). The conversation between the angel of the LORD and Hagar is just as startling in its cultural milieu as the conversation of Jesus with the Samaritan woman in his day. In both instances God invests a woman with full dignity by solicitously caring for her and by giving her revelations even though both of them come from outside the pure race and are sinners” (Bruce Waltke, “The Relationship of the Sexes in the Bible,” *Crux*, Sept. 1983, pp. 11-12).

told him to do whatever Sarah said (v. 12). So Hagar and Ishmael were sent into the desert, where they would have died, except for God's intervention. Sarah died at age 127 and was buried near Hebron. Abraham also had sons (no daughters are mentioned) by Keturah and some concubines (25:1-6).

Isaac married Rebekah, the daughter of his cousin Bethuel. She was a girl willing to talk to strangers, industrious enough to volunteer to water 10 camels, willing to extend hospitality on behalf of her family, adventurous enough to go on a one-way journey to Canaan, and willing to speak for herself (24:15-61). Abraham specified from the start that she had to be willing (v. 8).

Rebekah was barren at first (barrenness was generally blamed on the woman), but Isaac prayed for her, and she became pregnant (25:21). After the babies fought within her, she inquired of the Lord, who told her that the older son would serve the younger one. (Apparently she did not have to go through her husband to inquire of the Lord, or to receive an answer.)

Rebekah knew that the Lord would bless Jacob, and she favored Jacob, but Isaac favored Esau (25:28). When Rebekah learned that Isaac wanted to bless Esau (contrary to God's intent), she conspired with Jacob to deceive Isaac (27:5-10). She prepared the meat, and Jacob pretended to be Esau and obtained the blessing. When Esau wanted to kill Jacob, Rebekah told Jacob to go to Haran. She managed to get Isaac to bless him yet again and send him to northern Mesopotamia to find a wife (27:42-28:5).

Esau married two Hittite women, Judith and Basemath (26:34). His parents did not like his Hittite wives, so he married a cousin, Mahalath, daughter of Ishmael, and others (28:9; 36:2-3).

Isaac moved to Gerar because of a famine, and just as his father had done, he told Abimelech that his wife was his sister (26:7), and Abimelech protested (v. 10).

Jacob was deceived by Laban, and ended up marrying two sisters. Leah had four children, and Rachel demanded that Jacob sleep with her handmaid so that she could have a surrogate family. Leah did the same, and at one point she paid Rachel for the opportunity to sleep with Jacob (30:16). There are plenty of wrong examples in this history. Rachel stole her father's household idols and lied to her father (31:35).

In the city of Shechem, there was a prince named Shechem who slept with Dinah, the daughter of Leah, which caused her to be defiled and shamed in the eyes of her brothers. Shechem offered to pay as much as was wanted, but “Jacob’s sons replied deceitfully” and slaughtered the city, taking women and children as slaves (34:13, 29). Jacob complained about this, but Simeon and Levi responded, “Should he have treated our sister like a prostitute?” Yet it was their mother who had purchased a night with their father.

Rachel had said, “Give me children, or I’ll die” (30:1). And when she had her second child, she died. She named him Son of My Trouble, but Jacob renamed him Benjamin, son of my right hand (probably a reference to Rachel). She was buried near Bethlehem (35:19).

Reuben, the firstborn son of Leah, slept with Bilhah, the handmaid of the now-deceased Rachel (v. 22). As firstborn, he would have eventually inherited his father’s concubines, but because of his premature action, he lost his status as firstborn (1 Chron. 5:1).

Genesis 38 tells the story of Tamar. Judah had married Shua, and they had sons named Er, Onan, and Shelah. Judah got a wife for Er named Tamar. God killed Er, and in keeping with ancient custom, the next brother was supposed to sleep with the widow to produce offspring in Er’s name (v. 8; cf. Deut. 25:5). But Onan did not want to make offspring for Er (because Onan would then get a smaller inheritance), and God killed him, too. But even after Shelah had come of age, he was not sent to Tamar to give her children.

So Tamar pretended to be a prostitute and became pregnant by her father-in-law, Judah. When the pregnancy became known, Judah threatened to burn her to death, but when she proved that Judah was the father, he said, “She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn’t give her to my son Shelah” (v. 26). She had upheld her duty to her family, but he had not.

Women play a smaller role in the Joseph story. Joseph had a dream in which the sun, moon, and 11 stars bowed before him. The moon was interpreted as his mother (37:10), even though she was dead. Potiphar’s wife wanted to sleep with Joseph, but when Joseph refused, she accused him of attempted rape (39:14). But she has no further role in the story. Pharaoh gave Joseph a wife – Asenath, the daughter of an Egyptian priest, and they had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim (41:45-52).

Exodus-Deuteronomy — narratives

Exodus begins with the initiative of some women. The Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah refused to kill Israelite boys. They lied to Pharaoh, and God blessed them (Ex. 1:19-20). A Levite mother hid her son for three months, then put him in a basket on the Nile; his sister watched while Pharaoh's daughter rescued the boy. The sister offered to find a wet nurse, and so the mother was paid to nurse her own baby (2:1-9).

After Moses fled to Midian, he came to the defense of seven women and watered their flock of sheep; he married one of them, Zipporah, and they had a son named Gershom (2:15-22). When God was about to kill Moses, Zipporah saved his life by circumcising Gershom and touching Moses with the foreskin (4:25).

God told Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, and he promised to make the Egyptians favorably disposed toward them. "Every woman is to ask her neighbor and any woman living in her house for articles of silver and gold and for clothing" (3:22). Later he told Moses that both men and women should ask their neighbors for silver and gold (11:2).

Miriam the prophetess led the women singing and dancing in worship (Ex. 15:20). Later, she and Aaron spoke against Moses because of his Cushite wife, and Miriam was punished for a week (Num. 12:1-15), presumably because she was the chief instigator; no mention is made of her gender.

Men and women alike were involved in the golden calf (Ex. 32:2-3), and men and women alike were involved in building the tabernacle (35:22-29).

In Numbers 27, the daughters of Zelophehad petitioned Moses for a change in inheritance laws, allowing daughters to inherit if there were no sons. Moses took the request to God, who said, "What Zelophehad's daughters are saying is right," and their request was written into the law (vv. 1-11). These women left a permanent mark in the laws of the old covenant.

Exodus-Deuteronomy — laws

Just as in other neighboring cultures, laws were normally written in the masculine, as if only men would commit crimes. For example: "If a man [*iysh*] steals an ox or a sheep... If a man borrows an animal... (Ex. 22:1-14). The NRSV rightly translates these to be inclusive: "When someone steals an ox or a sheep..."

Whenever someone borrows an animal...” Many additional examples could be given of laws that assume the person is a male; a few laws mention women as well. All the laws of incest are given from the male perspective (Lev. 18).²

The laws of Israel sometimes apply to men and women equally, sometimes unequally. We will present some of them to illustrate points of equality and aspects of inequality.

God said he punished the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation (Ex. 20:5), but nothing is said about the sins of the mothers. Women were specifically included in the Sabbath commandment (v. 10) and the commandment to honor parents (v. 12). Anyone who cursed or attacked either parent was to be killed (21:15, 17). But in the tenth commandment, the “neighbor” is presumed to be male – nothing is said about the possibility that the neighbor might be a widow who owned property (20:17).

If a Hebrew man became an indentured servant, he was to be set free after six years, and his wife would be free, too; but if the master gave him a wife, she and her children did not have to be set free (21:2-4). The man could stay with his family only if he became a servant for life (vv. 5-6). Servants, whether male or female, were to be freed if injured. A bull that killed either a man or a woman was to be destroyed (vv. 26-28).

If a female was sold as a servant,³ she was not to be set free. (In that society, such “freedom” might force her into prostitution.) She could be sold to Hebrews, but not to foreigners. If she was purchased for a son, she had to be treated as a daughter. If the son married another woman, he must not deprive the first one of conjugal rights, or else he must set her free (21:7-11). The last verse may imply that sexual relations were involved in the previous situations as well; it was common for female servants to be concubines.

If men caused a premature birth through reckless behavior,⁴ they could be

² Thus the law prohibits a man from sleeping with his aunt (vv. 12-14), but nothing is said about a woman sleeping with her uncle.

³ Fathers could also sell sons into slavery; men *and women* could sell themselves (Lev. 25:39; Deut. 15:12).

⁴ But if they caused a stillbirth or serious injury, verse 23 would then apply. Christopher Wright argues that in this context, “life for life” does not mean a death penalty, but a living child given to compensate for one killed before birth. The death penalty was not appropriate for accidental

fined “whatever the woman’s husband demands” (21:22). No mention is made of what the woman wanted. If a man slept with a virgin, he had to pay a bride-price, even if the father did not allow the marriage (22:16-17).⁵

Women were unclean for a longer period of time after giving birth to a female (Lev. 12:1-5). After an emission of semen, men would be unclean until evening; but women would be unclean for seven days for menstruation, and her uncleanness was more transferable (Lev. 15:16-24).

For vow redemption, females were valued less than males were (Lev. 27:2-7). Both sexes could take Nazirite vows to dedicate themselves to divine service (Num. 6:1).⁶ Women were permitted to take religious vows, but they would be valid only if the father or husband approved (Num. 30:3-14). A vow by a widow or divorced woman was automatically valid (v. 9).

Apparently women could not be priests, although no law specifically addresses that (but most men could not be priests, either). A priest could give sacrificial food to his daughters, even to those who had returned to the family after being widowed or divorced (Num. 18:11; Lev. 22:13).

Males were required to go to the festivals and give an offering three times a year (Deut. 16:16), but it was assumed that women, children and widows would normally go as well (26:12; 31:12).

When the Israelites captured women in war, they could take a woman as a wife. She could be freed, but not sold or treated as a slave (Deut. 21:10-14). If a man married two women, he was to count the firstborn son (who got the larger inheritance) fairly, not based on which wife he liked more (vv. 15-17).

If a betrothed woman voluntarily slept with another man, she was guilty of adultery and both people would be killed (22:23-24). But if it happened in the country, it was presumed to be a rape, and only the man was to be killed (Deut. 22:23-27). If the girl was not betrothed, the man would be forced to pay 50 shekels and marry her, without right of divorce (vv. 28-29). The law did not give the girl

homicide (v. 13). (*God’s People in God’s Land: Family, Land and Property in the Old Testament* [Paternoster, 1997], 212).

⁵ Deut. 22:28-29 is similar, but does not allow any refusal, and specifies that the woman can never be divorced.

⁶ However, the rest of the chapter is written as if the Nazirite is a man, in keeping with the convention that laws are written as if for males even when they apply to females.

any say in this.

If a man suspected that his new bride was not a virgin, he could challenge her. If evidence of virginity could not be given, the woman was to be stoned at her father's house, for being promiscuous while under his care (22:13-21).⁷ If a man had been married for a while and suspected his wife of infidelity, he could bring an offering to the priest and put her to a test (Num. 5:12-28); the law presumed her innocence and left the punishment up to God's intervention.

If it could be proved that a wife slept with someone else, she and the other man were to be killed (Deut. 22:22) – but it did not work the other way around. A husband who slept with a prostitute, for example, was not considered guilty of adultery. Similarly, laws did not require men to be virgins when they married. Men could have multiple wives, but women could not have multiple husbands. Laws regulated the sexual behavior of young women and wives, but they did not regulate the sexual behavior of widows; nor did they prohibit prostitution.⁸

If a man wanted to divorce his wife, he had to provide her with a paper that permitted her to marry someone else (Deut. 24:1-4). The woman was not given the right to divorce her husband. Wives were legally under the authority of their husbands, and were sometimes treated like property, but they were not in the same legal status as “property” – they were not part of an inheritance, although concubines were. “A wife could not be sold as an ox or a donkey could.... A woman's conjugal rights...distinguished her from the slave who was truly owned.”⁹

Conclusion

Women were usually better off under the laws of Moses than they would

⁷ But if he falsely accused her, he could never divorce her. The “evidence of virginity” may have been a cloth stained by a recent menstruation, showing that the woman was not pregnant at the time of marriage.

⁸ However, prostitution was regulated and discouraged. Religious prostitution was not permitted, and the wages of a prostitute could not be brought into the tabernacle (Deut. 23:17-18). The daughters of priests could not become prostitutes, and priests could not marry prostitutes (Lev. 21:9, 14). Fathers could not force their daughters into prostitution (Lev. 19:29). But there was no penalty for prostitution itself.

⁹ Linda Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church: Three Crucial Questions* (Baker, 1999), 77.

have been in other nations.¹⁰ Nevertheless, many of the above laws still strike us as favoring men over women. How should we respond to these laws?

First, we must acknowledge that the laws, as part of the old covenant, are obsolete. Christians today are under no obligation to live by these laws.

Second, we must recognize that even when the old covenant was in force, these laws did not describe the ideal society. Jesus pointed out that the law of divorce was a *concession* that God allowed because the people were sinful (Matt. 19:8). An already existing custom was regulated to prevent flagrant abuses, but the law did not imply approval of the custom itself. The same is true for many of the other laws, such as those that implied a greater sexual freedom for men than for women. The *lack* of penalty for men should not be taken as a divine endorsement of their freedom to visit prostitutes, for example. It was a patriarchal culture, and God allowed some inequities to continue for a time.

We believe that *no one* should be bought or sold into slavery. We believe that the life-long commitment of marriage should not be arranged without the consent of both bride and groom. We believe that fornication and adultery do not merit the death penalty. We believe that men as well as women should be virgins when they marry, and we believe that men as well as women should refrain from sexual activity outside of marriage.

Yet we also recognize that we cannot always insist on these ideals. In many nations, marriages *are* arranged, and the couples have to live with the result. Many young people are not virgins, and adultery does happen. Even within the community of believers, there is sometimes “hardness of heart” – a hardness that calls for repentance, but also necessitates practical accommodation to what people have done.

This is not the place to spell out ethics for the diverse situations that people get themselves into – we are simply pointing out that these laws, although biblical, were given in a particular cultural context, and we should not view them as timeless directives from God. Even in the New Testament, there are directives that have been shaped by culture – head coverings for women, greeting people with a

¹⁰ For examples, see William Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*, pages 76-80, and the articles on women in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* and InterVarsity’s *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*.

kiss, making a roster of older widows, etc. We will discuss these in a later paper, but for now it is sufficient to note that the Old Testament is culturally limited to a far greater extent than the New Testament is.

In our next paper, we will look at women in Israel's history – from Rahab to Esther. Due to the volume of material, we will again have to be brief, but this survey will give some historical context to the ministry of Jesus and the writings of Paul.