WOMEN IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN AND SIMILARITIES IN THE HEBREW BIBLE: GENDER ROLES, GENDER DYNAMICS, AND FEMININE SYMBOLISM

Abstract

Feminist groups have argued that the limited knowledge about women's roles, positions, and rights during the Ancient Near Eastern period due to a patriarchal ideology and male dominance structures prevented the textual records of women during the Iron Ages (1200–587 BCE). They have, therefore, accounted neither for the religious beliefs of half of ancient Israel's population nor for the responsibilities that women assumed for maintaining religious rituals and traditions. Only in the last four decades have scholars, primarily women, begun to explore women's essential roles in ANE cultures. This article utilizes evidence from the Hebrew Bible and from archaeological sites throughout ANE. It demonstrates the way women undertook responsibility for clan-based and community-based religious rituals and rites, including pilgrimage, seasonal festivals, rites of military victory, and rites of mourning. They fulfilled, as well, essential roles within the sphere of domestic or household religion. At home, they provided medico-spiritual healing for all family members, as well as care for women and babies throughout pregnancy, childbirth, and beyond.

Introduction

Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) civilizations have historical and literary connections with the way gender roles, gender dynamics, and sexual metaphor portraits women in a lower hierarchical position. To contribute to gender role studies and to ANE studies, this paper will analyze and offer examples of women dynamics in the ANE.[1] Furthermore, it will be argued throughout this article the way Israel's idolatry is exposed by using metaphors such as adultery, infidelity, rape, and sexual violence where women are used as an analogy of Israel. The biblical god present in the Hebrew Bible is described as a male victim in comparison with Israel, which are often represented as the female unfaithful one. This with the intent to show the way feminine symbolism reveals the views of patriarchal power and superiority of Israel's god against other ANE deities.[2]

Methodology and Definitions

Gender and gendered power dynamics need to be defined to grasp the intentionality of this article. In this sense gender is defined as a "socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as the norms, roles and relationships that exist between them."[3] In addition, gendered power dynamics will follow the fourth descriptions of power given by Eric Wolf in his Distinguished Lecture: *Facing Power-Old Insights, New Quin*. At this lecture, Wolf define power in four forms, (1) culturally-valued personal power as the attribute of the person, as potency or capability, (2) the ability of a person to impose their will on an another person,

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[1] The pieces of evidence come from legal materials, and civil affairs to understand the use and theological purpose of feminine symbols as a literary tool.

[2] Nevertheless, it must be considered that by supporting this argument readers will simultaneously notice the presence of violence, sexual imagery, and the degradation of women in a way that it highlights the religious, social, and political stigma of idolatry.

[3] http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs403/en/

whether in social action or in interpersonal relations, (3) exercising control of the settings in which people may show forth their potentialities and interactions with others, and (4) power that organizes and orchestrates a social structure, role, or field of action.[4]

A critical approach to ANE text using the contemporary definition of gender role and the four forms of power given by Eric Wolf will bring clarity to the way ANE civilizations deal with social issues that involve women such as marriage, divorce, and adultery. Wolf four forms of power are helpful to understand the use of literature to contrast the divine/human relationship. On the other hand, this paper will employ the term sex and the use of sexual imagery in the Hebrew Bible following the way historians and sociologist have approached ANE civilizations by highlighting the distinctiveness of biology (sex) between men and women.[5] The approach will consider sexual language as the mechanism to express justification for divine judgment and its theological implications.

Overview Regards Gender Roles and Dynamics in Ancient Near Eastern

It is important to recognize that similar to contemporary societies, the presence of gender roles, and gendered power dynamics can also be found in social and political structures of the most renowned ANE civilizations, such as Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria, Ugarit, Persian, and Ancient Israel.[6] However, it has been argued that, unlike some later civilizations and societies, some ANE civilizations such as Ancient Egypt at some period of history were not organized in a patriarchal structure. Rather, they followed a matriarchal familial system.[7] Hence, it is

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[4] These definitions are following a previous paper written by the author of this paper. The intention is to expand on the topic. Eric R. Wolf, "Distinguished Lecture: Facing Power—Old Insights, New Questions." *American Anthropologist* 92, no. 3 (1990): 586.

[5] Marten Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East* (Boston/Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 1.

[6] Bill T. Arnold and Brent A. Strawn, *The World around the Old Testament: The People and Places of the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, a Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 172-178.

[7] Alan Wynn Shorter, *Everyday Life in Ancient Egypt* (London, UK: S. Low, Marston, 1932), 109.

important to highlight that some ANE social and political structures were not primarily based or centered on patriarchal relationships as some contemporary groups have argued.[8] Archeological and textual evidence had demonstrated that women's roles, duties, and civil rights were shared among genders during ancient civilizations than during other periods dominated by patriarchal familial systems and more restricted social roles stereotyping male and females. Contrary to later Egyptian dynasties that were based on pharaonic lineage passed through the male side, archaeological discoveries have revealed that in some periods some ANE civilizations had rulers that were not descendants of previous kings.[9] By gathering these shreds of evidence is understandable the development of schools of thoughts that hypothesizes a moment in history where this shift begins. If the conclusions are accrued, then the possibility of matriarchal royal lineage is sustainable. To this extent, it shed lights on the possibility of rearranging marriages between brothers and sisters, and in some cases fathers and daughters with the intention to conserve the royal lineage.

Another difference within contemporary civilizations and future dynasties is that marriage in Ancient Egypt was considered in most cases a civil union rather than religious.[10] This is an important factor when attempting to draw conclusions or insights on the contemporary conversation of gender roles and gendered power dynamics within marriage dynamics.

By studying ancient Egypt primary texts, one can find noticeable differences from their contemporary ANE civilizations such as women having the right to possess physical assets granted by contracts without having to share these assets in the case of separation.[11] This being

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[8] Marten Stol,"Women in Mesopotamia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 38, no. 2 (1995): 123-44.

[9] Alan Wynn Shorter, *Everyday Life in Ancient Egypt*, 109.

[10] Ibid, 110-111.

[11] Ibid.

said, it is important to highlight that the chance for a woman to enter marriage with property or other valuable possessions would only depend on the socio-economic status of the family of birth.[12] Although ancient civilizations happen to use marriage in their theodicies and mythologies, this does not mean that it has divine connections or that it had to be restricted by religious rules. Legal documents and portraits related to marriage have led scholars to conclude that an important part of marriage was to present themselves in the whole sense of husband and wife relationship, which was validated by an official that would legally consume the union and register the stipulations and mutual agreement of such marriage.[13] Therefore, one can argue that the institution of marriage in Ancient Egypt was fairly equitable and supported by the civil law of the Egyptian empire.

Although legal documents support gender equality in the legal spectrum of marriage, it is not historically accurate and academic responsible to overlook the fact that in common or daily duties men and women had respective roles[14] that were related to their biological sex.[15]

Adultery

Different from a marriage where women experienced and enjoyed equality and privileged positions, adultery was not the same case. Although adultery was not permitted or tolerated in Ancient Egypt, it can be argued that women that were accused of such behaviors did not experience the same judgment and punishment as men. As a civil law, the Egyptian judicial

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[12] The assets come from their fathers inheritage.

[13] Pierre Montet, *Everyday Life in Egypt in the Days of Ramesses the Great* (London, UK: E. Arnold, 1958), 49.

[14] Don Nardo argues, "Even if he was not deeply in love with his wife, a man could find a measure of happiness in the knowledge that she was content, willingly kept a tidy, well-managed home, and taught the children good manners. He could also take pride in the fact that he worked hard to put food on the table and a roof over both their heads." Don Nardo*, Living in Ancient Egypt* (Detroit. MI: Thames/Gale, 2014), 23-24.

[15] Ibid.

system would consider and treat any adulterous actions as punishable crimes. As with many ANE civilizations, adultery was considered a religious offense against the gods and an indicator of the type of afterlife an individual will have. However, most important that any divine offense was the social instability[16] that adultery will bring to the civil life and communal conscience[17] of the people.[18]

ANE Feminine Symbols and its similarities in the Hebrew Bible

Often the biblical writers' advocates for a strict monotheism against polytheistic and henotheistic beliefs that were common in the ANE context. However, this is not to say that Israel was completely monotheistic, instead, there are internal and external pieces of evidence that shows Israel participating in rituals and beliefs that were associated with polytheism, henotheism, and monolatry.[19] Stolz has credibly argued that the concept of monotheism is a modern invention that can be situated during the Enlightenment period.[20] Hence, knowing the mixture of polytheism, henotheism, monolatry, and monotheism inside the Hebrew Bible it will be easier to understand Israel's views on the YHWH/Israel contractual relationship.[21] This dynamic was primarily characterized by using literature to portrait a male god.[22]

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[16] In this case, adultery in Ancient Egypt should be understood as an immoral action against another citizen, as well as an attempt to disturb the peaceful environment within the community.

[17] A small number of Papyri from the period of the New Kingdom served as examples of the way the Egyptian legal system dealt with adultery. Papyrus l0 exposed and presented accusations against the administrator of the temple dedicated to Khanum located at the Elephantine community. The man being accused of corruption and adulterous behavior is a priest named Penanuquet. See C. J. Eyre, "Crime and Adultery in Ancient Egypt," *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 70 (1984), 95.

[18] John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 152.

[19] Thomas Römer, "Yhwh, the Goddess and Evil: Is 'monotheism' an Adequate Concept to Describe the Hebrew Bible's Discourses about the God of Israel?" *Verbum Et Ecclesia* 34, no. 2 (2013): 1.

[20] Thomas Römer, "Yhwh, the Goddess and Evil: Is 'monotheism' an Adequate Concept to Describe the Hebrew Bible's Discourses about the God of Israel?" *Verbum Et Ecclesia*, 1.

[21] This masculine-gendered deity was first worshiped in connection with goddesses such as Ishtar in Mesopotamia, and Astarte, Anat, and Asherah in the Levant. From these goddesses, Asherah is the one that is connected to Israel's God. See Thomas Römer, "Yhwh, the Goddess and Evil: Is 'monotheism' an Adequate Concept to Describe the Hebrew Bible's Discourses about the God of Israel?" 2.

[22] Renita Weems, *Battered Love, Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*, 80.

The main reason that Asherah becomes a central piece of evidence for the way gender roles, gender dynamics, and feminine symbolism was used in the Hebrew Bible is that the Yhwh-Asherah relationship was transferred after the Assyrian exile to the new Yhwh-Israel relationship where the metaphor involving women became the predilection language of the biblical writes.[23] In this sense, it can be argued that the evolution from polytheism, henotheism, monolatry, and eventually ethical monotheism used feminine symbols and roles as the political, social, and religious language that serve as the discourse for the elites and prophets to judge Israel's behavior. The main components of this female metaphor are marriage, rape, violence, and adultery.

The capacity of a metaphor to deliver a message resides in the way it can be used to bring different objects and present their similarities in a way it can be understood by the audience. The metaphor has the capacity to bring cognitive, psychological, and emotional similarities that transcend the literal meaning of the objects in comparison in a way that can be grasped by the audience psyche. These metaphors allow readers of the Hebrew Bible to understand the reasons why Israel's god cannot be understood out of the male, husband, and faithful partner. In this sense, Israel's participation in the relationship can only be understood by following the metaphorical expressions that portrait Israel as a woman, wife, and unfaithful partner.

Marriage has always been an important social "institution" that involves gender roles and gender dynamics. Ancient Israel, as part of ANE civilizations, placed a strong emphasis on marriage as a fundamental part of their society. Marriage relationships between man and woman were inclined to place authority and control to the male figure.[24] The same representation of

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[23] Thomas Römer, "Yhwh, the Goddess and Evil: Is 'monotheism' an Adequate Concept to Describe the Hebrew Bible's Discourses about the God of Israel?", 3.

[24] Marten Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East*, 466-469.

control is present in the Hebrew Bible when the biblical writer portrays god as a controlling male/husband, while Israel is presented as the subordinate woman/wife. Terrence Fretheim while conducted a study about the different images of god, categorized marriage metaphors as a "controlling metaphor,"[25] This dynamic was transferred using metaphorical language to speak about the sacred and the divine relationship between Yahweh and Israel.[26]

In Jer. 2:2-3, one can see the metaphorical comparison between the devotion of a youth bride who loves and is willing to follow her lover through the wilderness. Clearly, the biblical writers are presenting a literal sense and perhaps a common practice in Ancient Israel to further develop the divine connection between Yahweh faithfulness and protection against Israel's unfaithfulness and change of behavior toward their part of the covenant. Here is where the marriage metaphor is used to expand and develop a frame for the listener and reader of the message to create an imaginary connection with the well-known relationship between a husband and a wife who have entered a contractual relationship.[27] This is not to say that gender equality cannot be possible in modern times, instead, what cannot be attained is gender equality in the world of the biblical writers. Therefore, to avoid women subordination, readers should realize that marriage metaphors in the Hebrew Bible need to be read acknowledging the gendered roles and gendered dynamics present in Israel, as well as the divine endorsement placed by the writers when speaking about Yahweh's loyalty and Israel's unfaithfulness.

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[25] Terence Fretheim, The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1984), 11. It holds the content of the control role of man in the marriage dynamic.

[26] See Jer. 2:2-3, as an example of the man-woman relationship used as a divine message.

[27] This designation clearly placed Israel as the subordinate and responsible for their calamities. On the contrary, the biblical writer exonerates Yahweh from being responsible for Israel's punishment. Israel/wife is given total responsibility for their own suffering and pain while Yahweh becomes the victim of Israel's behaviors. By victimizing Yahweh, the biblical writers placed the male/husband role over the woman/wife. The problem with placing gender to the divine being is that it possesses absolute authority and demands divine subordination.

Although the use of marriage metaphor presents issues of gendered dynamics in which women are represented as unfaithful and evil, this is not the final goal of the biblical writers. An objective reading and interpretation of the marriage metaphor in the Hebrew Bible presents that the outcome or desire of the marriage metaphor was reconciliation and forgiveness between Yahweh and Israel. In this sense, the marriage metaphor remains connected to the societal rules where marriage should be a mutual covenant.[28] The problem resides on the dichotomy created by the gendered dynamics, as well as the triumph of reconciliation and reconstruction of the marriage relationship created by the metaphor. Renita J. Weems argues in relation to this dichotomy, "We turn now to the more difficult question of this particular metaphor's value for contemporary liberationist discourse."[29] Liberationist discourse is correct to protest any gendered dynamics presented in the Bible that perpetuates women's role as subordinate and blame for men's condition. However, this protest should not distance the utility of the metaphor by disassociating the context and literary use of the metaphor. It is a difficult issue since for some liberationists to achieve total liberation it is necessary to deconstruct the entire male/patriarchal structure, in this case, is the gendered dynamics endorsed by the metaphors of marriage.

Rape

Another metaphor and narratives that are used by some biblical writers is rape. In most cases where rape is being narrated or used as a metaphor, the victim is a woman. Like marriage metaphor has been used through the Bible, rape narratives and metaphorical use place women in

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[28] Renita J. Weems, Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets, 98.
[29] Ibid.

a subordinate and shameful position. This lower lever position goes beyond the husband-wife relationship, it extends through the whole society, in this case, Ancient and biblical Israel. In the case of Yahweh, the entire Israel, men, and women were subordinate to him.   As can be seen in Jer. 20:7, rape and seduction metaphors become part of the poetic and prophetic message of the prophets. Here one can see that when the seduction metaphor is used towards men, they become the subordinate and inferior being. Nevertheless, the same dynamic is counter transferred to the male-female relationship, whether married or not. Now, in the case of the metaphors and narratives where rape and seduction should not be taking easily since believers can take the meaning and develop their personal theology and doctrinal statutes full of text of terror.[30] In the case of text of terror related to rape and seduction metaphors and narratives, Renita Weems provide some hermeneutical questions that can be asked to understand the context of that time. Weems asks, "What is the image of a naked woman, mangled female body grips the religious imagination? What can humiliate women and mutilating their bodies have to do with talking about God's love for people? Why do demagogues appeal to sexual images to frame what they have to say about political anarchy and religious idolatry?[31] Weems questions may be similar to most women that approached the Bible and are finding things that are against what they believe.

The main problem that rapes and seduction metaphors and narratives bring as a literary tool, is that feminist scholar has argued that an androcentric message is explicit in the text. The biggest issue in regards the metaphors and narratives of rape and seduction are that unconsciously the audience reading such metaphors and narratives tend to overlook and, in some cases, suppress women dignity and important role in the Bible. In this sense, women become voiceless and invisible for the hermeneutical process in which the reader may find contextual

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[30] Text of terror refers to biblical portions that have been use for oppression, destruction, or violation of human rights.
[31] Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Bible*, 1.

meaning.   Hence, it is possible that male readers found themselves thinking that their concept of masculinity is shared and endorsed by the Biblical writers and connected to a divine inspiration when they interact with a male author.[32]

Conclusion

This paper has presented and argued explicitly and implicitly the way women in the Ancient Near Easter are presented in history, as well as literature. From legal documents to religious texts, women are presented having specific gendered roles and dynamics. On the one hand, it is possible, and it can become either unconsciously or consciously accepted and endorsed by individuals or communities that miss the entire meaning and purpose of the metaphor. This situation can become dangerous if the readers cannot avoid accepting the terror

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[32] Ibid, 99.

and prejudice that texts that portraits gendered roles and dynamics that perpetuates women at a lower level than man. By accepting such meanings without differentiating the metaphor from the context in which such metaphor was born can motivate readers to defend ideologies and practices dominated by misogynistic and patriarchy. On the other hand, a poor understanding of the way language enhance imagination and serves as a mechanism to present deeper and transcendental meanings will prevent religious practitioners, as well as non-religious to understand the importance of such metaphors and the way it has shape theology, politics, societies, and human relationships.

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