

Lecture # 5

Women in Judaism

The Biblical and Talmudic period (c. 1700 BCE-500 CE)

The period from Moses (c. 1250 BCE) to about 200 BCE is the biblical period with traditions going back much further.

the first actual writings of the Bible date from approximately the time of the death of Solomon around 900 BCE.

Abraham is considered the first patriarch of the Hebrew people dating from about ~~2000~~-1750 or so BCE.

There are some interesting possibilities concerning the connection between the Hebrew people and the Indo-Europeans who were coming into the area from about 2300 onward.

Tho the Hebrews themselves were semetic in language, there is strong evidence that the Aryans had great influence on them.

Abraham is continually listed as coming from Harran as his homeland and his father's homeland. This connection is reinforced by the stories of Isaac and Jacob who return there for wives.

It is from Harran that God told him to go to a land He would show him.

Harran was located in the very center of a long settled Indo-European group, the Hurrians

Throughout the Bible, especially in Genesis, there are references to the Hittites and Horite people, some very closely associated with Abraham. these are both indo-european peoples.

When Abraham needed a place to bury Sarah he approached the Hittites. The answer, when Abraham offered to pay for the land was no "You are a mighty prince among us, bury your dead in the best grave we have."

even many of the names involved with his relatives, such as Na Hor are indo-european names.

It is also significant that the Hebrew Bible states (in both versions of the myth) that Noah, primeval ancestor of the Hebrews, started out after the flood from the very same area from which the historically attested Indo-Europeans are known to have entered Anatolia (southern Turkey).

The connections of Moses, Joseph and even Abraham with Egyptian royalty should also be considered as a factor in the relationship between the Hebrews and the Indo-Europeans.

One Hebrew tribe in particular, the Levites, who were the priestly caste to which Moses and Aaron belonged, Levites, could be connected to a tribe of Indo-Europeans closely related to the Hurrians and Hittites known as Luvians or Louvites.

from the texts now deciphered, it is evident that they were into rituals and incantations. It appears that the Luvians or Levites as they are known in the Hebrew scriptures, may have been a separated priestly caste of the Indo-Europeans, much like the Brahmins of India *and the Druids among the Celts.*

according to the Pentateuch, the Levites were to remain a very exclusive group.

only Levites were acceptable as members of the priesthood of Yahweh. Moses, Aaron and the sons of Aaron were the highest priests.

they were not allowed to marry any woman except from their own tribe.

the Levites were the judges exclusively. when other tribes complained, they were suppressed.

penalties for breaking the rules of the Levites was severe. Breaking the sabbath or blasphemously was stoning.

fire sacrifices were extremely important and major aspect of the rituals of the Levites, much like those of the Brahmins in India.

the first ten sections of Leviticus are totally concerned with fire sacrifices.

the Levites were supplied with food and other things by the tribes, through the tithe.

the general picture rendered is one of rather a well clothed, well fed, well housed, well transported, perfumed aristocracy, who ruled with supreme authority over the other Hebrew people.

their position as the ruling class of the Hebrew people, certainly an Indo-European pattern, suggests that they may have been assigned this heritage to justify their relationship to the other tribes.

we so know from psalm 107 that all the Hebrews were not of one race. it says:

So let them say who were redeemed by the Lord, redeemed by him

from the power of the enemy, and gathered out of every land, from east and west and north and south. .

this suggests that at the time of the writing of these psalms Israel saw itself as a group of races gathered together under the direction of the Levites.

the worship of the Indo-European and Hebrew gods as volcanic mountains may explain the great importance of the fire rituals among both the brahmins and the levites.

it may also explain the name YHWH which has puzzled scholars looking for a semetic word .

in sanskrit the word yahweh means everflowing, very suggestive of the lava of volcanic eruption.

connections between the Indo-Europeans and the Hebrews are too numerous to be lightly dismissed tho more translation of Luvian texts will be needed to prove it.

this connection would explain the very patriarchal laws and attitudes of the Levite priests of the Hebrews in the scriptures and their insistence upon the destruction of the Goddess religion.

It would also explain the severe laws regarding women and the fact that the people, up until the exile, did not stay with the worship of YHWH but constantly turned back to the goddess worship, their own heritage.

The Biblical Period

traditionally the beginning of the Hebrew religion dates

from Moses and the giving of the 10 commandments from Mt. Sinai (or Mt. Horeb in another tradition, which is an Indo European word) about 1250 or so BCE.

the great goddess tradition which flourished in the middle east became anathematized, both because it challenged Israelite monotheism and because it threatened male dominion.

if women were allowed cultic prominence, and cultic sexuality were allowed religious sanction, masculine control of the priesthood and sure lines of descent and inheritance could well fall to pieces.

the Israelites married their daughters off shortly after puberty .

the expectation was that the bride, but not necessarily the groom, would be a virgin, and if she was not, and her husband could prove it, she could be stoned—for betraying her father (Deut. 22:13-21)

also, a married woman suspected of adultery could at her husband's request, be subjected to trial by ordeal (Num. 5:11-31)

The ordeal itself was not severe but the toll psychologically was high.

at first men who accused their wives falsely were not punished, tho later they were beaten and forced to pay a fine to the woman's father.

men were not subjected to ordeal, because wives could not accuse husbands of infidelity, and prostitution was indulged, tho

prostitutes were maligned.

generally, early Israelite morality shows a double standard, women being held to much stricter chastity than men.

Adultery could mean death for both guilty parties (Lev. 20:10) because the adulterer violated another man's property and the adulteress violated her husband's authority.

if a man violated an unmarried girl, he was only obliged to marry her, after obtaining her father's permission and paying a bride price. as punishment, he could never divorce her.

women belonged to their fathers or husbands, but were not mere property as slaves as the custom gave them certain protective rights.

Husband's were enjoined to love their wives, and Gen. 2:24 spoke of the marital bond as stronger than that between parent and child.

There are two accounts of the creation in Genesis and both accounts make the same claims: 1) man and woman have been willed into being by the direct action of God as the high point of creation; 2) they complement one another and together constitute humankind.

the oldest account, written of course, from a male viewpoint, makes primal man in effect say "she is just what I need, an identical match for me."

in creation, then, Genesis intuitively suggests a basic equality of the sexes.

Genesis depicts the sexes as types of early Israelite male and

female behavior. so, Eve, intelligent and practical sees the fruit is good to eat and a possible source of wisdom and Adam simply eats what his wife has prepared.

7:23-29
it is in Eccles. ~~25:24~~ that misogynistically makes Eve the cause of sin, but the original story simply relates both sexes to the mystery of a life that is much less than our intuition says it should be.

other women of the Bible support his interpretation of Eve, proto-woman, as intelligent and decent.

Bethsheba is a clever woman, getting her son on the throne.

Deborah is a mighty prophetess

Ruth a noble daughter-in-law, and not even a Jew.

Esther was able to save her people.

Proverbs 31 shows the model laid before Israelite women and suggests that all woman's fruitfulness, not just her sexuality, was prized.

the Proverbial description says of the ideal wife, "She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life (Prov 31:12). this may well echo the fear that Israelite men harbored about strong women like Delilah, who used her intelligence and beauty to bring Samson down. (Judg. 16:4-21)

doubly feared was the non-Israelite woman whom, like Solomon's wives, turned his head from worship of YHWH or Jezebel corrupted Ahab, so women linked to fertility gods could be trouble compounded.

the main way an Israelite woman did their husbands good was in bearing children. to be barren was pitiable--a sign of God's judgement.

although patriarchal polygamy slowly yielded to monogamy, this meant only more trouble for the childless woman, since barrenness then became legitimate grounds for divorce. (Deut. 24:1-4)

concerning sexual love, the main biblical view is that within marriage, it is right and good.

the song of songs even has the female pursuing the male and the male submitting without loss of his masculinity.

the inclusion of this in the canon shows a solid strata valuing sexual intercourse not only as healthy but even a symbol of God's interaction with his people.

the biblical wife was not primarily her husband's lover but her foremost duty was to build up his house by nurturing sons (prov 31:1-9)

as mother she had some say in selecting a future daughter-in-law or dedicating offspring to God's service.

on occasion, a queen mother might even seize political power herself, as when athaliah ruled for six years after the death of her son (II Kings 11:1-4)

sometimes, tho rarely, God's love is seen as maternal in a rare break in patriarchal theology's armor.

no more than a nursing mother can forget her child, can God

forget his people. (Isaiah 49:15)

Like a mother, he comforts them for their trials in captivity
(Is 66:13)

thus, when the tender side of the covenant relationship comes up, provoked by Israel's suffering, mother -love was the analogy closest at hand.

unlike the priesthood, charismatic office was open to women.

it was possible for them to prophesy.

Deborah, Huldah and Novaliah were prophetesses (the last a false one)

Huldah was responsible for telling King Josiah that the book of Deuteronomy found in the temple in 622 BCE was scripture. this was the first time anything had been declared scripture in Israel.

women were also professional mourners (Jer. 9:17), midwives (Gen. 35:17), temple singers (Ezra 2:65), and nurses (ruth 4:16).

prostitution was for some a full time profession but was frowned on.

some women were sorcerers, but this was perilous for Deut. 18 called it "an abomination unto the Lord."

this is because it was largely a female art associated with the worship of the goddess.

the priestly caste of the levites used divination as the urim and thummim, in the bible and this was not frowned upon. the difference was Hebrews were only to use their own priests.

females who worked outside the male-dominated system raised a

great furor.

it is probably this furor, along with their ritual impurity, that excluded Israelite women from the priesthood.

a woman was unclean during her menstrual flow and for seven days thereafter, while seminal emission made a man unclean only "until the evening" (Lev. 15:16)

after childbirth a woman was considered menstruous for seven days, and then for thirty three days more.

if the child was a female, both figures were doubled. (Lev. 12:1-8)

after this time of purification, she was bound to seek out a priest to make atonement for her.

legally, women were under the same dietary and moral regulations as men (Lev. 11)

apostasy meant death for either sex.

it was optional for women to participate in the 3 annual pilgrimages, but compulsory that they attend the 7 year assembly.

a woman might take the Nazirite vow of special consecration to God—if her husband or father did not object (Num. 30:4-16)

a male so consecrated was worth 50 shekels, a female 30.

in summary, women had status as mothers but little political-religious office or power.

their uncleanness made them ambivalent. so for important undertakings men were told not to go near a woman.

tho the Hebrew bible does not favor celibacy, it thinks pure religiosity, close contact with the holy one, means abstinence.

this meant a psychology in which women verged on being an impediment to the male main actors.

this thinking undergirt such early practices as allowing a man to sell his daughter into concubinage in order to repay a debt (Exodus 21:7-11)

it is true that some of the later writers show concern for how the woman will be treated, but in grisly passages such as Genesis 19, where the virginal daughters of Lot are offered so that Sodomites won't set their hands on male guests, it is clear that when push came to shove, many women were consigned to harsh treatment.

the law did command honor for both mother and father, yet it kept women dependent from cradle to grave--literally so, since if a husband died, his male relatives were to take charge of his wife (Gen. 38)

this was imperative since women were not allowed to own property, so had little chance to gain wealth.

only if a man had no sons, could his daughter inherit.

according to the law of Moses about young women, "Let them marry whom they think best; only they shall marry within the family of the tribe of their father." (Num 36:6)

end for Break

The talmadic Period

the Talmud is a 63 volume compendium of scholarly and legal opinion, folklore, philosophical and theological speculation, medical and scientific theory, decision interpretation, anecdotes, biographies and much more.

the word itself means "the teachings" and it centers on the meaning of the Torah--God's law or guidance.

through centuries of diaspora life after the fall of the temple in 70 CE, the rabbis who compiled and then studied Talmud.

they tried to meet the challenges of exile, persecution, Greek culture and Christianity by searching out new precedents and anecdotes and adapting them to the new exigencies of faith.

the Pharasses party is the only one that survived the fall of Jerusalem and it is they who brought the Jewish religion down to the 20th century through their efforts at interpretation.

overall, the talmudic picture of women is favorable--if she is a good wife and mother.

in other words, the rabbis did not alter the biblical view.

rather, they buanced it for new circumstances and the new center that Jewish life had in study.

the Rabbi became the important person in the Jewish community after the temple, since the priests were no longer needed for sacrifices.

thus "Wherewith do women acquire merit? by sending their children to learn torah in the synagogue and their husbands to study in the schools of the rabbis" (Ber. 17a)

much concern went into selecting a good wife and not a few stories are told of good men who were corrupted by marrying wicked women, and wicked men who were transformed by marrying good women.

it was widely held that "an unmarried man is not a man," living as he does "w/o joy, w/o blessing, w/o good" (Jeb. 62a)

relatedly, a woman is a golem, a shapeless lump" until her husband transforms her into a finished vessel. (Sanh. 22b)

in fact, so urgent was the need for a spouse that "one may sell a scroll of the Torah for the purpose of marriage" (Meg. 27a)

little wonder that the Holy One was said to have created the universe in six days and to have been busy ever since arranging marriages.

the term for marriage among the talmudists was Kiddushian or sanctification. the husband consecrates his wife, setting her aside as something dedicated to the sanctuary (Kid. 2b)

he should honor his wife because "no blessing is experienced in his house except on her account." (B.M. 59a)

tho wives were thoroughly dependent on their husbands, they had explicit rights to conjugal satisfaction (Kid. 19b), financial support, medical care, a stipulated sum of money should the husband die or there be a divorce, and burial.

if a wife was kidnapped, the husband had to ransom her, even if it took all his wealth.

and a wife's daughters were supposed to be provided for financially. this provision was meant to balance the law that all inheritance went to sons.

a wife's obligations to her husband were spelled out quite specifically.

primarily, she was to provide for his physical needs and enable him to study Torah.

there are stories told in the talmud of rabbi's wives who took excellent care of their husbands.

the good wife knew that her availability sexually not only afforded her husband pleasure but saved him from temptation.

the talmudic view was that men are easily seduced ("a man should walk behind a lion rather than behind a woman."), so an understanding wife is a great guard for his virtue.

this produced lengthy discussions in the talmud on menstrual regularity.

study of the Torah was closed to women.

there is an injunction saying "A man is obliged to have his daughter taught torah." but these injunctions lost out to such strong opposing views as, "Whoever teaches his daughter torah is as though he taught her obscenity" (Sut. III, 4) and, "Let the words of Torah rather be destroyed by fire than imparted to women" (Sut. 19a)

There are many stories to show how women supported their men so they could study Torah, such as that of Rabbi Akiba's wife who

saw his potential and supported him for 12 years while he was away studying. When he came home with thousands of students, her reward came when he told them in her presence that all his knowledge, and theirs, was truly hers.

this kind of story was meant to encourage wives to selfless devotion and warn husbands against ingratitude.

as in the biblical period, talmudic judaism found sterility fearsome--to be childless was to be as one dead (Gen. R 71:6)

obversely, fruitfulness was greatly celebrated: "in the hereafter women will bear children daily" (Shab. 30b)

contraception was permitted if conception was thought likely to harm the mother (jeb. 12b)

although all children were a gift or pledge from God, sons were generally received with greater joy.

at times this gave rise to such sayings as "Happy is he whose children are sons and woe to him whose children are daughters." (B.B. 16b)

a daughter is a "vain treasure."

She costs her father sleep: in youth, lest she be seduced; in maidenhood, lest she not find a husband; in marriage, lest she prove barren; in older age, lest she practice witchcraft.

thus the Talmud glossed Numbers 6:24, "The Lord bless thee and keep thee by adding, "Bless thee with sons, and keep thee from daughters because they need careful guarding" (Num. R 11:5)

Biblical heroines like Beborah and Huldah were praised in the

Talmud, not so much for their prophecy, as for their having been wives and devoted mothers.

concerning divorce, the talmudists' instincts were to limit this prerogative to men, but to be solicitous for women's interests and rights.

a woman could be divorced with or w/o her consent but a man can only be divorced with his consent.

only the adulterous woman had to be divorced, and the talmudic lawyers tended to drag their feet in all other cases, so as to maximize chances for reconciliation.

the detailed procedures of preparing the gett, or bill of divorce, and the necessity of paying the kethubah, or marriage settlement, militated against hasty divorce actions.

women who gave scandal, could be divorced w/o receiving the kethubah, and could include appearing in public with an uncovered head, being loud-mouthed, or spinning in the street. (Ket. 7:6)

Desertion, no matter how long, was not cause for divorce. unless a woman could muster 2 male witnesses (women could neither be judges nor witnesses) to say he was dead, she could not remarry.

in relaxed interpretation however, one witness, and that even a woman could suffice.

religiously, the central talmudic view that women were not obliged to learn Torah effectively kept them from full participation.

women were not held to positive commandments that entailed actions at specific times (like prayer) because these could conflict with their household duties.

some rabbis argued that these exemptions would remove a woman from her husband's direct control in terms of the biblical injunction "he shall rule over you."

women could not be counted in a minyan, the quorum necessary for a prayer service, nor could they preside at a prayer service.

tho there seems to have been no law against women being called to read Torah, this was not done because of "the dignity of the congregation" (Meg. 23a)

women were obliged to recite the prayers that welcomed the sabbath, and bid it farewell, to attend a seder meal on passover, and to hear the Purim reading of the book of Esther.

it also evolved that women were required to visit the mikvah, or ritual bath, seven days after menstruation, to separate the dough to make the sabbath loaves, and to light the sabbath candles.

other laws were those of diet (kosher), and since women were responsible for preparing the food, they often became quiet expert in the laws for keeping kosher.

the spiritual domain of public religion was thoroughly male.

this meant that women were spectators at public ceremonies, separated from the men, prayed silently, and were "enablers" of

THE TORAH OFFERED TO ISRAEL

On the second day of the third month, Moses received word from God to betake himself to Mount Sinai, for without this direct summons he would not have gone there. This time, as at all times, when God desired to speak with Moses, He twice called him by name, and after he had answered, "Here I am," God's revelation to him followed.¹⁸⁸ When Moses had been carried to God in a cloud, which was always ready to bear him to God and then restore him to men, God said to him: "Go and acquaint the women of Israel with the principles of Judaism, and try with kindly words to persuade them to accept the Torah; but expound the full contents of the Torah to the men, and with them speak solemn words concerning it."

There were several reasons for his going to the women first. God said: "When I created the world, I gave My commandment concerning the forbidden fruit to Adam only, and not to his wife Eve, and this omission had the effect that she tempted Adam to sin. Hence it appears advisable that the women first hear My commandments, and the men will then follow their counsel."¹⁸⁹ God, furthermore, knew that women are more scrupulous in their observance of religious precepts, and hence He first addressed Himself to

them. Then, too, God expected the women to instruct their children in the ways of the Torah, wherefore He sent His messenger first to them.¹⁹⁰

men's learning and piety.

the "image" of women in the Talmud runs the gamut.

great praise one one end, for instance, when the people asked Rabbi Abba Hilkia to pray for rain, he took his wife and went upstairs.

each stood in a separate corner, begging God for mercy. the first cloud to appear came from the direction of the wife's corner (ta'Anit 23a,b)

similarly, women were regarded as more compassionate to the poor. When Mar Ukba and his wife were in great physical danger, she confided to him that no harm would befall them, because of her many kindnesses to the poor. (Ket. 67b)

Rabbi Meir, who was wont to pray that all sinners perish, was scolded by his wife Beruriah, who reminded him that Psalm 104 asks for disappearance of all sin, not all sinners. thus women are credited with cleverness.

women may be religiously discerning. they may also be saintly.

Many rabbis opine that women fulfill the ritual laws more enthusiastically than men. - read midrash on moses - opposite pg 19

Beruriah, wife of Rabbi Meir, not only was resolute in accepting her two sons' death, but she was a brilliant student of Torah, mastering three hundred laws a day and zealous for scholarship.

she had a sad end. since she scoffed at the rabbinical saying "women are lightminded" her husband Rabbi Meir, to test

her virtue, told one of his students to seduce her.

eventually she yielded, and then, for her shame, committed suicide.

her disgrace was attributed by later rabbis to feminine weakness.

thus, in the measure that women gain religious prominence, a certain critical, even misogynistic, tendency raises its head.

Beruriah is perhaps the most egregious example, but even the kprophetesses Deborah and Huldah do not escape rebuke.

Deborah is criticized for being haughty and is called a hornet;

Huldah is called a weasel.

more predictably, the rabbis churn out a regular theme that woman is a temptress.

the female's voice, hair, and legs are especially bothersome to sages, who cite them as enticements o sexual arousal.

there is a tendency to portray women as sexually ardent, even rapacious, so much so that a mythology of female spirits of seduction appeared.

The myth of Lileth, Adam's first wife, arose. She wanted to be the boss, even to being on top during intercourse, so God cast her out and gave him Eve. *if time do story on tape @ 15 min*

along this line one reads: "it is forbidden for a man to sleep alone in the house, and whoever sleeps alone in a house

will be seized by Lilith." (Shab. 15b) - *show clip of Lilith -*

excessive conversation with a woman, even one's wife, could cause a man to lose his good memory (a must for talmudic scholarship).

if a menstruous woman passed between two scholars at the beginning of her period, she would kill one of them; at the end of her period, she would just bring them to strife.

two women sitting facing one another at a crossroads are surely engaged in witchcraft (Pes. 111a)

in fact, the majority of women are inclined to witchcraft" (Sanh. 67a)

the menstrual taboos and accusations of witchcraft, of course, reveal an archaic--one might say primitive--strand in talmudic religion.

More "rational" were the talmudic stereotypes of women: "Four qualities are ascribed to women: they are gluttonous, eavesdroppers, lazy, and jealous" (Gen. R 58.2)

Women were considered Garrulous as well: "Ten measures of speech descended to the world; women took nine and men one" (Kid. 47b)

on occasion, women are also held to crave luxury, be prone to anger, and show extreme cruelty to one another.

an example of this last vice is the neighbor of a starving woman who wandered over to "see what she was cooking," but actually went to shame her for her poverty. (Ta'Anit 24b-25a)

the scholars continued the biblical ambivalence toward women.

some scholars have traced the beginnings of biblical misogyny to the influence of the priestly tradition which had its greatest influence during and after the exile.

Ezekiel's and Zechariah's tendency to correlate femaleness with religious uncleanness is an example.

by the end of the post-exilic period and the beginning of the talmudic era, woman was widely considered to be impure, subordinate, inferior.

as heirs to the Pharisaic branch of the priestly tradition, the rabbis did will to pick up the early biblical symbols which used female love to symbolize God's care and to have an eye for the good women of devotion and brain in their midst.

on the one hand, they came to call Torah God's "daughter" and Israel's bride.

on the other hand, a woman could be described as a "pitcher full of filth with its mouth full of blood." (Shab. 152a).

Talmudic-era women did sometimes fight back, however. One sprightly woman, after Rabbi Judah decided a case against her, complained that his teacher Samuel would have given her better justice.

when asked, patronizingly, if she knew Samuel, she replied, "O yes. He was squat, potbellied, large-toothed."

for this she was promptly excommunicated. (Ned. 50b)

Talmudic attitudes toward women formed most of Jewish culture
thru the Middle ages .

a forthcoming lecture will cover Jewish women from the middle
ages thru