

JEWISH ANTECEDENTS

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ANY GENERAL statement on the place of the jewish woman in history would be an absurd simplification or a dogmatic assertion. All that can be attempted in a short space is to draw some inferences from individual examples.

Genesis begins by telling us that 'the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the water'.¹ The hebrew word for spirit is *ruach*, which is usually a feminine term; indeed, the verb for 'moving' upon the face of the waters is given in its feminine form, *merachefet*. From the outset, then, the Spirit of God embodies the principle of femininity; and this is taken up again in the jewish mystical tradition, where the term *shechinah* is used to express the immanent presence of God. The same idea continues to be developed, from jewish gnosticism to the mysticism of the Kabbalah, with the same stress on the feminine principle. Though these texts are comparatively late (Genesis is now dated in its present form as belonging to the fourth century B.C.), they contain much ancient material.

In the biblical texts concerning the four matriarchs, Sarah, Leah, Rachel and Rebekah, the women are described as of strong individual character and will-power.² Yet they are not idealized, nor are their imperfections glossed over, as can be seen in the case of Sarah and Hagar.³ Frequently they are presented as being barren over a long period; a situation which poses acute problems in a patriarchal society. Sarah, the first and greatest of the matriarchs, only bears Isaac in old age.⁴ It would be interesting to know more about Leah, who bore her husband six children;⁵ but she is overshadowed in the biblical narrative by the favourite Rachel, who died in child-birth, having given life to only two children.⁶ Since children were regarded as the real wealth of the patriarchs, the story of Jacob's affection for Rachel stresses the importance of the personal relationship between husband and wife,⁷ a point made even more directly in the moving words of Elkanah, the father of

¹ Gen 1, 2.

³ Gen 21, 9-14.

⁵ Gen 29, 31-35.

⁷ Gen 29, 18.

² Gen 12-23; 29-33; 29-35; 22-29.

⁴ Gen 18, 11-12.

⁶ Gen 35, 17-20.

the prophet Samuel, when he asked his then barren wife, Hannah, 'am I not better to thee than ten sons?'⁸

Although polygamy was theoretically possible, it was strongly discouraged by the Rabbis. Marriage was (and is still) regarded as a sacred relationship, a consecration (*Kiddushin*); and it therefore implies a deep reverence and respect for women. One witness to this is a well-known passage of the *Mishnah*, a composition of the oral law, compiled in the second century A.D. where it is stated that women are exempt from those religious observances which demand fulfilment at specified times, since such observances might conflict with women's domestic duties.⁹ Women, however, are bound by the commandments as much as men, and are expected to fulfil all other observances where circumstances permit.

A post-biblical though ancient prayer in the authorized orthodox morning service, in which men thank God because he has not made them women, is paralleled by the woman's prayer of thanksgiving to God for making her according to his will. However, the man's prayer has been eliminated from the progressive liturgies, because it may be misunderstood and regarded as offensive. It has also been interpreted as thanksgiving for the greater opportunities offered to men for the performance of religious duties. A more common-sense view sees the prayer as realistic, since women's lot may be harsh and painful.

One of the great Jewish women of the biblical period was Deborah, seer, poet and prophetess. Her song of triumph is accepted as historical and belonging to the period of the Canaanite wars, in the first decades of the twelfth century B.C.¹⁰ In Talmudic times also, Jewish women achieve distinction. Such a one was Beraryah, a great personality, teacher and authority on legal questions, who lived in the second century A.D. The daughter of Rabbi Hanania and the wife of Rabbi Meir, she fulfilled the role of Rabbi herself. The Talmud relates stories of her piety and strength of will, best exemplified in her keeping from her husband, on the Sabbath, the death of their two sons, lest his grief should interfere with his religious observances. Later and clearly fictional tales speak of her seduction by one of her husband's disciples and her suicide: such tales are indication of the pervasive anti-feminism of the middle ages, when outstanding women were usually down-graded.¹¹

⁸ 1 Sam I, 8.

¹⁰ Jg 5, 1-31.

⁹ *Kiddushin* I, 7.

¹¹ Rashi (1040-1105 A.D.) to *Avoda Zara*, 18b.

The sanctity of jewish marriage has already been alluded to; and the importance of the wife and mother in the culture continues to be symbolized in the custom of her ushering in the sabbath by the kindling of two lights. It is the housewife who sets the tone of the home; and the extent of her influence is attested by the fact that all children of jewish women are legally regarded as Jews as long as they are the offspring of lawful unions or relationships.¹² The roots of this influence are to be found in the description of the virtuous woman, the *eshet chayil*, in Proverbs.¹³ The date of the different parts of this text is controversial, but the passages may have a long ancestry, going back perhaps to the period of the kings. The woman described is shrewd, active and hard working. She is in complete charge of the household, an expert business woman and highly competent financially. She is also a highly honoured citizen and certainly not without political influence. It is striking how closely she resembles Mrs Golda Meir, who became the first ambassador of Israel to the U.S.S.R., then Prime Minister of Israel, and is now retired, a grandmother and still an active leader. She was accepted by the great majority of Israelis, not only for political reasons, but also because she was a great leader.

The legal position of jewish women has changed over the centuries, especially more recently, because the laws of the land of residence are fundamentally binding on all Jews. However, the bible already knows the rights of maintenance and even of inheritance for daughters and other female members of the family when no corresponding male survivors exist.¹⁴ Certain restrictions remain in orthodox circles, because a civil divorce is valid only if a letter of divorce, a *get*, is given by the husband. Although originally only the husband had the right of divorce, rabbis could (and still can) force the husband to give one, if the wife so wished. Furthermore, they enacted that no wife should be divorced against her will. Pecuniary arrangements were stringent and fixed in the marriage contract, the *Ketubbah*. The wife retained possessions of her dowry similar to the provisions found in the Code of Hammurabi (c. 1800 B.C.). Although divorce was permitted, the rabbis frowned upon it: 'Whosoever divorces his first wife, even the altar sheds tears'.¹⁵ A disability found in orthodoxy concerns the *agunah*, the widow who cannot remarry because there are no witnesses testifying to her

¹² Deut 23, 3.

¹⁴ Num 27, 8-11.

¹³ Prov 31, 10-31.

¹⁵ *Gittin*, gob; cf Mal 2, 14-16.

husband's death. This situation can be circumvented by contract between the spouses. Levirate marriage¹⁶ is superseded in monogamous societies by *Chalitzah*, the freeing of the widow from the obligation to marry her brother-in-law. These restrictions are not observed in the progressive jewish movements, but they continue to pose problems in the State of Israel.

It is true to say that polygamy was permissible in judaism, although not encouraged up to the eleventh century, the period of the well-known Rabbi Gershon of Worms, who ruled over the *Ashkenazi*, german-jewish communities. In these communities polygamy was forbidden. Certainly the jewish ideal of marriage has always been monogamous, as exemplified by Adam and Eve, the common ancestors of mankind. Furthermore, none of the famous rabbis of the past was ever polygamous.

The Renaissance opened new windows on the world, and jewish women were no exception. One of the most outstanding is Gracia Nasi (c. 1510–69) of marrano descent, a wise stateswoman and patroness of learning and scholarship. (*Marranos* are the forcibly baptized Jews of Spain and Portugal.) She travelled widely, settled in Constantinople, where the atmosphere under turkish rule was friendly, and a synagogue was there dedicated to her, *La Señora* or *Ha-Geveret*.

A complete contrast is seen in the best known representative of *Ashkenazi*, german jewry. Glueckel of Hamelin lived from 1645 to 1724, and kept a regular diary, which reveals that, despite her wide travels, her life was confined to the jewish community and family. Her reminiscences, written in Yiddish, a mainly german-jewish idiom, are not only of literary merit, but represent a vivid picture of her emotions and surroundings.

Jewish women have also left their mark in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the period of enlightenment and emancipation. The confined life of the Jews was then regarded as restrictive and even shameful, and assimilation to european culture on a grand scale first appeared as a desirable goal. Typical of this time was Rahel Levin (1771–1833), who was baptized as a Lutheran and married the statesman Karl August Varnhagen von Ense in 1814. Up to about 1809, before the impact of the Napoleonic Wars, she was a renowned hostess. Her Berlin *salon* was visited by prussian aristocrats and the nobility, among them Prince Louis Ferdinand.

¹⁶ Deut 25, 7.

However, she never relinquished her jewish consciousness and her sensitivity to suffering, and pronounced on her deathbed: 'I was born a Jewess; nor do I now regret this privilege in any way'.

Another outstanding personality was Dorothea (1763-1839), the daughter of the famous jewish philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn. Twice married, she was first the wife of the banker Simon Veit and later of the writer Friedrich Schlegel. She was first converted to protestanism, later to catholicism, and was the author of a novel *Florentin*, published in 1801, which expressed her individualism and her romantic leanings.

The jewish woman of history thus emerges as a wife and mother.¹⁷ We have to wait until the late nineteenth century, and social influences that are predominantly english, before the unmarried Jewess appears as a personality in her own right. One of the most prominent was Lily Montagu (1873-1963), who became a lay preacher, youth leader, social worker and Justice of the Peace, as well as a successful organizer of the World Union for Progressive Judaism. Like Florence Nightingale, Octavia Hill and many other english women, she was wholeheartedly devoted to her work and seems to have been completely assimilated to english life. The problems of zionism never penetrated her consciousness, not even the disasters of the german holocaust.

Now, however, the situation has changed entirely. The land of Israel is a common concern for all contemporary Jews, men and women alike: jewish women there have done a great deal in the field of social work. Wizo, the Women's International Zionist Organization, and Hadassah of America, the Zionist Women's Organization, have stimulated self-help, founded baby homes and hospitals, and are helpful to arab as well as jewish women and children. They know neither racial nor religious prejudice and they exist to serve.

The greatest problem, and perhaps the most poignant for the jewish parent today, is that of inter-marriage. Proselytes have always been accepted in judaism, although with some reluctance, because many of the best known jew-baiters and anti-semites were baptized Jews. On the other hand, the story of the Moabite Ruth, and her jewish mother-in-law, Naomi,¹⁸ testifies to a sublime family

¹⁷ The recent malevolent descriptions of the jewish matriarch, by american writers like Saul Bellow, belong to the contemporary spirit of alienation.

¹⁸ Cf Ruth 1, 15-18.

relationship; but this nowadays is, in many cases, not even a pious aspiration. However, christian and jew alike would agree that it is essential to preserve the religious unity of the home and also of the education of children; and therefore even a proselyte of doubtful conviction and insight can provide a valuable link in order to maintain the integrity of the family.

Finally, what of the spiritual heritage and future of the jewish woman?¹⁹ Margarete Susman (1874–1966), the philosopher and writer, and Hannah Arendt (born 1906), the biographer and thinker, have paved the way. Women rabbis are being ordained and officiate in the progressive jewish movements of America and in this country; and one great lyric jewish woman poet, Else Lasker-Schueler (1869–1945), has illumined and interpreted the traditions of the jewish people. No female parallel to Martin Buber or Leo Baeck has yet emerged, but the faith of jewish women is becoming more articulate and thus leads into the future. They will, we trust, spiritually rekindle the lights lit by their ancestors, and discover new paths in the service of God.

Select Bibliography

The literature on the subject of the jewish woman is naturally vast. Most studies of biblical literature are relevant. For a brief introduction, cf Whitley, G. F.: *The Genius of Ancient Israel* (Amsterdam, 1969). On the position of women from a traditional point of view see Loewe, R.: *The Position of Women in Judaism* (London, 1966); from a progressive viewpoint, cf Rayner, J. D.: 'Woman's status in Judaism', in *Reform Judaism* (ed. D. Marmor, London, 1973), pp 198ff. Joan Comay's book: *Who's Who in the Old Testament together with the Apocrypha* is an unpretentious work of reference (London, 1971). On marriage and divorce, cf Mielziner, M.: *The Jewish Law of Marriage and Divorce* (Cincinnati 1884), which is still valuable. Rahel Varnhagen is the subject of a monograph, *Rahel Varnhagen, the Life of a Jewish Women* (London, 1957), which is the work of Hannah Arendt, well known as a writer and philosopher. As a human and religious document, Lily H. Montagu's book: *The Faith of a Jewish Women* (London, 1943), is an important historical source.

¹⁹ In this connection, Simone Weil (1909–43) is worthy of mention. Her thought has deep christological orientations; but despite this, she refused baptism and felt unable to join the christian Church. One may perhaps detect here an unconscious trait of loyalty to her jewish descent.