

**THE ROLE AND POSITION OF JEWISH WOMEN BETWEEN
200 BCE - 200 CE**

by

HÉLÈNE RHONA LIEF

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SUPERVISOR: DR A H E ASHER

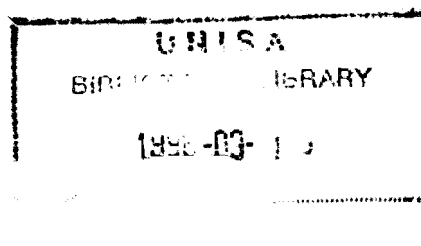
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This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Stanley, whose faith in my ability to complete the task was a constant source of inspiration to me.

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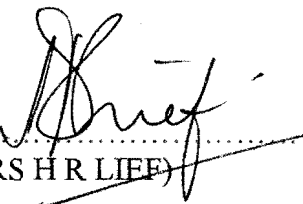


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(MRS H R LIFF)

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SUMMARY

This dissertation examines the role and position of Jewish women in the Near East between 200 BCE - 200 CE. This was a very important period in Jewish legal and cultural history.

The redaction of the Mishnah, the oldest extant body of Jewish law, was completed at approximately the end of the time under review, and was to have a lasting influence on the Jewish people.

No society exists in a vacuum. During these years the Jews lived within the Graeco-Roman Empire and this reflected on their attitudes towards women.

To appreciate this it has been necessary to go back in time to the Hebrew Bible and to trace any attitudinal changes which occurred over the centuries.

Although the Mishnah has been regarded as the *terminus ad quem* of this investigation, brief mention is also made of prevailing attitudes affecting women in present day Jewish society.

KEY TERMS

Biblical women; Apocryphal writings relating to women; Pseudepigraphal writings reflecting attitudes to women; Mishnaic attitude to women; Women in the Graeco-Roman world; Josephus and his attitudes to women; Philo's assessment of women; Women leaders in the ancient synagogues, Feminism

ABBREVIATIONS

HEBREW BIBLE

Genesis	Gen
Exodus	Ex
Leviticus	Lev
Numbers	Num
Deuteronomy	Deut
Joshua	Josh
Judges	Judg
I Samuel	I Sam
II Samuel	II Sam
II Chronicles	II Chron
Psalms	Ps
Proverbs	Prov

NEW TESTAMENT

Matthew	Mt
Mark	Mk

APOCRYPHA & PSEUDEPIGRAPHA

Ben Sirach	Sir
Judith	Jdt
Susanna	Sus
Tobit	Tob
Wisdom of Solomon	Wis
Jubilees	Jub
IV Maccabees	IV Mac
Testament of Job	TJob

PHILO

De Legatione ad Gaium	Leg
De Specialibus Legibus	Spec Leg

JOSEPHUS

Antiquities Judaicae	Ant
Bellum Judaicae	BJ
Contra Apionem	ConAp
Vita	Vit

MISHNAH & TALMUD

Babylonian Talmud	TB/b
Jerusalem Talmud	TJ/a

Abot	Ab
Baba Bathra	BB
Berakhot	Ber
Bikkurim	Bikk
Gittin	Gitt
Ketuboth	Ket
Kiddushin	Kidd
Megillah	Meg
Nazir	Naz
Niddah	Nid
Sanhedrin	Sanh
Shabbath	Shab
Sotah	Sot
Sukkoth	Suk
Genesis Rabbah	GenR
Tosefta Megilla	TosMeg
Tosefta	Tosef
Yoma	Yom
Yebamoth	Yeb

JOURNAL ABBREVIATIONS

Biblical Archaeologist	BA
Catholic Biblical Commentary	CBC
Catholic Biblical Quarterly	CBQ
Journal of American Academy of Religion	JAAR
Journal of Jewish Studies	JJS
Lexington Theological Quarterly	LTQ
Society of Biblical Literature	SBL

Encyclopaedia Judaica	EJ
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MAPS AND CHARTS

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• THE JEWISH DIASPORA IN BABYLONIA, ASIA MINOR AND GREECE - The Macmillan Bible Atlas (p117)	34A
• PALESTINE UNDER THE MACCABEES - Hammond's Atlas of Bible Lands (pB23)	72A
• THE HOUSE OF MACCABEES AND HASMONEANS - Hammond's Atlas of Bible Lands (pB41)	84A
• THE ROMAN WORLD - Hammond's Atlas of Bible Lands (ppB24-25)	139A

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 AIMS

The intention of this dissertation is to examine the role and position of Jewish women in the period from 200 BCE until the redaction of the Mishnah (ca 200 CE). Although the main thrust of this dissertation covers these four centuries, it has been necessary to start with the Hebrew Bible to discover the attitudes prevailing under the patriarchal society of that time. The area of concern is confined to the Near East and it will be demonstrated that in certain instances the surrounding cultures influenced the thoughts expressed by Jewish writers.

As far as possible an attempt has been made to present a balanced view of the attitudes towards women over the centuries. In recent years, with the upsurge of feminist thought, there has been an abundance of literature propounding these ideals, as well as a denigration of biblical and later rabbinic attitudes towards women. It must, however, be pointed out that much of the rhetoric regarding biblical commentary is an interpretation of the texts by these writers. By virtue of the subjective and often emotional nature of commentary, this lends itself to bias and prejudice. However, it does not require a radical feminist to underline the many instances of antagonism shown to women and the subordinate position in which they were held from biblical times onwards and, indeed, often labour under to the present day.

1.2 METHOD

In conformity with Jewish practice, the letters BCE (Before the Common Era) and

CE (Common Era), are used in place of BC (Before Christ) and AD (*Anno Domini* - The Year of Our Lord) respectively. Use has been made of both primary and secondary sources, the former wholly in translation. The Revised Standard Version of the Bible has been used, as well as the Revised Standard Version of the Annotated Oxford Apocrypha. Charlesworth's commentary on The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha was used for the texts in Chapter 5. The Augmented Harvard System will be used in references.

This dissertation is written from a Jewish perspective. This fact must be emphasised as the viewpoint is distinctly different from that of Christianity, e.g. Christianity accepts Eve as an evildoer and regards sin and death as the negative results of her actions. However, at no time do the rabbis blame her for the ills of the world. The Jewish attitude is that man and woman are given freedom of choice and the opportunity to atone for any wrongdoing on their part. Use has been made of many Jewish texts such as the Mishnah and the Talmud (see Bibliography).

1.3 CHAPTER 2 - WOMEN IN BIBLICAL LITERATURE

Despite the decidedly patriarchal attitude of biblical narrative, an attempt will be made to ascertain whether there were any instances of women playing a strong role outside the home environment. It is known that the Matriarchs were important in determining the destinies of their families. Questions will be posed and answered as to whether they were at any stage considered important in activities outside the domestic sphere.

This dissertation will consider the Matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel; Miriam, Deborah and Huldah the prophetesses; the Wise Women of Tekoah and Abel; Ruth, Naomi and Esther, as well as some other influential women in biblical literature in order to discover the answer to this question.

1.4 CHAPTERS 3 AND 4 - WOMEN IN APOCRYPHAL AND PSEUDEPIGRAPHAL WRITINGS

Literary activity did not cease with the canonisation of the Bible and there is much to be learned of attitudes towards women by studying these two groups of extra-canonical writings. Although written at approximately the same time (200 BCE - 100 CE) it was decided to discuss them under separate chapters. The Apocrypha for the most part is comprised of anonymous historical and ethical works, whilst the Pseudepigrapha is composed of more visionary works, apocalyptic in nature and all “characterised by a stringent asceticism and dealing with the mysteries of creation and working out of good and evil from a gnostic standpoint” (EJ 1971, Vol 3:182).

In the discussion on the Apocrypha, parallels between biblical narrative and the re-telling of these stories at this later age will be highlighted. An attempt will be made to link the story of Judith with that of Deborah and Jael in the *Book of Judges*. Ben Sirach’s writing will be examined to ascertain whether it reflected a literary genre prevalent in the Bible. It will be demonstrated that the moral life as dictated by biblical injunctions, formed the basis of the stories of *Susannah* and *Tobit* while in the *Wisdom of Solomon* proverbs were given a Hellenistic slant.

An attempt will be made to show that in the Pseudepigrapha biblical characters are often used to give greater credence to the narrative. Thus in the re-writing of the *Book of Job* where women are largely ignored, they are discussed in great detail in the pseudepigraphal *Testament of Job*.

It is the aim of this dissertation to demonstrate the influence biblical literature exerted on writers of this period, and also to ascertain whether in fact attitudes were modified or changed in any significant fashion during the period under consideration.

1.5 **CHAPTER 5 - JEWISH WOMEN IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN PERIOD (THIRD-FIRST CENTURY BCE)**

An attempt will be made to reflect the influence surrounding cultures had on Jewish thought in Palestine and the diaspora. Here Josephus is one of the most important sources of information. Philo, the Alexandrian philosopher, is an invaluable commentator of the time. As these two writers lived in the Hellenistic world, they reflected an exchange of ideas between the cultures. This dissertation will endeavour to explain the reasons for their attitudes to women as contained in their writings.

1.6 **CHAPTER 6 - POSITION OF WOMEN IN RABBINIC JUDAISM**

Rabbinic thought and literature did not come to an abrupt end with the redaction of the Mishnah (ca 200 CE). However for purposes of this dissertation it has been decided to use this classic text as the *terminus ad quem*. This legal system entrenched many laws, some based on biblical injunctions. Others were developed over the centuries and were considered by the rabbis to be imperative and indispensable for the survival of their people. In the discussion of these laws, an attempt will be made to assess their value for the community in general and women in particular. Parallels will be drawn with Graeco-Roman law in an effort to ascertain whether Jewish women were in a better position than their counterparts in the surrounding cultures, or whether they shared similar disadvantages.

1.7 **CHAPTER 7 - CONCLUSION**

In Chapter 7 it is proposed to summarise the conclusions arrived at after the examination of the abovementioned subjects. An attempt will be made to show the influence biblical thought and literature had upon subsequent authors and their attitudes to women. Consideration will be given as to whether there has been any change in these attitudes through the ages and whether, in fact, conditions are very

different in the present day. It is hoped that by Chapter 7 this dissertation will have satisfactorily demonstrated the aims it set out to achieve.

CHAPTER 2

WOMEN IN BIBLICAL LITERATURE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In order to examine the role and position of Jewish women in the years leading up to the redaction of the Mishnah (ca 200 CE) one must of necessity go back to biblical times. The study of attitudes to women in Hebrew Bible literature will have a very important bearing on the development and understanding of these attitudes in the following centuries. It is important to look at the geographical setting of the world that produced this literature as well as the sources themselves.

2.1.1 Geographic and climatic conditions

The land of Israel was situated in a narrowly confined space within which the Israelite tribes had their settlements. The north-east and the south contained fertile plains, small hills and valleys. The centre of the land had lowlands along the Mediterranean coast on the west, and hills and mountains on the east. The southernmost part was mainly desert, hot and humid along the coast, especially in summer. Naturally life was very different on the fertile plains from that in the mountainous areas or the hot, desert-like soil of the Jordan valley. On the western sides of the mountains, heavy winter rains prevailed, creating conditions different from the eastern slopes where there was low rainfall. The warm maritime plains with their high humidity provided a very productive area in contrast to the poor soils in the mountainous and desert regions in which shepherds and flocks depended on a few springs for water (Noth 1983:9-10). The climatic conditions played an important role in the

settlement of people and from the diversity of terrain it is easy to understand conditions of life must have varied greatly from region to region.

2.1.2 Social units

The patriarchal tribes of the earliest period described in *Genesis* lived as their ancestors had, as nomads or semi-nomads in the desert. They raised sheep and goats and engaged in seasonal agriculture. At different times they lived on outskirts of towns and cities under the protection of the settled population, but they lived according to their own customs. Their survival depended on strong tribal ties. The smallest unit was the patriarchal family comprised of a man and wife, sons and their wives and families, unmarried children and servants. Several families formed a clan whose members aided each other, claiming a common ancestor and recognising a common leader. These clans formed a tribe which had an obligation to care for and protect their weaker members.

2.1.3 Dating of Patriarchal period

There are many theories regarding the dating of the patriarchal period of biblical history. Lerner (1986:163) states that most scholars date this period to the first half of the second millennium BCE, quoting historical evidence in the documents from the royal archives of Mari, dating from ca 1800 BCE, in which the conditions in Haran, Abraham's homeland, are described. Noth (1983:84) states that numerous texts from the fifteenth century BCE found in the ancient city of Nuzu support the theory that the settlement of the Israelites in Canaan was part of a wider historical movement and took place during the transition from the Bronze to the Iron Age. Bright (1981:83) emphasises the difficulties in dating the patriarchal period because of limitations of evidence. The exodus from Egypt has been dated by archaeological evidence as falling in the reign of Rameses II (ca 1290 - 1224 BCE). Some scholars believe the conquest of Canaan under Joshua was completed by 1250 BCE which marked the end of the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age in Palestine (Lerner 1986:164).

The Hebrews who were semi-nomadic tribes conquering Canaan became settled in a region which had been sparsely settled due to climatic conditions. Lerner goes on to make a most logical observation by stating that the need for agricultural labour in settling in this desert environment, and the concurrent loss of population due to wars and epidemics, may well explain the biblical emphasis on the family and on woman's procreative role.

Niditch (1991:26) identifies Israelite history as being divided into three major periods: (1) Time before the monarchy (before ca 1000 BCE), (2) the period of monarchy (ca 1000 - 586 BCE) and (3) post monarchic period (586 BCE on). Obviously attitudes and social structures of the communities as well as positions of power changed over this long period. In the first period the leaders were the elders, the persons engaged in cultic activities and the military men. Once the monarchy was established the king held a supreme position and his relatives and courtiers exerted an enormous influence in high circles. After the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE the monarchy was abolished and the Israelites were exiled to Babylon. From that time onwards, according to Brenner (1985:13), the priests, religious teachers, the scribes and the prophets began to play an increasingly important role in society, as well as contributing greatly to the development of Judaism.

2.1.4 Inhabitants in the land of Canaan

As striking as the variety of the land itself so was the variety of its people. The Bible refers to people from numerous backgrounds, Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, Girgashites, Jebusites and Philistines. Surrounding the area were Phoenicians, Ammonites, Moabites and Edomites. The Israelites were the most numerous people within the boundaries of the land from the twelfth century BCE onwards and it is about these people whom most of the biblical stories are told. The land of Israel lay along the trade routes of travel between Africa and Asia and as a result the influences of Egypt and Mesopotamia were felt in the region.

The diversity in Hebrew Bible concepts of, and attitudes to women are influenced in great part by the differences in time of the writing and by the socio-religious context. Bird (1974:47) points out that the texts span close to a millennium in their dates of composition “while particular themes, motifs, images and languages may derive from even earlier periods and cultures”.

As has been indicated there were many different peoples living in close proximity with each other in a small region. It is not difficult to understand how a certain syncretism arose with different groups incorporating each other's beliefs and mores and adopting them as their own. Soggin (1983:57) makes the valid point that the people of Israel are an inseparable part of the wider context of the people of the ancient Near East, especially the western Semites. He states “This is true ethically, linguistically, historically and culturally; it is also true within certain limits, of Israelite religion, a field in which Israel represents the exception rather than the rule. Israel's position becomes understandable only against the above-mentioned background”.

2.1.5 Biblical literature

The use of biblical narrative as a historic document rests on a solid foundation. Lerner (1986:161) states that there is a close correlation between archaeological discoveries of the ancient Near East cultures and the Bible, re-inforcing the point just made. She goes on to state that it is generally accepted that earlier Sumero-Babylonian, Canaanite and Egyptian cultural and religious materials were adapted by redactors of the Bible. However the use of biblical text as a source of historical material does present problems because of the complexity of its authorship, its purposes, and its sources. However it does provide the literary source for information on women and their role in society at that time.

The section of the Bible, which is the body of sacred literature traditionally accepted as authoritative because it is believed to be divinely inspired, is known as the Canon. This concept is distinctively and characteristically Jewish. It was of prime impor-

tance and the animating force of Jewish existence. Its precepts and teachings were impressed on the mind and soul of the nation. The canonised scriptures were looked upon as the faithful witness to the national past, the embodiment of the hopes and dreams of a glorious future, and a guarantee of their fulfilment (EJ 1971, Vol 4:818). Alongside the Written Law (Canon) there was the Oral Law which is the authoritative interpretation of the former and was regarded as having been given to Moses at Sinai and was therefore coexistent with that Law.

However, the books which comprise the Canon could not be the entire literary output of ancient Israel. The scriptures themselves bear testimony to the existence of an extensive literature now lost, and the very concept of a scriptural Canon presupposes a process of selection extending over a long period (EJ 1971, Vol 4:819). There is also a wealth of information to be gleaned from the non-canonical literature which became available during the middle of the second century BCE.

This tradition of the authorship of the Pentateuch has given way, apart from strictly orthodox belief, to the acceptance that the Bible, whether divinely inspired or not, was the work of many hands. Meyers (1988:11) makes the very interesting point that the Bible is for the most part the result of the literary activity of a small section of the Israelite population. Most of the Five Books of Moses are the product of a literary elite, namely the result of priestly activity. This was an all-male, hereditary group with its leadership based in the Temple. Most of the historical writings were probably based on court records and traditions circulating in royal circles. Here again a largely male dominated society was responsible for the narratives of Israel's national existence. As a result the fragments of information about women come from sources removed from the lives of most of the people. The writer of this dissertation agrees with Meyers (1988:12) when she says that these facts are reflected in the androcentric orientation of the Bible. **"The priestly, royal and gubernatorial establishment was not only unrepresentative of women; it was also unrepresentative of the population as a whole. Priests, kings, officers and bureaucrats were elite groups; as such they were removed from the masses of the population, both male and female"**.

Bird (1974:47) states that the Hebrew Bible is a man's book "where women appear for the most part as adjuncts of men, significant only in the context of men's activities". She further maintains that despite occasional vivid and individualistic portrayals, the great majority of women referred to appear more as stereotypes rather than real historical individuals. Even where a woman has become a legendary figure, and where "force of character or peculiarity of vocation or position has procured a unique place for her" the role played by her is almost exclusively a subordinate or supporting one. Bird (1974:60) further maintains that these women are essentially minor characters necessary to the plot that revolves around males. Occasionally they may steal the limelight but the story is rarely about them.

The opinion of this dissertation is that this is a very sweeping statement and does not take cognisance of the times in which these events occurred, and agrees with Meyers (1978:102) who argues that it is important to recognise that, however limited in proportion to males such leadership may have been, this position was thoroughly accepted and acceptable.

2.2 THE STORY OF CREATION

Otwell (1977:15) states, that if we go back to the story of creation there is no hint of the subordination of women. Humanity was created male and female and no sex is elevated above the other. He says that the differentiation and inference that Eve was the "evildoer" owes its credence to later Judaism when biblical passages were translated and interpreted by the rabbis during Talmudic times. **However the author of this dissertation cannot accept Otwell's assertion and feels this is a Christian viewpoint.** In fact the Rabbis never blamed Eve nor is there any mention of sin in the text of the story. The Jewish attitude is that man or woman is given freedom of choice and the chance to atone for wrongdoing. God did not withdraw his care for Adam and Eve. Hertz (1990:11) makes it clear that the serpent was the tempter and instigator of the offence, and it is the serpent who is cursed and not its dupes or victims.

It is later interpretations by Christians of this story that infer Eve was the evildoer. Higgins (1976:639) says that the temptress in its various forms cannot be explained except in terms of presuppositions of individual commentators and cultural explanations. She emphasises that there is a logical risk in reading the phrase in *Genesis* 3:6 “and she gave some to her husband, and he ate” as the equivalent of tempting and leading into sin. Doing so requires the reading into the text of what is in fact not evident.

Meyers (1988:75) points out that Eve is not mentioned again in Hebrew scripture and only appears later in the non-canonical or apocryphal literature of Ben Sirach, or *Ecclesiasticus*, which will be discussed in Chapter 3. Ben Sirach associates sin with Eve and is the first known author to state that sin and death are the negative results of a woman’s act. “... this early sage provided one of the most extraordinarily tenacious interpretations of a biblical narrative”. **The same attitude may be found in the New Testament in passages such as I Timothy 2:13-14 where not only is Eve associated with sin but her creation is viewed as secondary, and by implication, of lesser importance.**

Trible (1976:226) uses the story of eating of the forbidden fruit in a most interesting fashion viewing it as she does from a feminist point of view. She indicates that the decision to take the fruit and eat is Eve’s alone. “There is no consultation with her husband. She seeks neither his advice nor his permission. She acts independently. By contrast the man is a silent, passive and bland recipient”. Adam shows no reluctance or hesitation when she offers him the fruit, but accepts it. Consequently Tribble says that this act shows that not only is the man not dominant or aggressive, but neither is he the decision maker. He blindly follows his wife’s suggestion “without question or comment, thereby denying his own individuality. If the woman be intelligent, sensitive and ingenious, the man is passive, brutish and inept”. Tribble feels these character portrayals are amazing in a male-orientated culture and she too uses this to indicate that far from the original text being patriarchal in attitude, it is surely later exegesis which gives this interpretation to biblical texts.

As discussed above, the concept of original sin, and Eve being responsible for subsequent ills of mankind, is an interpretation of the biblical text by non-Jewish exegetes and has become part of Christian tradition.

2.3 THE MATRIARCHS

The women who followed Eve in the *Book of Genesis*, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, emerged as strong personalities often taking risks on behalf of their families and exerting strong influences over them. Except for Leah, all the wives of the Patriarchs were barren for a large part of their lives, and produced offspring only with great difficulty. Niditch (1991:32) states although their positions were circumscribed by the men around them, these women exercised great power over husbands and fathers in situations involving the family, children and sexuality. They played a crucial role in the continuation of the Israelite nation.

None of these women gave birth under ordinary circumstances but it was the unusual and often initially infertile women whose sons were responsible for the ongoing tradition. The Matriarchs mothered nations and received special communications about the children to be born. They often showed considerable power in matters relating to fertility and sexuality.

2.3.1 Sarah

Sarah was a spiritually powerful woman who, without children of her own for ninety years, taught women about the one God, while Abraham taught the men. She was strong enough to command her husband to take Hagar as a concubine, resulting in a male offspring, Ishmael. After she herself conceived and bore a son, Isaac, she asked Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael, as she foresaw danger to her family if they remained in the fold. Abraham hesitated. God spoke to Abraham and said "Be not displeased because of the lad, and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your descendants be named"

(Gen 21:12). Sarah used her strong influence, reinforced by God, to further the career of her only son, who was Abraham's younger offspring.

2.3.2 Rebecca

Rebecca, like Sarah, was a holy and devout woman. She too conceived only after many years of childlessness and gave birth to twin boys. God told her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples, born of you, shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger" (Gen 25:23). Rebecca realised that Jacob should be the one to inherit Abraham's spirituality. Here a woman used deception to achieve greatness for her favourite son, who did indeed become Israel.

Niditch (1992:20) considers Rebecca's wisdom to be that of a woman working behind the scenes to accomplish her goals. It is a vicarious power that achieves success for oneself through the achievement of male children; a willingness to sacrifice oneself for the sake of the son. Rebecca's power is not that of one in authority; it is the power of a woman in a man's world; the power of a trickster who is typical of the marginalised. Yet she is so clever and strong and so superior in wisdom to the men around her "that she seems to be the creation of a woman story-teller, one who is part of a male-centred world ... who subverts its rules ... a power of mockery, humour and deception".

2.3.3 Rachel and Leah

Sarah and Rebecca were highly spiritual women who, in advancing the interests of their sons, appeared to do so not only for themselves but also for their people as a whole. Rachel and Leah were two sisters constantly at war with each other. They competed for their husband's affection. Leah, the elder, was fertile and produced six healthy sons. Still not satisfied she gave her maid to Jacob so that she could become an adoptive mother to more sons. Rachel, the younger, was barren and also gave her maid to Jacob. When she finally gave birth to Joseph she stated that one biological

son was not enough and later died in childbirth giving birth to Benjamin. Brenner (1985:94) states that within the world of these women it would appear that it was only through an abundance of sons that they were able to achieve personal security. The interests of the wider community were not their concern.

2.4 DESIRABILITY OF MALE OFFSPRING

There is no denying that there are numerous passages in the Hebrew Bible where the desirability of male offspring is made very obvious. The story of Rachel and Leah discussed above is an outstanding example of this attitude. Archer (1990:18) even goes so far as to suggest that barrenness, which was a disgrace and grounds for divorce, did not necessarily denote the inability to produce offspring, but merely not to produce **male** children. The view of this dissertation is in agreement with Archer as the birth of a boy was recorded by citing his name as the son of the father in all genealogical lists. Archer's observation (1990:18) of the startling disparity in the ratio of male to female births recorded in the Bible, seems accurately to reflect the attitude at that time to the importance of producing a male child.

God told Abraham that Sarah's barrenness would be rectified by giving her a son. "I will bless her; and moreover I will give you a son by her" (Gen 17:16). Male offspring were often regarded as a gift from the Almighty. In *Genesis* 30:22-24 we learn that God remembered Rachel by hearkening to her and opening her womb. "And she conceived and bore a son, and said, 'God has taken away my reproach'" ... and in *Genesis* 30:24 "May the Lord add to me another son". Otwell (1977:53) states that "this cry epitomises the intensity of women's longing for sons" and goes on "should a further confirmation of the importance of sons be needed it is provided by passages describing the severity of their loss". In *II Samuel* 14:7 the Wise Woman of Tekoah talks to David and likens the loss of a son to the "quenching of a coal", and the destroying of the family name.

Furthermore the Bible prescribes rites for the induction into the Covenant of male children as well as an act of redemption. The fact that there is no parallel ceremony

for the female child, or in actual fact no ceremony whatsoever for her, indicates discrimination. Archer (1990:29) suggests that the inability of women to attain full and individual membership of the society in which they lived is most clearly reflected in the rites and ceremonies which took place early on in the child's life. God made a covenant with Abraham: "Every male among you shall be circumcised ... and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you" (Gen 17:10-11). After thirty days of age, should the first born be a male, he was to be redeemed from the Temple priests by payment of five shekels. This ceremony once again showed how the female was excluded from being admitted into the society by way of any formal ritual. It is interesting to note that in *Leviticus* 27:1-8 the value of a boy was five shekels, that of a girl three shekels; an adult male's value to God in monetary terms was fifty shekels of silver, while that of a female was only thirty shekels of silver. There was no special celebration of a girl's birth. Archer (1990:34) maintains that circumcision reflected, restated and re-inforced a woman's position of secondary importance in a society ordered along strictly patriarchal lines. Even the laws of purification after childbirth reflect a certain bias against girls. In *Leviticus* 12:2-5 we read that a woman is considered unclean for seven days after the birth of a "male child", but for fourteen days if she "bears a female child".

The reasons for the relative unimportance of the female child and the society's attitude to the birth of a daughter are many. However it is the opinion of this dissertation that the root cause is that Hebrew tradition is based on a strictly patriarchal society. Men made the laws, executed them and, by and large, headed any important position in every walk of life - political, social, economic and personal. Even God was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The male line was the important one in genealogy. It was the male child who could carry on the traditions, care for his parents and immortalise the family name. Because of the laws of inheritance the wealth in form of property or goods would remain in the father's family and thus benefit the community as well as the family itself. In other words a son took over where his father left off. A daughter, who would be removed to her husband's house at an early stage, would never be in a position to fulfil this obligation.

However, Israel was not in a unique position but shared the patriarchal standard of society with the surrounding cultures where man held a superior position. In the Bible there are many instances of subordination of women to men. Women, wives and daughters were regarded of minor importance and placed in a subservient relationship to men, husbands, and fathers. A wife called her husband master, (*ba'al*); lord (*adon*); ... a daughter her father *adon*. Women were ranked as minors. In the Decalogue she is her husband's possession not to be coveted by his neighbour. She is the vehicle for procreation and the preservation of her husband's name and family. Widows without children remained attached to their husband's family through levirate¹ marriage. This re-marriage to a family member could provide a son who would be considered the son of a dead husband. Here the childless widow who found herself in an untenable situation was provided with protection and care within her dead husband's family. Should there be no claimant to the right of levirate marriage, the widow could then marry into another family and the process would be repeated. Early legislation took a harsh view of women's position and treated them primarily as chattels. Before marriage they were under their father's power and after marriage under their husband's authority. The father possessed absolute authority over his unmarried daughter for as long as she stayed in his house.

All this did not in any way diminish the importance of women in the role of child-bearing and motherhood. Childbearing was a most important function and "fecundity, barrenness, and the loss of children were of urgent concern to men, women, and the nation" (Otwell 1977:50). The male was responsible for the formal transmission of the family name but it was the female who was the bearer of new life. Otwell (1977:61) observes "... the divine presence and activity which guaranteed the progeny was resident in the woman. Her fecundity was the most crucial and clearest proof of God's presence in the midst of the people". It would appear that ancient Israelite women shared the responsibility over the children fully with their husbands.

¹

Levirate marriage is the marriage between a widow whose husband died without offspring and the brother of the deceased as prescribed in Deuteronomy 25:5-6.

2.5 WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Despite the fact that the Bible tells of a male-dominated and male-orientated society, where the woman became a man's legal possession at marriage, the protection and rights of wives and women were clearly stated. Knierem (1975:2-4) summarises the situation thus: the engagement was a contract in which the bridegroom paid the price (the *mohar*) to another man for this man's daughter. The marriage was consummated when the bridegroom received the bride into his own family, and the woman became the legal possession of her husband. He became her lord, her owner. The husband had the right to divorce his wife if he found a case of her infidelity. When after a second marriage to another man, she became free and available again, her first husband could not demand or even take her back. This meant that once he had made the hard decision of divorcing her the society took his motives seriously, compelling him to be consistent and disallowing for any arbitrariness. One may question what rights the wife had. Many biblical narratives indicate that a woman's honour was highly guarded and carefully protected and, occasionally, as in the case of Dinah (Gen 34:1-31) and Tamar (II Sam 13:1-32) avenged. If a virgin was raped, the rapist was forced to marry her (Deut 22:28-29), but she was not bound to accept him as a husband. Of course she might choose to do so for fear that once she had been violated no one else would have her. In torts and damages a woman was protected equally under the law with few exceptions. Greenberg (1983:59) states that according to *Leviticus* 20:9 and *Deuteronomy* 27:4 the position of mother was almost sacrosanct : dishonouring a mother warranted the curse of God; cursing a mother was a sin punishable by death. As long as women belonged to their husbands they had rights which the husband had to observe. Knierem (1975:2-4) emphasises that the system operating at the time did not leave women without protection. The question is were they sufficient to protect women adequately, and whether they served as a counter-balance to the many inequalities to which women were subjected?

For example, a wife could not initiate a divorce but a husband could do so if he found some fault (Deut 24:1-4). A woman was expected to be a virgin at the time of marriage and infidelity during marriage was unacceptable. As virginity was a

condition of marriage, the marriage could be annulled if the woman was found not to be a virgin. Adultery was considered a violation of property rights in which the husband was the only injured party (Epstein 1967:95). A woman could not give legal testimony, and inheritance privileges, except in certain cases, were denied her. Tribble (1982:116) says that as far as a girl was concerned, either her father or husband controlled her life. If either chose to allow her to be mistreated or abused, she was obliged to submit. Lot offered his daughters to the men of Sodom to protect a male guest (Gen 19:8). Jephthah sacrificed his daughter in order to fulfil a foolish vow (Judg 11:29-40). However, the human sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter cannot be considered in any way as normative. There is sharp condemnation of child sacrifice in both *Deuteronomy* and *II Kings* where it is identified as a cult act in the religions of Israel's neighbours.

"... take heed that you be not ensnared to follow them after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not enquire about their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve these gods? - that I also may do likewise' ... for every abominable thing which the Lord hates they have done for their gods; for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods" (Deut 12:30-31).

"When you come into the land which the Lord thy God gives you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you any one who burns his son or daughter as an offering" (Deut 18:9-10).

"And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings , and used divination and sorcery, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger" (II Kings 17:17).

Tribble (1982:116), quoting the stories of Lot, Jephthah and Amnon says that the narrative literature makes clear that from birth to death Hebrew women belonged to men. The view of this dissertation is that Greenberg (1983:60) gives a more balanced view when she says that biblical woman was not truly equal, but by no

means persecuted. Although she suffered limited rights in matrimony, divorce, the courts and inheritance, she was fairly well protected, and on occasion was able even to rise to a position of national importance. Bird (1974:42) endorses this viewpoint by saying "she is depicted as possessing a measure of initiative, power and respect ..." In fact we find women participating in every aspect of social life.

2.6 WOMEN PARTICIPATING IN SOCIAL LIFE

In *Deuteronomy* 29:10 we read that women participated in the great religious assemblies. They were present when Israel entered into the covenant with God and when Joshua read the Torah to the people of Israel (Josh 8:35). When the Torah was read every seventh year on the Festival of Succoth, women were required to be present (Deut 31:12). They accompanied their husbands on their pilgrimages to the sanctuary. They also greeted the victorious warriors with songs of praise on the latter's return from war.

"As they were coming home, when David returned from slaying of the Philistine, the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with timbrels, with songs of joy, and with instruments of music. And the women sang to one another as they made merry, 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands'" (I Sam 18:6-7).

Often the utterances of those women singers were considered to be supernaturally inspired, and perhaps this fact caused Saul to become angry:

"And Saul was very angry, and this saying displeased him; 'They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands; and what more can he have but the kingdom'"? (I Sam 18:8).

Women also sang and danced at marriages and funerals, and they played musical instruments together with men in public processions. "The singers in front, the min-

strels last, between them maidens playing timbrels” (Ps 68:25). Miriam sang at the shores of the Red Sea (Ex 15:20-21) and Deborah accompanied Barak into battle when she was exhorted to “Awake, awake, Deborah! Awake, awake, utter a song! ...” (Judg 5:12). In *I Chronicles* 25:5 we read of the fourteen sons and three daughters of Heman the king’s seer, who were Temple musicians. “They were all under the direction of their father in the music in the house of the Lord with cymbals, harps, and lyres ...”

2.7 WISE WOMEN IN BIBLICAL LITERATURE

Friedman (1987:480) points out that it was not only on private occasions that women had a role to play but they were “engaged in what today would be called diplomatic missions”.

2.7.1 The Wise Woman of Tekoah

Amnon raped his sister Tamar and was then killed by his infuriated brother, Absalom. Absalom, fearing the wrath of his father, (David) fled. After three years Joab realised that David longed to see Absalom again and so he sent for the wise woman of Tekoah and dispatched her, dressed in mourning, to deliver a message to David. The story she told David was that she was a widow, with two sons, one of whom had slain the other. Her family was demanding the death of the murderer in revenge. This action “... would quench my coal which is left, and leave to my husband neither name nor remnant upon the face of the earth” (II Sam 14:7). By promising her remaining son would not be killed, “David unwittingly passed judgement on his own case as well, and the woman was able to make her accusation against him ... and make her poignant plea for Absalom’s restoration” (Camp 1981:16).

Brenner (1985:34-35) discusses the suitability of choosing this woman for the mission. Joab who was a calculating man and plotted his moves carefully, selected her because her reputation was well known. Not only can she repeat the words Joab had previously put in her mouth, but she does so convincingly. “Her ability to achieve

what she set out to do becomes apparent the moment she swings from the fabricated personal complaint (a family's wish to avenge the blood of a murdered son by killing his murderer, the remaining son) to David's personal business (his refusal to let Absalom, the son - murderer, return from exile and assume his position as heir to the throne)". She managed to enlist David's support by juxtaposing two principles of social order - private blood revenge, and the basic prerogative of central government to impose order through the institutional procedures of the law. This was a political matter, designed to arouse David's interested comment. The skill with which the woman of Tekoah introduced David's problem revealed her talent, and showed she was much more than an accomplished actress. She had the presence of mind to seize upon a situation, judge it for herself, and manipulate it to her own advantage.

Camp (1981:17) states that although the Woman of Tekoah presented her story humbly to begin with, her rhetorical question "Why then have you planned such a thing against the people of God?" (II Sam 14:13) is spoken by one who seemed accustomed to making and delivering such judgements. It would be hard to imagine a person with the courage and mien to execute such an audacious act if she lacked the practical experience of the exercise of authority. Camp states that the role the wise woman of Tekoah played is representative of at least one significant political role available to women in the years preceding the Kingship in Israel. Camp (1981:24) goes on to say that her "adroitness" in dealing with a difficult, and what could be a dangerous situation "raises the possibility that (she) was not (a person) without training but ... had in fact been prepared at some point in life to fulfil such consequential responsibilities ... in spite of what some scholars assume to be (her) second-class status as a woman". Niditch (1991:34-35) calls her a "professional mediator, an improvisationist skilled in the dramatic weaving and enactment of mediating parables".

2.7.2 The Wise Woman of Abel

In *II Samuel* 20:16-22 we read of a wise woman who used her skills of mediation to avoid disaster by intervening between her town and Joab, the leader of the army, who

had come on a search-and-destroy mission to capture the rebel Sheba ben Bichri. She used appropriate proverbs, rhetoric and skills of mediation to convince her townsmen to give up the offender to the agent of the King, and in this way prevented great destruction (Niditch 1991:35).

2.7.3 Abigail

During the reign of Saul, David, who was constantly fleeing from the King, was surrounded by a group of fugitives. In order for himself and his band of followers to survive, he had to enlist the help of neighbouring farmers and stock breeders. In return for so-called protection, he demanded goods and money. One of the wealthy men who refused to co-operate with him was Nabal, making David extremely angry. Nabal's wife, Abigail. "... a woman of good understanding and beautiful countenance ..." (I Sam 25:3) managed to save her husband's life by humbling herself and assuming a modest attitude. She flattered David and told him he was God's favourite and was entitled to the throne of Israel. She also belittled her husband and asked David to refrain from taking revenge on the foolish Nabal. Like the woman of Tekoah she talked to David about the blood guilt which might hinder his prosperity later if he chose to take action now against the irresponsible, worthless Nabal. David, of course, had no choice but to capitulate. The combination of beauty, eloquence and flattery was too beguiling to be ineffective. He agreed to leave Nabal alone, complimented Abigail on her swift actions and later, after Nabal's death, wed her. Abigail's motives were concerned with her own preservation. Brenner (1985:41) describes her good sense as being of the practical variety. "Although she shares the qualities of intelligence and insight with the 'wise' woman associated with Joab, ... she is not a 'wise' woman herself because her scope is limited to her own affairs and does not extend to public affairs". Perhaps Abigail was a woman of good sense rather than a wise woman.

2.8 PROPHETESSES

Brenner (1985:55) cites Miriam and Deborah as the two great female figures of pre-monarchical Israel. The only sphere which was out of bounds for them from the outset was the priesthood.

2.8.1 Miriam

Miriam was obviously an important figure. During her sojourn in the wilderness she, together with Aaron, challenged Moses' authority. In *Numbers* 12:1-2 we read of Aaron and Miriam challenging Moses, not necessarily for leadership *per se*, but in order to discredit Moses because of his marriage to an Ethiopian woman. They said, "Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" (12:2). Miriam was punished by God and became "leprous, white as snow ..." (12:10). Miriam was shut out from the camp for seven days, but the people did not continue on their journey until she was re-admitted, indicating that she was highly regarded by them. However she failed in her bid for recognition as Moses' equal in political leadership and prophetic status. This was due, in no small measure, to the times in which she lived. Furthermore her brother, Moses, was the greatest prophet and leader of all time.

2.8.2 Deborah

In the *Book of Judges* 4-5 Deborah is described as a prophetess and judge who inspired Barak to rally his troops in resistance to Sisera. Called a mother in Israel, she was the planner of military strategy, prophetess and co-author of a victory poem (Brenner 1985:55). Meyers (1988:159) states that the designation mother in Israel which occurs in *Judges* 5:7 does not refer to a biological maternal role, but rather to her divinatory leadership and her ability to provide answers to Israel's problems.

She was so well respected that Barak refused to undertake the military assignment unless she accompanied him. “And Barak said to her, ‘If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go’” (Judg 4:8). Her popularity would seem to have sanctioned the military action. Here Deborah showed that she was the initiator and driving force behind Barak. Like Jael, (Judg 4:18-21) who killed Sisera by driving a tent peg into his head, she emerged as the heroine of the story. Both are strong in their respective ways and both are mainly instrumental in defeating the Canaanites.

Although these women attained “a high degree of political involvement and achievement, (they) remain women ... As such, these female leaders are not depicted as independent figures, they are either led by men or have to share the leadership with them” (Brenner 1985:56). Deborah, although wholly or partly responsible for writing the victory poem, had to recite it together with Barak, although her name was mentioned first. Miriam as singer of the Song of the Sea, “echoes Moses’ words in her capacity as the women’s leader” (Brenner 1985:55).

2.8.3 Huldah

Late-monarchic Huldah, although married, was known as the most reliable prophetic figure in Jerusalem despite the fact that Jeremiah had begun to prophesy in 626 BCE.

In *II Kings* 22:14-20 we learn of the request made to Huldah to counsel King Josiah’s High Priest Hilkiah, on the discovery of an important scroll in the Temple. She prophesied that the kingdom of Judah would be destroyed because the precepts of this scroll had not been adhered to. Josiah accepted her words and called for repentance and re-dedication to God. Brenner (1985:59) points out that the choice of Huldah as a prophetess is considered odd by most biblical commentators. Why was Jeremiah not consulted instead? Ghatan (1986:13) suggests that perhaps she was sent for by King Josiah because women were more merciful than men and the King hoped she would pray that all the bad decrees found in the Scroll of Law during the repair of the Temple would not befall the Kingdom. She foresaw the destruction of

Jerusalem but her prophetic words that Josiah would die in peace (II Kings 22:20) did not come to pass. He in fact died in the Battle of Megiddo in 609 BCE (II Chron 35:20-24). However she did play quite an important role in the institution of Josiah's reforms, although she was actually excluded, together with all women, from officiating in the cult itself.

Bird (1974:67-68) says that none of the authors writing of these prophetesses give special attention to the fact that they were women, and their words and activities coincided closely with those of their male contemporaries in the same profession. Furthermore there is no evidence to suggest that they were considered unusual in this role.

2.9 RUTH AND NAOMI

In the *Book of Ruth* we read of the aged Naomi and the youthful Ruth struggling for survival in a patriarchal environment. These women bore burdens, had to make decisions without the help of men, and were forced to work out their own salvation in the midst of the alien, the hostile and the unknown. Ruth was depicted as the ideal daughter-in-law and wife. Despite the fact that she was a Gentile she made a great contribution to the Israelite community. Through her loyalty and fortitude she secured the future of the Davidic line.

The *Book of Ruth* is read in the synagogues on the holiday of Shavuoth. Ruth's role as housewife and mother is the central image. She was devoted to her husband and family and acted out of pure devotional love to Naomi. Naomi, having lost her husband and two sons decided to return to Bethlehem in Judah and urged her sons' widows to remain in Moab. Orpah, one of Naomi's daughters-in-law, turned back when Naomi described the dreary life awaiting them in Judah. But Ruth said,

"Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people

shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried.” (Ruth 1:16-17).

Ruth’s devotion to Naomi was so special that the women in the town said, “your daughter-in-law who loves you, ... is more to you than seven sons ...” (Ruth 4:15).

This simple tale of love and devotion contains an ethical lesson. Ghatan (1986:16) quotes Rabbi Zeira who states “This *Megillah* (Scroll) does not contain laws of purity and impurity, neither prohibition nor permissibility. And why was it written? To teach us how much good deeds are meritorious” (*Yalkut Shimoni*).

2.10 ESTHER

The *Book of Esther*, written some time during the Persian period (ca 535 BCE - 330 BCE), was still a matter of debate in the third century CE when Rabbi Samuel ben Judah passed the opinion that it did not have a place in the Canon. God is never mentioned in the book nor are the Law and the Covenant ever referred to.

Esther, as a Jewess, was perturbed about living in a heathen environment. But she adapted to court life and still managed to keep her religious beliefs secret. The only way she was able to achieve power and rescue her people was by not drawing attention to her Jewish origins. Esther took the place as Queen to Ahasuerus, the Persian King, after Queen Vashti was deposed because she refused to entertain her husband’s guests. Through intrigue and deception Esther used her influence to intervene with the King against Haman, the King’s vizier, who plotted to slaughter all the Jews in the empire as revenge against Esther’s uncle, Mordecai.

Esther revealed her true identity as a Jewess and was depicted as having saved the Jewish people through her sensuality and daring. Esther was a member of a people who were in a subordinate position in the Persian Empire and yet she was able to achieve a high position of influence in the royal court. She showed great courage in approaching the King uninvited and could have been put to death for

doing so. To this day she is admired and revered and “The Fast of Esther”, a minor fast, is observed in her honour. The festival of Purim is celebrated the day after the fast and the *Book of Esther* is read in the synagogues.

2.11 PROVERBS

The *Book of Proverbs* belongs to the literary genre of biblical wisdom literature and was designed to educate and caution the young. Wisdom was often portrayed as a woman, and embraced all the positive roles played by wives and mothers in Israelite society. It stressed the importance of family life and the important roles women played in maintaining this tradition.

Good wives are so highly prized that they are considered a gift from God. “He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favour from the Lord” (Prov 18:22). The mother’s role in educating the young was highlighted together with that of the father. “Hear my son, your father’s instruction, and reject not your mother’s teaching; for they are a fair garland for your head, and pendants for your neck” (Prov 1:8-9).

In Proverbs 31:10-31 we learn about the virtues of the good wife.

“A good wife who can find?

She is far more precious than jewels.

The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.

She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.

She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands.

She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from afar.

*She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and
tasks for her maidens.*

*She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants
a vineyard.*

She girds her loins with strength and makes her arms strong.

She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.

Her lamp does not go out at night.
She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle.
She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy.
She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household are
clothed in scarlet.
She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple.
Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of
the land.
She makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers girdles to the
merchant.
Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to
come.
She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on
her tongue.
She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the
bread of idleness.
Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he
praises her:
'Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all'.
Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the
Lord is to be praised.
Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the
gates".

The emphasis on her success in industry in every day life and in business transactions, indicates a woman's valuable contribution to society. Her household management skills are lauded. All this reflects a very positive attitude to women and the book ends on this note.

Man is admonished to beware the seductions of foreign women and to observe fidelity in marriage. "Drink waters from your own cistern, flowing water from your

own well” (Prov 5:15). The “loose woman” personified “folly” and association with harlots is not in keeping with wisdom.

The “bad” wife is not a general type but is primarily described as contentious, and is like “a continuous dripping on a rainy day” (Prov 27:15). Furthermore, “It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a contentious woman” (Prov 21:9) and “It is better to live in a desert land than with a contentious and fretful woman” (Prov 21:19).

2.12 INFLUENTIAL MOTHERS IN BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

The influence of a mother over her children is reflected in several passages in the Bible. Abimelech, the only son of Gideon and a concubine, appealed for the loyalty of the men of Shechem, his mother’s home, on grounds of maternal kinship when he and the other sons of Gideon sought to rule that city (Judg 9:1-3).

2.12.1 Samson’s mother

The influence that Samson’s mother had upon him is illustrated in *Judges* 14:16.

“And Samson’s wife wept before him, and said, ‘You only hate me, you do not love me; you have put a riddle to my countryman, and you have not told me what it is’ And he said to her, ‘Behold, I have not told my father nor my mother and shall I tell you?’ She wept before him the seven days that their feast lasted; and on the seventh day he told her, because she pressed him hard”.

Samson’s relationship to both parents was closer than his tie with his wife, a fact which obviously the latter resented. It should be noted however, that Samson’s mother’s name is nowhere mentioned in the story.

2.12.2 Hannah

Hannah was a barren wife, who prayed for a son, promising to dedicate him to God if her prayer was answered. The priest, observed Hannah praying, and because of the intensity of her worship, Eli took her to be a drunken women. When Hannah answered “No, my Lord, I am a woman sorely troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but have been pouring out my soul before the Lord” ... Then Eli answered, “Go in peace and the God of Israel grant your petition which you have made to him” (I Sam 15:17). Hannah gave birth to a son, Samuel, and after she had weaned him she took him to the Temple, offered a sacrifice and a song of thanksgiving, and left him with Eli to serve in the Temple for life. Eli blessed her and Hannah bore three more sons and two daughters (I Sam 2:21).

In all these stories, the strong bond between mother and son is clearly illustrated. Bathsheba and Samson’s mother were mothers of powerful men. Hannah’s piety and dedication to God was instrumental in raising a son who was to become a foremost Israelite judge and prophet.

2.12.3 Bathsheba

Solomon’s respect for his mother, Bathsheba, is a further illustration of the status of a mother in the eyes of her children. When Bathsheba entered the throne room, Solomon “rose to meet her, and bowed down to her; then he sat on his throne, and had a seat brought for the King’s mother; and she sat on his right” (I Kings 2:19). In the *Song of Solomon* 3:11 we read of the important role of the King’s mother.

*“Go forth, O daughters of Zion,
and behold King Solomon
with the crown with which his mother crowned him
on the day of his wedding,
on the day of the gladness of his heart.”*

2.13 CONCLUSION

Should we regard all this as proof that women had an equal role to play during biblical times? The writer of this dissertation would venture to say that they certainly played an important part in the overall life of the community. Meyers (1978:101-102) says that the exceptional leadership of women such as Miriam, Deborah, and the wise women of Tekoah and Abel are testimony to an epoch of liberation in which stratified hereditary leadership was abolished, and anyone, women included, could rise to singular positions of authority. The biblical accounts of female prophets are indeed evidence that God did communicate with women as well as men and entrusted them with messages of vital concern to the whole community.

The variety of images discussed here, and the many that have not been touched upon, reflect the diversity in the Hebrew Bible's conceptions of women. As stated above, the vast differences in time of composition of the writings, the tremendous changes in the society in the economic, political and religious spheres, gave rise to a constantly changing attitude towards women. Meyers (1978:92) puts the facts very succinctly when she says that some three thousand years of male dominance in western civilisation and in particular in religious institutions, have clouded our visions and have led to the belief that the exclusion of females from regular leadership has been the norm in human history. She states "the liberating principles of Mosaic Israel and the egalitarian society which it set about to establish turned out to be the very force which caused a dramatic turnabout in the history of women". It will become apparent during the course of this dissertation that later literature, reflecting the attitudes of the writers, was at great pains to use biblical stories and quotations to justify the changed attitude to women, and the need for them to be controlled, dominated, and regarded with suspicion by the male members of society.

The numerous instances of the subordination and abuse of women in biblical narrative do not tell the whole story. Women were protected in law, revered as mothers and as good wives, participated in cult activities, and on occasions rose to positions of power, and were able to be fully participating members of the community. The

opinion of this dissertation is that biblical narrative in the main showed men and women as having the same inherent characteristics and there were no innate differences that precluded the reversal of roles should circumstance warrant it.

The women of the Bible were shown primarily within the family and their roles as wives and mothers was highlighted. The mother was always supportive of her children and often performed dangerous acts to save the life of a child. The mother of Moses disobeyed Pharaoh's command to cast male children into the Nile; the wise woman of Tekoa told David a story that one of her sons had killed his brother and the family was anxious to exact revenge. This was a fabricated tale related in order to bring Absalom back to his father, David.

Sarah protected Isaac by banishing Hagar. Rebecca helped her favourite son to receive Isaac's blessing. Women were concerned with the economic well-being and security of their family as evidenced in the *Book of Proverbs*. Women maintained a sphere of authority within the household, but they were also active in other spheres where they performed independently and with authority. The early Israelite attitude to women, while patriarchal, was not impossible to challenge.

Greenberg (1983:59) makes the interesting point that there is a striking contrast between biblical law and biblical narrative. The law presupposes passive women whose destiny was controlled by men, but in fact the narrative portrays many women as powerful figures. There were women with manipulative powers such as Rebecca, Jael and Bathsheba; women prophets and leaders (Miriam, Deborah and Huldah). Greenberg continues to outline the "profound religious dimension to the biblical woman's life". She was present at Sinai and experienced Revelation. She was obligated to observe numerous positive commandments. Women often accompanied their husbands to the Temple where special areas were set aside for them. Most importantly in the transmission of religious identity a Jewish person is one born of a Jewish mother, regardless of the father's religion.

The position of women in biblical times was a visible one within society. They were able to voice their opinions, they acted as judges and prophetesses and could even inherit property.

In Chapter 2 biblical narrative has been used to gauge the attitude of society of the time to women and the role they played in the community. In Chapters 3 and 4, prevailing attitudes gleaned from extra-biblical literature will be considered and discussed. An effort will be made to demonstrate how significant a role the former literature played on the writings of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha.

CHAPTER 3

WOMEN IN APOCRYPHAL LITERATURE

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The Apocrypha is a group of works dating primarily from 200 BCE - 100CE. These works represent several literary genres and are of great importance in that they reflect the attitudes and way of life of Jewish people at that time, whether living in Palestine or the diaspora. Because of the interaction of different cultures and the influence foreign ideas had on Jewish thought one finds both an acceptance of the new ideas and in contrast a resistance which necessitated warnings against the dangers of assimilation.

Metzger (1965:ix) defines the meaning of the word "apocrypha" as "things that are hidden". Some have suggested that these books were withdrawn from common use because they were considered to contain mysterious or esoteric lore too profound to be communicated to any except the initiated. Others felt the reason for hiding these works was because they were spurious or heretical. Metzger (1965:ix) contends that in antiquity the word apocrypha not only had an honourable significance but also a derogatory one, depending on the point of view held by those using it. None of these books are included in the Hebrew Canon. Apart from *Ecclesiasticus* there are no references to these books in Talmudic literature, and together with pseudepigraphal writings are called *Sefarim Hitsonim* or "extraneous books". For the most part they are anonymous historical and ethical works.

In the old manuscripts of the Septuagint which is the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible it was the custom to include books of the Apocrypha among the Holy Scriptures. There are those who assume, therefore, that because they were included in the

Alexandrian Canon they were considered part of the Canon in the land of Israel until the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, and that the Bible was only canonised in Jabneh in the first century CE. The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1971, Vol 3, 183) states that these views are quite incorrect because they are based on a series of faulty premises. Rabbi Akiva pronounced that he who reads the *Sefarim Hasonim* forfeits his share in the world to come (Sanh 10:1). (These same scholars used the Talmudic discussions about the books to be “hidden away” (Shab 13b) to indicate that only during the period of the destruction of the Second Temple was the canonisation of the twenty-four books finalised.) It may be argued that these phrases could easily have referred to books all of which are in the Canon. According to Talmudic tradition (BB 14b) the Canon was already fixed at the end of the Persian period. This tradition is repeated by Josephus in *Apion* (1:40-41) when he writes “From the death of Moses until Artaxerxes ... the prophets wrote the events of their time. From Artaxerxes to our own time (i.e. the first century CE), the complete history has been written, but has not been deemed worthy of equal credit with the earlier records, because of the failure of the exact succession of the prophets” (EJ 1971, Vol 3, 184). Indeed, apart from the final chapters in the *Book of Daniel* which may have been added during the disturbances preceding the Hasmonean¹ uprising, all the canonical books antedate the Hellenistic period (ca 330 BCE - 65 BCE). The prologue of Ben Sirach’s grandson to his Greek translation of his grandfather’s work makes it evident that the scriptures had already been translated into Greek in the first generation of the Hasmoneans and the traditional division into Pentateuch (Five Books of Moses), Prophets (or *Nevi'im*) and Hagiographa (or *Ketuvim*) was accepted. The testimony of Ben Sirach’s grandson as well as those of Philo and Josephus who used the Septuagint,² shows that the Greek-reading Jews knew no other division of the Bible and the Canon was at that time identical with the pre-set one. The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (op cit) concludes that this is all evidence to support the theory that the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha were always “*Sefarim Hitsonim*”.

¹ See Chapter 4 (p 65).

² The oldest Greek translation of the Bible.

Literary activity did not cease with the canonisation of the Bible and indeed flourished during the Persian and Hellenistic eras. It was during this time that the apocryphal books were composed. The common thread linking these works is their concern with Israel and their disregard of sectarian schisms. These works dealt mainly with the struggle against idolatry and the authors believed that prophecy had come to an end. This body of work was a collection written for Jews as opposed to later pseudepigraphal writings which were sectarian.

For an insight into the attitudes towards women, and the role they were expected to play in society of the time, as well as the unusual women and their deeds, this chapter discusses the apocryphal books of *Judith*, *Ecclesiasticus*, *Susanna*, *Tobit* and *The Wisdom of Solomon*.

3.2 THE BOOK OF JUDITH

This work was probably written in the Hasmonean period, either towards the end of the rule of John Hyrcanus I (135 - 104 BCE) or at the beginning of the reign of Alexander Jannaeus (103 - 78 BCE). Its aim was to inspire patriotism and piety, and to encourage the Jewish people during the time of religious persecution. However, the incongruities in time and place and the identities of key figures in the story indicate that the author completely disregarded historical facts.

According to the text Nebuchadnezzar was the Assyrian King. His capital city which he destroyed was Nineveh. The destruction of Ecbatana is also attributed to Nebuchadnezzar. In the *Book of Judith* 4:3 and 5:19 we read that the Jews had recently returned from the captivity and rebuilt the Temple. It was at this time that Nebuchadnezzar was threatening Jerusalem. In fact Nebuchadnezzar was the Babylonian King, and his capital city was Babylon. He ruled from 605 - 562 BCE. Nineveh was destroyed by his father, Nabopolassar in 612 BCE after which time he made it his capital city. Ecbatana was conquered, but not destroyed, by Cyrus the Great of the Achaemenian Empire in 544 BCE. Furthermore it was the Babylonians under

Nebuchadnezzar who destroyed Jerusalem, burned the Temple in 586 BCE and exiled the Jews, and it was during the subsequent rule of the Persians that the Jewish exiles returned and rebuilt the Temple.

Moore (1990:33) points out that a pre-exilic event (i.e. Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of the Temple and exile of the Jews in 586 BCE) is described in a post-exilic setting (sometime after 519 BCE). It is most unlikely that the author of the book would not have known of these historical anomalies. Asher (1996:61) points out that this is not the only time when Assyria and Babylonia are interchangeably used. "In *II Chronicles* 33:11-13 there is a brief mention of an episode in which Manasseh is said to have been captured by the army of the "King of Assyria" and taken in chains to Babylon. There is no reference to such an episode in *Kings* or in extra-biblical documents and doubts have been expressed about its authenticity". She adds that it is however, not impossible that a recalcitrant vassal should have been brought to Babylon rather than Nineveh because the two kings contemporary with Manasseh are both likely to have visited Babylon from Assyria. There was another possible reason for the confusion and that was at one stage two Assyrian brothers ruled Assyria and Babylon respectively almost at the same time, Ashurbanipal in Assyria and Shamash-Shum-Ukin in Babylon.

According to the *Book of Judith*, the Judeans were in great danger from Nebuchadnezzar, the "Assyrian" King. He sent his Chief General, Holofernes, at the head of a mighty army to take revenge on all people who refused to submit to his rule. The Israelites living in Judea, having heard of Holofernes' ruthless destruction of shrines and communities, feared greatly for the safety of the Temple and Jerusalem. They had only recently returned from exile and re-dedicated the Temple. The High Priest ordered the people to blockade the gateway to Judea and all the roads to Jerusalem. Holofernes angered by this action, and also by the fact that the Israelites placed their God above Nebuchadnezzar, vowed to exterminate them and laid siege to the city of Bethulia, hoping thereby to force the Israelites to capitulate. After thirty-four days, all sources of water dried up and the people were in dire distress. In

this crisis, a very beautiful and devout widow entered the story and played the leading role in rescuing her people from tragedy and death.

Judith severely reprimanded the elders of the city for contemplating surrender to Holofernes, unless God intervened to save them within five days (Jdt 8:11-17). She announced a secret plan to save the city, and after a long and ardent prayer for the destruction of Israel's enemies, she prepared to put her plan into action. Bathing and anointing her body, and dressed in finest clothing and jewellery, she packed a bag of food. She and her maid then set off for Bethulia. On entering the enemy camp her beauty completely overwhelmed the soldiers, who escorted her to Holofernes' tent. On entering his tent, Judith prostrated herself, and pledged loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar. She seduced Holofernes with flattery and her beauty, and offered him a secret plan to conquer Bethulia. The Assyrian general was completely charmed by her and invited her to drink and eat with him. But Judith refused as she was obliged to observe her dietary laws. She spent three days in a nearby tent, and she finally accepted an invitation to a banquet to be hosted by Holofernes. When Judith arrived at the banquet arrayed in beautiful clothes and jewellery, her host was determined to seduce her. He drank himself into a stupor. Judith sent her maid away and she was left alone with her host. Praying to God for strength she cut off Holofernes' head and she and her maid fled the camp. On returning to Bethulia she displayed the head to the inhabitants of the city and called them to prayer. The Israelite army proceeded to massacre the now leaderless Assyrian army, and Judith was praised as the deliverer of her people.

3.2.1 Similarities between stories of Judith, Deborah and Jael

Because of the religious and national fervour which permeate this work, it is the opinion of this dissertation that it is highly likely that the tradition of Judith does not start with her. Like Montley (1978:38) this dissertation suggests that her story belongs together with that of Deborah, a judge of Israel who prophesied Sisera's fall by the hand of a woman and who marched in battle against the Canaanites and chanted a hymn of thanksgiving (Judg 4-5) and Jael, who ran a tent peg through Sisera's head

(Judg 4:17-22). It is also akin to the story of Miriam, who too was a prophetess who led her people in song and dance, after escaping from the Egyptians (Ex 15:20). Judith is a combination of aggressor (when she finds herself in a situation that calls for such a reaction) and seductress. Montley (1978:39) states that she is not the first seductress who caused a man's downfall. The tradition in the Hebrew scriptures tells of Eve who seduced Adam (Gen 3:6); Delilah who seduced and then betrayed Samson to the Philistines (Judg 16:4-20); Bathsheba whose beauty was the downfall of David and the cause of his sin (II Sam 11-12) and Jezebel who exerted a negative influence on Ahab (I Kings 21:7-24).

Bruns (1954:12) proposes that Judith bears a strong similarity to Jael of *The Book of Judges*. He says the "external similarity between (them) is too marked not to be noted". When the Israelites were expelled from the Northern Kingdom in 722/721 BCE by the Assyrians who occupied the land, they were in disarray. It was perfectly logical to assume that they would have taken with them stories which had circulated there and used them according to the needs and circumstances of the place and times in which they found themselves. Many Jews who escaped the captivity found their way to Egypt where they established a colony at Elephantine, a small island north of the First Cataract on the Nile. Elephantine was important both religiously as the city of the god Khnum, and militarily as a frontier fortress defending Egypt's southern gateway against the neighbouring Nubians who frequently plundered the rich land of the Nile. Under the Persian rule of Egypt (from 525 BCE), Elephantine was the site of a large military camp of mercenaries which included Jewish regiments. The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Vol 6, 1971:606) states that the discovery of the Elephantine papyri at the beginning of the twentieth century shed light on the celebrated letter containing the Elephantine Jews' request to Big'vai, the governor of Yahud, for permission to build their temple on the ruins of the town. This may have been in the second half of the seventh century BCE.

In general, relations between the Egyptians and the Jews were strained and during the absence of the satrap Arsames in 410 BCE a riot broke out at Elephantine led by the priests of Khnum. They were backed by the Persian military commander and the

Jewish temple was destroyed. Bruns (1954:13) says it is quite possible that a member of the community which was being menaced by their Egyptian neighbours composed the *Book of Judith*, to encourage them to stand up to the threats of their enemies. The author's heroine was Jael and her enemy was Sisera, but he gave the story a contemporary Persian setting and substituted the names of Holofernes and Judith for Sisera and Jael. This dissertation is of the opinion that Bruns has given a very valid reason for the *Book of Judith* being written at this time. It is not the only instance where biblical stories have been adapted to comment on later events.

Although the riot at Elephantine was quelled and the temple eventually rebuilt, many Jews took refuge at Hermopolis West until the Greek conquest gave them complete liberty and they were able to join large groups of Jews who were settled in Alexandria and Leontopolis. When the temple here became the object of an Egyptian attack in 146 BCE "the old Aramaic account drawn up at Elephantine ... is given a new colouring; for what served to spur the Jews of Elephantine ... would serve as well to encourage the defenders of the temple of Onias at Leontopolis ... (thus) Judith (is) a symbol of Jewish resistance to foreign tyranny based on the truly historical character of Jael whose memory lived among the Jews of the Egyptian dispersion in this way" (Bruns 1954:13).

White (1989:570) draws interesting parallels between the stories of Judith and Deborah and Jael and these seem to reinforce both Montley's and Bruns' contentions. Both books begin with a political struggle with religious implications between the Israelites and a foreign power. In both books the heroine slays the enemy by attacking his head. In patriarchal Israelite society women received their identity from fathers and husbands, but these three women received their identities from their actions.

Here the emphasis rests on the weak (symbolised by the female) triumphing over the strong (symbolised by the male) without male assistance, but with the help of Yahweh. The idea of acting in accordance with the will of Yahweh was not a new one. Asher (1996:42) states that "Jeremiah (25:9) in his denunciations of King Jehoiakim,

seems clearly to have called for the assassination of the King and his family. These announcements of judgement were proclaimed as rhetorical calls of assassination, but apparently there were no takers”.

And to the present time we have people making the same claim. A startling and tragic parallel may be drawn in modern times with the fanatical assassin, Yigal Amir’s given reason for killing the Israeli Prime Minister Yitshak Rabin in 1995. He said “I acted according to a Jewish religious law which says it is legitimate to kill someone who endangers Jewish lives” (The Star, July 8, 1996).

Another similarity in the stories is evident in the motif “the hand of a woman”. Deborah tells Barak that Yahweh will triumph “by the hand of a woman” (Judg 4:9). Jael takes the hammer in her hand and in the victory song (Judg 5:26) we learn that “she put her hand to the tent peg, her right hand to the workman’s hammer”. In the *Book of Judith* (8:33) she says “... the Lord will deliver Israel by my hand”. She repeats this in her prayer and in 13:14 she asks the people of Bethulia to praise God who “has destroyed her enemies by my hand this very night”.

Parallels between the stories continue. Jael gives Sisera milk to drink, which, as has been widely pointed out, acts as a soporific. Judith makes Holofernes drunk at the banquet. In both cases it was the women’s initiative that instigated the men’s downfall. Jael offered hospitality to Sisera, an act underlining a fundamental rule of caring for strangers. Usually travellers asked for shelter which was indispensable for their safety. By offering this shelter, Jael was guaranteeing Sisera’s safety. Transgression of this rule was considered as the utmost act of treachery. However the rabbis praised her for her help in killing an enemy of the Israelites.

Some commentators have censured Judith for her actions. Moore (1990:35) says “she was a shameless flatterer and bold-faced liar. She was also a ruthless assassin with no respect for the dead”. He goes on to ponder the question that perhaps the *Book of Judith* was omitted from the Jewish Canon because of these immoral aspects of her character and actions. “Some may even say she was guilty of murder.

Ironically, Judith was a saint who murdered". Viewed in a detached light this may have been the case. But this dissertation is in agreement with Merideth (1989:78) when she states that the objection which has been made to Judith's deceit and approval of violence, scarcely deserves notice. It could only be made in complete ignorance of the time. The Jerome Biblical Commentary (1968:627) states "The use of artifice as a tactic of warfare was held in highest regard in those ancient times. It would be naïve to be scandalised by such conduct".

Zeitlin (1972:14) who calls the *Book of Judith* a charming story defends her actions in no uncertain terms. "Many writers condemn Judith by stating that she was most frivolous, unscrupulous, and a liar, and used feminine guile and seductiveness to achieve her noble end by ignoble means. She used ambiguous language in order to deceive. These accusations against Judith are not justified. The Judeans went through a desperate crisis. They were on the verge of destruction by a powerful army, and rules of war justified any tactic to combat the enemy". He likens her actions to armies engaged in espionage and trying to lure the enemy into a position of weakness. As Judith had no army she used her charm and beauty to conquer the enemy. Here again we see justification for the elimination of an enemy of the Jewish people.

Merideth (1989:63) points out that both these stories carry the powerful message that women's sexuality is dangerous to men. There is an explicit sexual inference in the relationship between Jael and Sisera. Aschkenasy (1986:171) makes some interesting observations about the sexual symbolism in the stories of Jael and Judith. When Sisera comes into Jael's tent and asks for water, Jael gives him something more nourishing in the form of milk. Aschkenasy quotes Wolfgang Lederer who says in mythology the perception of early man, woman, water and milk are tied together, and that in Egyptian hieroglyphics, the water jug is a symbol of femininity. "Thus when Sisera asks Jael for water, he implies he wants more than just a drink; and when Jael responds by giving him milk, she more than hints at her readiness to satisfy him with the totality of her femininity". The writer of this dissertation feels this symbolism does reveal the underlying sexual connotations of these stories, and

provides a further link between Jael and Judith because they both used their sexuality to gain their ends.

In the *Book of Judith* there is an explicit sexual theme. Both stories reveal a well-defined female strategy. "The use of sex is used as a bait to gain man's trust and then overpower him and put him under woman's control. (The) narrators use a known formula which is the seduction of the unsuspecting man at the hands of the treacherous female" (Aschkenasy 1986:172). Here the men are the enemies of the Jewish people and they have to be defeated. It is for this reason that no blame is attached to the women for their deeds. Rather they are recognised as heroines and praised for their brave deeds.

In the *Book of Judith*, Achior is a secondary male character who acts as a foil for Judith just as Barak acts as a foil for Deborah and Jael. The story ends with her leading the victorious Israelites in a triumphal hymn to Yahweh. Once more, a parallel may be drawn with Deborah's victory song in *Judges* 5.

"Then sang Deborah and Barak, ... on that day: That the leaders took the lead in Israel, that the people offered themselves willingly, bless the Lord" (Judg 5:1-2) "So perish all thine enemies, O, Lord! But thy friends be like the sun as he rises in his might. And the land had rest for forty years" (Judg 5:31).

"Then Judith began this thanksgiving before all Israel, and all the people loudly sang this song of praise. And Judith said, Begin a song to my God with tambourines sing to my Lord with cymbals Raise to him a new psalm; exalt him, and call upon his name For God is the Lord who crushes wars; for he has delivered me out of the hand of my pursuers, and brought me into his camp in the midst of the people" (Jdt.16:1-3). "Woe to the nations that rise up against my people! The Lord Almighty will take vengeance on them in the day of judgement;

*fire and worms he will give to their flesh;
and they shall weep in pain for ever” (Jdt. 16:17).*

Each hymn ends with the destruction of Israel’s enemies and both Deborah (aided by Jael) and Judith bring peace to the land.

White (1989:12-13) comments that there is a total absence of miracles in the narratives of both stories. “Judith and Jael perform their deeds in completely realistic ways; they seize the chance given to them by the moment ... (their needs) are not explicitly commissioned by Yahweh. They act on their own; salvation is achieved by human initiative...” This too, lends credence to Brun’s theory that the author was familiar with earlier stories in a similar tradition (1954:12).

Both stories portray women in unusual roles and Judith’s victory is reminiscent of that of other famous women in the Hebrew Bible. Yet she stands out as a unique figure because she acts completely without the help of a man. Miriam had Moses, Deborah and Jael had Barak, and Esther had Mordecai. Judith however acted without male support, relying solely on her maidservant for help.

3.2.2 Characterisation of Judith by various scholars

Montley (1978:38-9) maintains that the characterisation of Judith is effective, rich with ambiguity, and of archetypal significance. The heroine is a character of ambiguous morals and motives. She is a wealthy but generous and chaste widow with a reputation for virtue. Devout and pious she knows her Jewish history and is scrupulously observant of the law. “She is disarmingly beautiful ... unflinchingly brave, and intelligently articulate ... but she is also ruthless in her castigation of the elders ... presumptuous in her assurance that God will deliver the people through her ... and boastful about her deed”. She manages to manipulate both priests and soldiers and is deceitful and seductive in her dealings with the enemy. Her prayers and battle cries are bloodthirsty and revengeful and her ruthless murder of a sleeping man seems somewhat incongruous with her conscientious performance of religious duties.

Montley summarises succinctly the type of person Judith was, and the opinion of this dissertation is that it becomes abundantly clear that she was a most unusual person. Although fictional, through her story one learns that the authority of men could certainly be challenged and usurped.

Craven (1977:94-95) says that Judith's triumph is one of cultural paradox. In a male-dominated society male rulers are forced to accountability. Her story is one of dramatic reversals. A woman defeats the enemy and not by military power but by her beauty is she able to achieve this. "Her strength is striking precisely because it opposes the weakness of those around her".

Stocker (1990:85) says Judith's story "signifies an action in history, devised and performed by a woman despite a woman's marginality in history". Even if the story is inaccurate, the relevance lies in the fact that the "myth ... shows a woman intervening in history".

Pervo (1991:157) quotes Levine as saying "only the text's females act in a fully efficacious manner; only Judith displays well-directed initiative; only her maid competently follows instructions. The men are weak, stupid, or impaired". Consequently Judith shines like a beacon against the background of "craven and incompetent males" who appear to be ruled by their emotions.

3.2.3 Judith as the perfect androgen

The writer of this dissertation finds the ambiguity of Judith's personality a fascinating factor and is indebted to the insights offered by Montley's analysis of her character.

Montley (1978:10) using the definition of androgyny as "a condition under which the characteristics of the sexes, and the human impulses expressed by men and women are not rigidly assigned" calls Judith the perfect example of this state. The "male" traits are "wisdom, independence, forcefulness and bravery", the "female" traits are

“physical beauty, guile and sexual seductiveness”. Montley points out that the amazing thing about Judith’s androgyny is that she is not masculine and feminine simultaneously, but sequentially. In her widow’s tower she is “asexual”. When she chastises the elders for their lack of wisdom she “plays the man”; with the Assyrians and Holofernes she is subservient and obsequious and flatters them and is very much “the woman”. In cutting off Holofernes’ head she once again assumes the “male” role. On her return to Bethulia she abandons this role and once more becomes “asexual”.

Judith is representative of a national legend of resistance. The requirements for such a figure are explained by Stocker (1990:85), who claims that “in order to be socially prominent yet still a private individual she must be rich. To be a free agent she must not be under a private male authority ... yet in patriarchy she must carry some reflected male authority; so she must be married but a widow ... this means she cannot be a virgin, but she must be the next best thing, celibate”. Judith fulfils these requirements. Levine (1989:17) says that Judith’s potential to represent Israel does not pose a problem nor does it threaten Israelite society. What does is the fact that she speaks and acts in a manner that “endangers hierarchical oppositions of gender, race and class, muddles conventional gender characteristics and dismantles their claims to universality and so threatens the status quo”. She is the only named woman character in the story recognised by the “male defined world”. She goes on to state that while her “widowhood conforms to the traditional representation of Israel as a woman in mourning ... her status, rhetoric, wealth, beauty (do not depict) the forlorn female in need of male protection” (1989:19). In *Judith* (15:12-13) “all the women of Israel” gather to see and bless her; some dance in her honour. She then leads them and “every man” follows. Levine (1989:24) observes that by stating such inversions of male-female leadership patterns are only permitted by the extraordinary circumstances of Judith’s deed and Israel’s rescue. However, they cannot be allowed to continue unchecked. “Only by remaining unique and apart can Judith be tolerated, domesticated and even treasured by Israelite society” (1989:24). Judith leaves the public stage and retires to her home in Bethulia and life returns to normal. This is

the only way Judith will no longer directly threaten ordered (i.e. gender-determined) Israelite society.

It is the opinion of this dissertation that the author of Judith achieved what he set out to do, namely to arouse the patriotism of the Jewish people. He showed that God was the protector of those in distress and was always there to help them in time of need. In order to expect this protection, the people had to observe the laws of piety. Judith is primarily a religious book, but although Yahweh is credited with victory, and Judith's reliance on the guidance of Yahweh is invoked in her speeches and prayers, nowhere is it stated that He told Judith to act as she did. The achievement of the enemy's defeat rested on human initiative.

3.3 ECCLESIASTICUS OR THE WISDOM OF BEN SIRACH

This book was reputedly written by Joshua, the son of Sirach and is the only book in the Apocrypha of which the name of the author is known. Metzger (1965:128) says that from internal hints one is able to infer that the author was a Jewish scribe. "Draw near to me, you who are untaught and lodge in my school" (51:23). He probably conducted an Academy in Jerusalem, lecturing to young men on ethical and religious subjects. The dating of this work is approximately 180 BCE and is a typical example of wisdom literature reflecting everyday life in Palestine at that time. According to Metzger (1965:128) "Sirach is a significant link in the history of the development of ancient Jewish thought. It is the last great example of the type of wisdom literature represented in the Old Testament *Book of Proverbs*, and the first specimen of that form of Judaism which subsequently developed into the rabbinic schools of the Pharisees and the Sadducees".

Eissfeldt (1974:597) pinpoints the date of authorship by citing the translator Ben Sirach's grandson, who says he came to Egypt in the thirty eighth year of King Euergetes and translated his grandfather's work into Greek for the Greek-speaking Jews in Egypt. This date corresponds to 132 BCE. The grandson clearly came from Palestine and brought his grandfather's book with him. So the former lived and

wrote in Palestine, probably Jerusalem, and the contents of the book correspond to this assumption. As the grandson probably came to Egypt as a young man, about sixty years before 132 BCE gives one the date of the grandfather's period of life and activity - approximately 190 BCE. All this corresponds to Ben Sirach praising the rule of the High Priest Simon, who was in office about this time.

Ben Sirach devotes a great deal of space to the discussion of women, and Trenchard (1982:5) in his well documented work divides Ben Sirach's view of women into five categories :-

- (a) The mother
- (b) The good wife and widow
- (c) The daughter
- (d) The bad wife
- (e) The adulteress and prostitute.

3.3.1 Woman as mother

Trenchard (1982:39) notes that in Ben Sirach's attitude to mothers, he never discussed her as an independent category or person. She was always mentioned in a role alongside the father.

"Listen to me your father, o children, and act accordingly, that you may be kept in safety. For the Lord honoured the father above the children and he confirmed the right of the mother over her sons. He who honours his father atones for sins and whoever glorifies his mother is like one who lays up treasure" (Sir 3:1-3).

Ben Sirach viewed a mother in a slightly negative fashion. This is in contrast to that of Tobit, who counselled his son, Tobias thus :- "My son, when I die, bury me, and do not neglect your mother. Honour her all the days of your life; do what is pleasing

to her, and do not grieve her” (Tob 4:3). Here a mother is specifically identified for parental honour.

After several verses of reminding the child to honour and glorify his father, Ben Sirach does say it is a disgrace for children not to respect their mother; and “whoever angers his mother is cursed by the Lord” (Sir 3:16).

Ben Sirach was obviously anxious to preach the maintenance of Jewish Law and the Fourth Commandment of honouring one’s parents was most influential in framing his comments in this section.

3.3.2 Woman as good wife and widow

Ben Sirach heartily approved of marriage and had many good things to say about a good wife.

*“Happy is the husband of a good wife; the
number of his days will be doubled
A loyal wife rejoices her husband, and he will
complete his years in peace.
A good wife is a great blessing; she will be
granted among the blessings of the man who fears the Lord.
Whether rich or poor, his heart is glad and at all times
his face is cheerful”* (Sir 26.1-4).

*“A wife’s charm delights her husband and her skill
puts fat on his bones”* (Sir 26:13).

Trenchard (1982:15) says fattening the bones suggests more than providing her husband with good food. “It extends to the whole idea of healthful well-being. A good wife will preserve her husband’s health”. Ben Sirach goes on :

"A silent wife is a gift of the Lord ... A modest wife adds charm to charm ... Like the sun rising ... so is the beauty of a good wife in her well-ordered home. Like the shining lamp on the holy lampstand so is a beautiful face on a stately figure. Like pillars of gold on a base of silver, so are beautiful feet with a steadfast heart" (Sir 26:14-18).

Ben Sirach leaves one in no doubt that a man needs a wife. He needs her to anchor him and make a home. "... where there is no wife, a man will wander ... so who will trust a man that has no home and lodges wherever night finds him" (36:25-26). He also infers that a good wife is a good investment. All the attractions of a good wife are only important in the manner in which they are of benefit to her husband. "The wife's excellence is established and measured in terms of her benefit to her husband, or at least, her lack of trouble for him" (Trenchard 1982:13).

In *Ecclesiasticus* 36:24 we read "He who acquires a wife gets his best possession. A helper fit for him and a pillar of support". By calling her a "possession" Ben Sirach infers a good wife is a good investment. But the role of this ideal woman is restricted to the domestic sphere.

These injunctions to his students resemble in literary genre and content the *Book of Proverbs* which is part of wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible, and seem to echo the praise of the virtuous housewife. (See Chapter 2, pp 28-29)

In his references to the widow, Ben Sirach speaks of her as one of the oppressed social classes in need of protection and support. He displays sympathy and understanding here and no negative attitudes are applied.

Just as the Fourth Commandment influenced his injunctions to honour the mother, so equally biblical verses about caring and protecting the widows and orphans must have affected his attitudes, e.g. "You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge; ... When you reap your

harvest in your field, and have forgotten a sheaf ... it shall be for the fatherless and the widow ...” (Deut 24:17-19).

Ben Sirach exhorts his pupils to be of help to the poor and needy and show sympathy to the orphan and widow. “Be like a father to orphans, and instead of a husband to their mother; ...” (Sir 35:14-15).

In calling for the protection of widows and orphans, Ben Sirach echoed the social conscience of mankind which began with the Bible and continues to the present day in Jewish institutions in the world.

3.3.3 The daughter

Ben Sirach has nothing good to say in his writing about daughters. His judgements are extremely harsh and reflect “frustration, bitterness and contempt” (Trenchard 1982:165).

*“A daughter keeps her father secretly wakeful,
and worry over her robs him of sleep;
When she is young, lest she do not marry, or
if married, lest she be hated;
while a virgin, lest she be defiled or become
pregnant in her father’s house;
or having a husband, lest she prove unfaithful,
or, though married, lest she be barren.
Keep strict watch over a headstrong daughter
lest she make you a laughing stock to your enemies,
a byword in the city and notorious among the people,
and put you to shame before the great multitude!” (Sir 42:9-11).*

More than a century ago Davidson (1894/5:403) analysed Ben Sirach’s opinion as: “Every evil possibility is conjured up: she may commit folly in her father’s house

and bring disgrace on him; or she may remain on his hands until she is passé; or if married, her marriage may turn out in various ways an unhappy one”.

Trenchard (1982:164) suggests that “thinking about daughters seems to bring out the worst in Ben Sirach”. In his discussion about daughters, Ben Sirach makes “two of his most incredibly negative statements about women”.

*“As a thirsty wayfarer opens his mouth
and drinks from any water near him,
So will she sit in front of every post and
open her quiver to the arrow”* (Sir 26:12)

Ben Sirach’s description of a daughter’s insatiable lust for sexual intercourse is both “remarkably explicit and unabashedly obscene” (Trenchard 1982:164).

3.3.4 The bad wife

Ben Sirach devotes a large section of his book to the negative aspects of woman as a bad wife.

*“There is grief of heart and sorrow when a wife is envious of a rival,
and a tongue-lashing makes it known to all
An evil wife is an ox yoke which chafes;
taking hold of her is like grasping a scorpion.
There is great anger when a wife is drunken;
she will not hide her shame
A wife’s harlotry shows in her lustful eye ...* (Sir 26:6-9).

(He talks of) “any wickedness, but not the wickedness of a wife!” (Sir 25:13).
“I would rather dwell with a lion and a dragon than dwell with an evil wife”
(Sir 25:16). “From a woman sin had its beginnings and because of her we
die” (Sir 25:24).

Levison (1985:617) states that interpreters agree “with amazing unanimity” that (25:24) refers to the origin of sin and death being attributed to Eve. He challenges this interpretation as Ben Sirach regarded mortality as the expression of God’s will for creation since the beginning. Furthermore it was not a rabbinical belief to blame Eve. Levison (1985:619) states that because this quotation occurs in the midst of Ben Sirach’s thorough discussion of a bad wife (25:16-26) and the good wife (26:1-4; 26:13-18) in all probability Ben Sirach referred not to Eve, but intended to infer that “from the (evil) wife is the beginning of sin, and because of her we (husbands) all die”.

3.3.5 The adulteress and prostitute

Ben Sirach goes into detail about punishment for this behaviour. He also warns men who lust after married women or prostitutes that even though their deeds may not be observed by man, God would be aware of them and he would punish the culprit accordingly.

Punishment for women is more severely and clearly stated.

*“So it is with a woman who leaves her
husband and provides an heir by a stranger
For first of all she has disobeyed the law of the Most High;
Second, she has committed an offence against her husband,
And third she has committed adultery through
harlotry and brought forth children by another man
She herself will be brought before the assembly
and punishment will fall on her children
Her children will not take root, and her branches will not bear fruit.
She will leave her memory for a curse, and her
disgrace will not be blotted out” (Sir 23:22-26).*

In Ben Sirach's references to woman as prostitute he mentions the strange woman, a female musician and the prostitute herself. It is not always easy to make a distinction between these and the adulteress.

*“Do not go to meet a loose woman,
lest you fall into her snares
Do not associate with a woman singer
lest you be caught in her intrigues
Do not look intently at a virgin,
lest you stumble and incur penalties for her
Do not give yourself to harlots lest you
lose your inheritance.
Do not look around in the streets of a city
nor wander about in its deserted section (Sir 9:3-7).*

In being advised not to meet a strange woman, the inference is that the meeting is not by accident, but by design and agreement. The man could be snared into her nets and become involved in sexual activity which could lead to a long-term relationship.

In Ben Sirach's advice not to consort with a female musician, Trenchard (1982:120) suggests that a female singer or instrumentalist is of low morals and would reduce the unsuspecting. This could echo the story in *Isaiah 23:15-16* where the prostitute used both instrumental and vocal music to attract her customers.

Ben Sirach's warning to avoid harlots because of loss of inheritance through the practice of purchasing sexual favours, is re-iterated by cautioning against walking in the deserted streets where historically the prostitutes had their domain.

This dissertation is in full agreement with Trenchard (1982:172) when he says Ben Sirach “was capable of issuing remarks concerning women that stand out as classic pieces of misogynist rhetoric”, a very clear example being “Better is the wickedness of a man than the goodness of a woman” (42:14). Perhaps his most vindictive com-

ment on women is "... from garments comes the moth, and from a woman comes women's wickedness (42:13). In fact in 9:1-9 Ben Sirach warns men to have no social relationship with women, for each category has a hidden pitfall into which wise men may fall.

However one must take into account the fact that he lived in a patriarchal society where women were viewed in their roles as wives and mothers, and never as equals of men, and he wrote for the enlightenment of men in such a society. McKeating (1973:85) makes a very valid point when he states what Ben Sirach says "not only tells us a good deal about his own state of mind. It also reveals something of Jewish society and family life during the Greek period". Camp (1991:38) elaborates on this statement by saying "... we might be able to understand Ben Sirach's shrill, sometime virulent instructions on woman to be no worse than an expression of the culture in which he lives". Swidler (1976:37-38) says that Ben Sirach living as he did at a time of expanding Hellenistic influence was violently opposed to its "malign influences" and wished to shield Jewish women from this growing freedom and equality espoused by the Greeks. Skehan (1987:90-91) comments that many ancient authors in Greece and Rome who wrote "really repulsive, hostile and obscene remarks about women ... (would make) Ben Sirach seem moderate by comparison".

In the final analysis this dissertation believes that Ben Sirach was undoubtedly a misogynist who reflected the general attitude to women which prevailed at that time. Greenfield (1987:167) states "His words may be taken either as a reflection of his times or as his personal views expressed with vigour and vehemence". The premise in this dissertation would venture to say that they were a combination of both these factors. At no point does Ben Sirach make any mention of women apart from their relationships to men. Bailey (1972:60) makes the very valid point that Ben Sirach sees women as distinctly inferior to men. "The positive adjectives (he) uses to describe women are: wise and good; charming; sensible; obedient; silent; well trained character; modest; chaste; and beautiful. 'Silent', 'obedient' and 'modest' indicate women's place in subordination at all times to men. 'Charming', 'chaste' and 'beau-

tiful' characterise their relationship to men ... The inferiority of her position in all of life is clearly delineated".

3.4 SUSANNA

Susanna was the beautiful God-fearing wife of a Babylonian Jew named Joakim who was falsely accused of adultery by two Jewish elders whom she had spurned. However, she was saved by the skilful interrogation conducted by the wise Daniel.

Susanna was portrayed as beautiful, wealthy and virtuous. Pervo (1991:147) calls her "squeaky-clean" and says she was "largely an object, vigorously virtuous, and quite passive", a description in fact of an ideal woman. Being God-fearing, she made a conscious and explicit choice to withstand the advances of seduction and threat of blackmail, in favour of obedience to God and his laws. "I am hemmed in on every side. For if I do this thing it is death for me; and if I do not, I shall not escape your hands. I choose not to do it and to fall into your hands, rather than to sin in the sight of the Lord" (Sus 1:22-23).

Susanna stands out in very strong contrast with the wickedness and lechery of men of high standing in the community. These elders considered it their right to claim sexual favours from a beautiful woman and knew in a court of law their word would not be in question against that of a mere woman.

Just as Holofernes in *Judith*, and Sisera in the *Book of Judges*, these men were would-be seducers. Holofernes and Sisera lost their lives at the hands of Judith and Jael respectively. The elders in this story were condemned by the assembly because they had borne false witness against *Susanna* and they were condemned to death.

As well as giving an indication of the attitude of men to women, and the assumption that the formers' words would stand up in a court of law if the complainant was a woman, *Susanna* also highlights the moral of virtue triumphing over villainy and the author attempted to portray the importance of trust in God.

3.5 TOBIT

This story centres around Tobit, an extremely pious Jew of Naphtali, who was deported to Nineveh in 721 BCE,³ accumulated wealth, and deposited a large amount of money with a friend, Gabael in Media.

Despite his rigorous adherence to the law, Tobit was faced with one calamity after another, and eventually became blind and poor. Job-like he continued to pray to God for help. His prayers were heard and answered and when he sent his son, Tobias, to Media to fetch the money he had deposited there with Gabael, God sent the angel Raphael to travel with him. In the meanwhile, Sarah, Raguel's daughter and Tobias' cousin, prayed to God for help. She had lost seven husbands on their wedding nights, killed by the demon, Asmodeus. Raphael gave Tobias magic formulae to heal Tobit's blindness and exorcise Sarah's demon-lover. Tobias successfully completed his mission and married his cousin Sarah whom he took home to Naphtali.

The book is permeated by Jewish legal and spiritual piety, and one encounters people devoted to God, respectful to parents and honouring the dead. One receives a clear picture of gender-defined roles and the reinforcement of traditions and biblical laws.

3.5.1 Marriage

Men arranged marriages and it would appear that both wives and mothers had very little to say in the matter. The desirability of marriage between closely related kin is highlighted by the story of the seven successive husbands of Sarah who were fated to die on their wedding night. Unbeknown to them, Tobias, her cousin, had a prior claim to her hand in marriage. The custom was for the suitor to approach the bride's father, thus Tobias went to Sarah's father to discuss marriage. "Then he called his daughter Sarah, and taking her by the hand he gave her to Tobias, saying

³ 722/1 BCE was when the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the population of Samaria was exiled.

‘Here she is, take her according to the law of Moses and take her with you to your father’” (Tob 7:13). The phrase “according to the law of Moses” (and of Israel) is part of the Jewish wedding ceremony to this day. By contracting this marriage Tobias was obeying his father’s advice and injunction against marrying a foreign woman (Tob 4:12).

Concerning relationships within the marriage it was possible for Jews of this time to change the social order of the society, and in certain circumstances find “a potential equalising of gender-determined roles” (Bow and Nicklesburg 1991:136). In the relationship between Tobit and his wife Anna, Anna was not the kind of wife who was totally controlled by her husband. In three of the four conversations between these two, Anna rebuked her husband. After Tobit was blinded, Anna became the wage earner and engaged in women’s work outside the home. One of her employees gave her a kid as a bonus and Tobit, became suspicious, and accused her of stealing it. She replied, “Where are your charities and your religious deeds? You seem to know everything” (Tob 2:14). This caused Tobit to weep with grief. “Such a negative presentation of Tobit and positive depiction of Anna tends to equalise their positions and offset the prevailing patriarchal social structure” (Bow and Nicklesburg 1991:136). In the second conversation Anna told Tobit that their son was more important than money, and he was to get his priorities in order. She was convinced Tobit had sent Tobias on a dangerous mission to claim his money from Gabael in Media. “Do not add money to money, but consider it rubbish as compared to our child” (Tob 5:18). When Tobit tried to comfort her in her anxiety she said “be still and stop deceiving me; my child has perished” (Tob 10:7). However they both realised the anxieties in each other and when Tobias returned Anna shared the good news with her blind husband.

Tobit’s fondness for Anna probably motivated his instruction to his son not to neglect his mother. “Honour her all the days of your life; do what is pleasing to her and do not grieve her. Remember my son, that she faced many dangers for you while you were yet unborn. When she dies, bury her beside me in the same grave” (Tob 4:3-4).

It was customary for members of the same family to be buried in the same tomb. In Hebrew Bible narratives one reads of “sleeping with one’s fathers” or being “gathered to one’s fathers”. “...archaeological evidence of skeletal remains and ossuary inscriptions ... bear witness to several generations of the same family being buried in one chamber” (Archer 1990:265). In *Judith* we read of her being buried in the cave of her husband, Manasseh (16:23).

In contrast to the relationship between Tobit and Anna, Rachel’s parents, Edna and Raguel acted together as a couple. The former never at any stage asserted herself as Anna did. There was no conflict in their relationship. Edna was only mentioned in conjunction with Raguel. Whilst she together with Raguel set her seal upon the marriage document she had no part in the negotiations with Tobias. However, when the couple departed she said to Tobias “... See, I am entrusting my daughter to you; do nothing to grieve her” (Tob 10:12).

Sarah, too, was a completely passive character and her primary function was to provide a wife for Tobias. After her marriage she spoke only one word, “Amen”, and was mentioned by name on only three more occasions; (a) when her parents bade her farewell when she left for Naphtali; (b) when Tobit blessed his daughter-in-law and (c) when Raphael told Tobit he brought a reminder of his prayer and that of Sarah before God. Tobias does “dictate the contours of their relationship” (Bow and Nickelsburg 1991:138), but his fondness for her is indicated by his wish that she will be a helper to him as Eve was to Adam, and that they would grow old together.

3.5.2 Religious life - Prayer

There is a difference between those of the males and females in their prayers offered to God, suggesting a difference in their religious roles. Tobit is “paradigmatic of Israel”, and he spoke of divine judgement and “my sins and those of my fathers” (Bow and Nickelsburg (1991:129). Sarah’s prayers concerned her own personal dilemma. She proclaimed her innocence and showed concern for her father who had no child to

be his heir. Although she had contemplated suicide she considered the adverse effect this would have on her father's feelings and reputation. She turned to God for guidance and help. "I have turned my eyes and my face toward thee. Command that I be released from the earth ... Why should I live? But if it be not pleasing to thee to take my life, command that respect be shown to me and pity be taken upon me ..." (Tob 3:12-15). Bow and Nickelsburg (1991:130) say that the tones of her prayers reveal her as more admirable a character than Tobit, whose prayer is "self-centred and whining". Furthermore "Tobit presumptuously assumes that his desire to die is also divine will". Sarah saw her death as one option; Tobit saw his death as the only solution. Although as Bow and Nickelsburg point out "it is not possible to claim dogmatically that women pray only in response to specific situations of individual concern, while men's prayers would usually include larger issues and other people"; in all instances in *Tobit* the male characters, in their prayers and blessings, focus on others, whilst the females do not.

3.5.2.1 Charity

The performance of charitable deeds was the responsibility of male family members. From a very practical point of view women would have been unable to perform acts of charity as they did not have the financial wherewithal to do so. They had no control over family property as long as a male family member was present. Sarah's inheritance was given to Tobias. In the event of a husband pre-deceasing a wife, she would inherit his wealth, but in the case of Anna, Tobias was living in his parent's home and apparently controlled the family possessions.

3.5.2.2 Burial of the dead

Burial is an extremely important ritual act and in *Tobit* it was both a private and public affair. For Tobias it was a familial duty. Tobit had instructed him to attend to both his and Anna's burial. Like charity, burial was strictly a male responsibility and Bow and Nickelsburg (1991:132) suggest this is possibly because of the public nature of interment.

3.5.2.3 Religious instruction

It is primarily a male duty to educate children in the law. Tobit instructed Tobias about keeping commandments, the importance of charity, proper marriages and behaviour. Surprisingly Tobit said his grandmother, Deborah, taught him the law as he had been orphaned. Does this infer that women knew the law and could impart their knowledge when necessary? Perhaps here was a case of an exception rather than the rule.

3.6 THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

Instructional wisdom literature was a very ancient phenomenon in the Near East where sages had been accustomed to offering their views on both technical matters and general standards of morality. Mesopotamia and Egypt had a strong wisdom literature. The wisdom tradition in Israel is extremely old reaching back to at least the tenth century BCE (Bright 1981:220). It was a way of thinking and attitude to life that emphasised experience, reasoning, morality and the concerns of man as man rather than as Israelite (EJ 1971, Vol 16, 558). In later stages, (e.g. in Ben Sirach's writing) wisdom and national-religious traditions joined together. When Solomon built the Temple, psalms of Canaanite origin were adapted for Israelite use (e.g. Psalms 29, 45 and 18) and new ones doubtless composed (Bright 1981:220). Wisdom also flourished and Solomon enjoyed fame as a composer of proverbs (I Kings 4:29-34). Bright (1981:220) states that it is well known that parts of *Proverbs* are based on the Egyptian Maxims of Amenemope, which came from the second millennium. This wisdom was fostered at Solomon's court. In the eighth century BCE Hezekiah's men engaged in collecting Solomonic proverbs (Prov 25:1) and probably also in assembling the religious and other writings of Judah and Northern Israel.

Eissfeldt (1974:601) says the work "shows the effects of foreign, namely Greek, stylistic influences". He claims that the entire work, especially "its second more prosaic half is written entirely in the bombastic style of the Hellenistic age ...". Not only the

writing, but the contents, too, deck out the “thoroughly Jewish core ... with all manner of features borrowed from Greece, or more properly from the syncretism of Hellenistic, Egyptian and Oriental ideas ...”. Eissfeldt goes on to say that the second and first centuries BCE mark the “classical period of this kind of learning and literature, influenced both in form and content by Oriental and Hellenistic thought” (1974:602).

The interesting feature of this work is that the gift of wisdom is personified as a woman who is endowed with every conceivable positive and desirable attribute.

“Wisdom is radiant and unfading and she is easily discerned by those who love her, and is found by those who seek her” (Wis 6:12).

“For in her there is a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, overseeing all and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent and pure and most subtle”. ... “For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty ... and an image of his goodness” (Wis 7:22-26).

“For she is more beautiful than the sun, and excels every constellation of the stars. Compared with the light she is found to be superior ...” (Wis 7:29).

The author of this work found her so desirable that he wished to take her for his bride knowing that despite his youth he would have *“glory among the multitudes and honour in the presence of the elders ...”* (Wis 8:10). Because of her he would have immortality and find rest with her *“... for companionship with her has no bitterness, and life with her has no pain, but gladness and joy”* (Wis 8:16). Her friendship would bring *“... pure delight, and in the labours of her hands, unfailing wealth, and in the experience of her company understanding, and renown in sharing her words”* (Wis 8:18).

“Wisdom rescued from troubles those who served her. When a righteous man fled from his brother’s wrath she guided him on straight paths; she showed him the Kingdom of God. ... she stood by him and made him rich. She protected him from his enemies, ... and she gave him everlasting honour” (Wis 10:9-14).

Collins (1983:182) points out that this presentation of wisdom is distinctly coloured by Greek philosophy. It is the principle of order which “stretches in might from pole to pole ...” He says that this work is one of the major products of the Egyptian diaspora, and it is interesting that the author of this book was greatly influenced by the Hellenistic thinking, as opposed to Ben Sirach who made every effort to counteract the liberal teachings of the time.

3.7 CONCLUSION

Archer (1986:239) suggests some reasons for the emergence in Jewish thought of the concept/image of the Evil Woman. This concept emerged for the first time in the Second Temple period (515 BCE - 70 CE) and was rooted in the changing socio-religious dynamics of the post-exilic Jewish community. She says a “hallmark of the Second Temple period was a phenomenal sexual morbidity which permeated every aspect of life and religious teaching”. This “obsession with woman as potential harlot (was) the product of historical processes”. During biblical times society was organised around the extended family unit. Three or four generations all lived under the authority of a single patriarch. Marriage was not formal and women were usually “taken” into the husband’s family. There were no official divorce proceedings. Polygamy was the norm as was the use of concubines. Virginity of daughters was not an obsessive concern and incest was loosely defined or prohibited. Property in general was controlled by the patriarch. There were no significant ideas of purity, no Temple and rigidly defined Monotheism.

Over the next few centuries societal structure and religious ideology gradually changed. A much more complex economic system developed, and other forms of

authority emerged. There was increased urbanisation, increased poverty on the land and forms of authority and governmental systems which changed the authority of the patriarch. There was a move away from the extended family, and women enjoyed a certain importance and generally retained a public presence.

Archer (1986:241) points out that in keeping with these changes the *Book of Deuteronomy* concerned itself with practical regulations regarding every day life and family related laws. Inheritance rights were clearly defined together with the institution of *primo geniture* whereby children of favoured wives were not given preferential treatment over less favoured ones. The laws of adultery were strengthened and greater attention was given to the purity of daughters. Marriage became more formalised, incest taboos were strengthened as were the laws relating to seduction and rape, especially of virgins. Bills of divorce were required by law. At this time there emerged a "vociferous and admonishing prophetic class". Archer indicates that from the writings of the time, women were prominent in cultic activities. The prophets urged the people to abandon their syncretistic activities and prescribed how the people should purify themselves.

During the period of the Second Temple and the Exile to Babylon (seventh - sixth centuries BCE), Israel worked to establish itself as the elect, holy community of God. Small wonder then that there was an ever-increasing obsession with ritual purity. Monotheism was reaffirmed and pagan worship squashed. Complex purity laws were introduced and special attention was paid to the purity of the priestly class. The laws of inheritance were changed to allow daughters to receive property in the absence of sons and women were placed strictly under the control of fathers or husbands. The ever-increasing obsession with ritual purity and the emergence of the nuclear family helped to produce a sharper differentiation in male-female social function. During this period the woman's role was placed firmly in the sphere of wife, mother and homemaker and the man in the public sphere as worker, provider and active member of social, political and religious affairs. Archer (1986:244) states "The Virgin - Harlot image and the references to adultery and pollution, divorce, purity, marriage and so on, all reflect the new concerns of the besieged community

... (and the) ever increasing patriarchal tenor of Jewish society in the pre-exilic period”.

Archer (1986:245) goes on to state that in the literature of this time, all women assumed the characteristics of the harlot unless they were controlled by man. “All women are potential adulteresses, and by nature lascivious and scheming ... (they) have the potential to ensnare men, weaken them, and disenfranchise them”. Men were repeatedly warned of the dangers of the evil woman. “For women, the projected image of the adulterous harlot and the punishments which society saw fit to mete out, served as a due warning to stay in their designated role of secluded modesty”.

The view in this dissertation is in agreement with Archer (1986:246) that the emergence of this image of women was the result of “the ever increasing sophistication of Jewish life and societal organisation (and) shifts in family structures”. And although these attitudes found fertile ground because of the flux of male-female social roles of the time, they were to have far reaching implications for women down through the centuries.

CHAPTER 4

WOMEN IN PSEUDEPIGRAPHAL WRITINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

As has been stated in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, literary activity did not cease with the canonisation of the Bible, and indeed flourished during the Persian and Hellenistic eras. It was during this period that the books of the Apocrypha were written. After the sectarian schism in the beginning of the Hasmonean period¹ the pseudepigraphal works began to appear. Whereas the apocryphal works dealt mainly with the struggle against idolatry, believing prophesy had ended, the pseudepigraphists believed that prophesy continued and that through this they could make laws and foresee the future. In order to give greater authority to their writings, the authors often attributed the works to earlier writers. The *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, (1971, Vol 3, 186) states that possibly much of the pseudepigraphal writing derived from the Essenes who had many devotees both in Israel and the diaspora. Some of their scriptures were translated and disseminated amongst their followers. It was precisely the importance attached to these prophesies within the sect, and their circulation during political crises at the time of Hycranus and the Roman procurators, that prompted the Pharisee sages to distance themselves from these works. They were, therefore, not representative of Judaism of the time and had very little influence on Jewish thought and attitudes. Although all books outside the Canon were rejected by the rabbis many of these books were accepted by the church and had an influence on Christian thought. Whilst apocryphal books were generally accorded

¹

The Hasmoneans (175 - 134 BCE) headed the rebellion against the Seleucid Kingdom and established an autonomous Jewish state. The Seleucid Empire had annexed Palestine in 198 BCE. At first the Jews were shown the greatest consideration. But when Antiochus III challenged Rome, the empire began to decline, and by 175 BCE when Antiochus IV came to the throne, he adopted a stringent policy against the Jews which drove them to outright rebellion.

the same status as canonical works within the church, with only a few exceptions all churches rejected the Pseudepigrapha. However discussion on this question is not within the scope of this dissertation.

Whilst the main books dealing with attitudes to women will be discussed more fully, it may be useful to comment generally on some of the works which have fleeting references to women. According to Swidler (1976:47) *The Letter of Aristeas* was composed between 130 and 70 BCE by an Alexandrian Jew who spoke of women in a deprecatory fashion. In verse 25 we read “Womankind are by nature headstrong and energetic in the pursuit of their own desires, ... subject (to) fallacious reasoning, and their nature is essentially weak”. In *The Book of Adam and Eve*, also probably written by an Alexandrian Jew in the first century CE, the author makes it clear that sexual sin is the mother of all evil and Eve was the primary sinner in the Garden of Eden. Eve was thought of as the source of sin, suffering and death of humanity, as well as the revolt of the animal kingdom against man. In *The Secrets of Enoch* written in the first century CE, the notion of Eve as the cause of death was reinforced. This is in contrast to the apocryphal work of *Tobit*, where Tobias tells his wife Sarah that she will be a help to him as Eve was to Adam. It is also contrary to the rabbinic attitude to Eve who was not made responsible for sin and all evil.

The Testament of Reuben states that “... a pit unto the soul is the sin of fornication. For in fornication there is neither understanding nor godliness and all jealousy dwellest in the best thereof ... For women are evil ... they use wiles ... and whom they cannot bewitch by outward attractions, him they overcome by craft” (5:1-2). Women are seen as spreading their evil plotting against men and they are “overcome by the spirit of fornication more than men”. In 6:1-2 we read “Guard your senses from every woman. And command the women likewise not to associate with men”. Contact between men and women was seen as an irremediable disease for women and an eternal reproach for the men.

The author of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* had the same obsession with the wiles and beauty women used to seduce man. The basic problem of all matters of incest and fornication rested with women who were particularly attracted to vice.

Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the Judean Wilderness in 1947, a new light has been thrown on the date and origin of some of these books including the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. Eissfeldt (1974:633) suggests that they should be regarded as deriving from the Qumran community which flourished between the second century BCE and 70 CE. This would explain the similarity between many features of the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* and Christian ideas and customs. The connection is not because of Christian authorship of the work, “nor to the assumption of Christian interpolations of an older Jewish original, but rather due to the relationship between the ‘Essene’ community of Qumran and Christianity ...” Eissfeldt (1974:635) elaborates on this idea by stating that a clear division between Christian revision of a Jewish original and a Christian author of older Jewish material can hardly be made. This question of authorship highlights the reason for pseudepigraphal works being totally ignored by the rabbis. It must be emphasised that the attitude to women as depicted in pseudepigraphal writings was the peculiar attitude of this group and was not in any way the official attitude of the rabbis.

4.2 THE BOOK OF JUBILEES

The *Book of Jubilees* gives the history of the world as revealed to Moses during the forty days he spent on Mount Sinai. The discovery of fragments of the Hebrew text at Qumran and Masada date this work to approximately 140 BCE, the author probably belonging to the Essene sect. In his dealings with women, the author’s uppermost thoughts are the avoidance of intimate relationships with foreign women who are represented as the Canaanite wives of Esau. These women are called impure “... because all of their deeds are fornication and lust, and there is not any righteousness with them, for their deeds are evil”(Jub 25:1). It is stated time and again that it was a shameful sin for Jews and non-Jews to inter-marry, and all involved were to be killed, including the Jewish father who gave his daughter in such a marriage.

However it was not only foreign women who were to be shunned, and the author warned “And you guard yourself from all fornication and impurity, and from all corruption of sin” (Jub 20:6). It will come as no surprise that the woman was to suffer most and no mention was made of the man involved. “And when any woman or girl fornicates among you, you will burn her with fire, and let them not fornicate with her after their eyes and hearts ...” (Jub 20:4). Swidler (1976:5) says “Such a fundamental grounding of evil in sex and meting out of punishment to women tended to imply ... a misogynist attitude in males ...”

4.2.1 The Role of Rebecca in The Book of Jubilees

As has been mentioned in the Introduction to this chapter on pseudepigraphal writings, reference was often made to earlier writers and characters in order to give the narrative more credence. In this work, the personality of the biblical Rebecca, a resourceful and dominating woman, is raised to an even higher standing. She assumes the mantle of leadership and “overshadows her rather docile husband and achieves a significant role in salvation history” (Chesnutt 1991:107).

Rebecca certainly fulfilled a role most unusual for a woman of this period. She functioned as the real link between God and Jacob :-

“And then she lifted her face toward heaven and spread out the fingers of her hands and opened her mouth and blessed the Most High God who created heaven and earth. And she gave him glory and praise ... ‘May the Lord God be blessed ... he who gave to me Jacob ... because he is yours ... O Lord, bless him and place in my mouth a righteous blessing so that I may bless him’” (Jub 25:11-13). She then blesses Jacob, “And at that time, when a spirit of truth descended upon her mouth, she placed her two hands upon the head of Jacob and said :- ‘Blessed are you, O Lord of Righteousness and God of Ages, and may he bless you more than all the generations of man. May he grant to you the way of righteousness, my son; ... may he multiply

your sons in your life ... And may their sons be more numerous and greater than the stars of heaven ... And may he give them this pleasant land ...” (Jub 25:14-17).

This blessing heralds a hitherto unprecedented action for a woman. Endres (1987:78) points out that the dramatic detail of Rebecca’s blessing of Jacob offers “evidence that the author wished to present her as a matriarch par excellence”.

Her importance is further highlighted when her preference for Jacob over Esau is reinforced by no less a figure than Abraham himself. He commands Rebecca to ensure Jacob’s advancement.

“And Abraham loved Jacob, but Isaac loved Esau. And Abraham saw the deeds of Esau and he knew that in Jacob a name and seed would be named for him. And he called Rebecca ... And he said to her, ‘My daughter, guard my son Jacob because he will be in place of me upon the earth and for a blessing in the midst of the sons of man ... because I know the Lord will choose him for himself as a people who will rise up from all the nations’” (Jub 19:15-18).

One is faced with the question of how to reconcile Rebecca’s apparent deceit of Isaac in acquiring the paternal blessing for Jacob, with her role as matriarch “par excellence”. Apart from Abraham’s instructions and her divinely inspired blessing of Jacob, Chesnutt (1991:108-9) points out that the author of the *Book of Jubilees* indicated Jacob’s moral superiority over Esau. *“And Jacob was smooth and upright, but Esau was a fierce man ... Jacob learned writing, but Esau did not learn because he was a rustic man ... and he learned war, and all of his deeds were fierce”* (Jub 19:13-14). Rebecca is thus given “patriarchal, ethical and theological legitimisation” and exonerated from any “ethical impropriety”. Her acts become “commendable ... (and therefore) Rebecca furthers divine purposes and provides a crucial link in the drama of salvation history”.

Furthermore, the rabbis did not regard this an act of deception. Rebecca, together with other biblical Matriarchs were regarded as people who received revelations. In *Genesis Rabbah* 67:9 we learn that it was through divine revelation that Rebecca came to know of Isaac's intention to bless Esau and of Esau's plot against Jacob. Even Josephus, whose attitudes to women will be discussed in Chapter 5, and "who typically downplays assertiveness or initiative on the part of biblical women, credits Rebecca with wisdom and foreknowledge and allows her a significant role as a divine agent" (Chesnutt 1991:120). The *Midrash*² to *Genesis* 27 reports that Rebecca foresaw the destruction of the Temple by the Romans and the martyrdom of great Jewish scholars.

After Abraham's death, Rebecca assumed a prominent leadership role. She issued a strong admonition to Jacob. *"My son, do not take for yourself a wife from the daughters of Canaan as Esau your brother ... (his wives) have embittered my soul with all their impure deeds ... my son heed my voice, and do the will of your mother"* (Jub 25:1-3). Isaac, far from taking the lead role in this regard, merely echoed Rebecca's words in *Jubilees* 27:10-12. Jacob's response was one of filial obedience. *"I swear, O mother, before you all the days of my life that I will not take for myself a wife from the daughters of the seed of Canaan ... Trust that I will do your will. And I will walk uprightly and will never corrupt my ways"* (Jub 25:9-10). The author of this dissertation is in agreement with Endres (1987:77) who states "Seldom in biblical literature has a mother's will played so significant a role ...".

Chesnutt's premise (1991:110-111) is that the author of this book wished to present Rebecca as an important example for the Jewish community of his day to emulate. Rebecca takes her place alongside the Patriarchs of Israel. "As a moral example and outspoken opponent of exogamy, the contamination of the Temple and familial discord, she embodies the ideals which the author considered indispensable for the survival of Judaism through the traumas of the second century BCE".

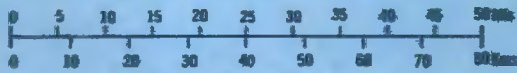
²

The Midrash is a genre of rabbinic literature constituting an anthology and compilation of homilies consisting of biblical exegesis and forming a running commentary on specific books of the Bible (EJ 1971, Vol 11:1507).

Palestine Under the Maccabees

GROWTH OF MACCABEAN JUDEA

- Boundary of Judea before the uprising, 166 B.C.
- 1 Conquests under Jonathan, 160-142 B.C.
- 2 Conquests under Simon, 142-134 B.C.
- 3 Conquests under John Hyrcanus, 134-104 B.C.
- 4 Conquests under Aristobulus I, 104-103 B.C.
- 5 Conquests under Alexander Jannaeus, 103-76 B.C.
- Maccabean domain at maximum extent (Kingdom of Alexander Jannaeus)



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The Great Sea
(Mediterranean Sea)



Whilst it would be wrong to assume that all women in the Jewish society of the time enjoyed the same status as Rebecca, it is because some semblance of proper familial and societal structures endured that it was meaningful for the Rebecca story to be re-written. Jubilees does “not throw social convention to the wind but shows great concern for proper relationships within family and society” (Chesnutt 1991:124). It is within the context of this structure that Rebecca is assigned to the dominant role of leadership in the home and prominence among the leaders of the Jewish people. Chesnutt (1991:124) feels that one may conclude that in this social world “it was both possible and desirable for a capable woman to assume an aggressive role of leadership as the situation demanded”.

4.3 THE FOURTH BOOK OF MACCABEES

Nickelsburg (1981:226) states that this book may well have been written around the year 40 CE in response to Caligula’s attempt to have his statue erected in the Jerusalem Temple. The author possibly lived outside Palestine, and was totally devoted to the laws of Israel and at the same time someone to whom Hellenisation formed an integral part of life.

Charlesworth (1985:533) says that it is not possible to think of Palestinian Judaism as distinct on most points from the “cultural stream of Hellenism ... Judaism was influenced to a hitherto unsuspected degree by Hellenistic ideas, ideals, and practices”.

However traces of infiltration of Hellenism into Palestinian Jewish life and thought are one thing but the ambience of *IV Maccabees* “is so thoroughly and unreservedly Greek that to regard it as a product of Palestine is virtually impossible” (Charlesworth 1985:553).

IV Maccabees is an expansion of *II Maccabees* which is dated around the first century BCE. This latter work recounts the events of 180-161 BCE in Seleucid-controlled Palestine. During this time the Maccabean war took place (166-163 BCE).

The author inserted several accounts of martyrdom under the Seleucid King, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, after the profanation of the Temple in Jerusalem. One reads of the evil of these rulers and the success of Judas Maccabeas. The fact that Jews were forbidden to observe the Sabbath or feasts, or in fact confess to being Jewish, was reason for the action of the faithful who endured martyrdom. These people were unable to reconcile the rule of Hellenistic Palestine and their religious lives. They refused to participate in pagan rites celebrating Antiochus' birthday and continued to circumcise their sons. Furthermore they would not eat the flesh of swine. By dating this work to mid-first century (Nickelsburg 1981:226) contemporary relevance is given to the accounts of tensions with Rome.

4.3.1 The role of the mother

Rather than submit to the tyrannies of the Roman authorities, the mother in *IV Maccabees* encouraged her sons to accept all forms of torture rather than break the dietary laws and eat pork. Forced to watch and endure the torture and death of each of these seven sons in turn, "that noble mother counted all these things as nought because of her faith in God" (IV Mac 15:24). As she was about to be seized and put to death, she flung herself into the fire so that the soldiers would not touch her body.

The mother's actions in this work depict "the paradox of reason's triumph in the weakest of rational beings: a woman tied spiritually with the bonds of motherhood" (Young 1991:75). Charlesworth (1985:531) says the mother of these seven sons is depicted "in her suffering and death (as) the most illustrious exemplar of the victory of reason, in as much as before her own end she exhorted her sons to endure death rather than transgress the Law".

"For the mother of the seven youths endured the agonies of every one of her children. Consider how many-skeined is maternal affection ... even unreasoning animals have a sympathy and affection for those born of them ... winged creatures protect their young by nesting in the roofs of houses ... and repel any intruder ... they flutter about their

nestlings in the anguish of love ... and help their young in whatever way possible ... even the bees ward off intruders at the season of making honey ... and defend (their young) to the death. But sympathy for her offspring did not move the mother of the youths, whose soul was like Abraham's" (IV Mac 15:12-20).

The sons exclaimed in unison: "When we have died in such fashion, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob will receive us, and all the Patriarchs will praise us" (13:17). Abraham is the prime example of mastery over love of a child, and by likening the mother to the great Patriarch, she is being glorified.

In 15:1-3 we read "O reason of the children, master over the emotions! O religion dearer to the mother than her sons! When two alternatives lay before her ... she loved religion better". The author goes on to say that "mothers are not stalwart in spirit ... their love of children is more abounding". Despite the fact that she had given birth to each of them and cherished a deep bond with every one of them "she disregarded the temporal safety of her children" and they "so loved their mother that in obedience to her they observed the Law even unto death" (IV Mac 15:8-10).

However the fortitude of the youths paled beside that of their mother as she watched them tortured and put to death:

"Ah, sacred nature, charm of parental love, filial yearning, nurture, the indomitable emotions of motherhood ... The flesh of her children she saw disintegrating in the fire; the fingers of their hands and toes of their feet quivering on the ground; the flesh of their heads flayed down to the cheeks ... O mother, who did now experience anguish more bitter than their birth pangs! ... How numerous, then, and how great, were the torments of the mother, as she suffered with her children ..." (IV Mac 15:13-22).

This mother of seven sons, was so highly praised and acknowledged as a martyr for the reason that she was not weak in spirit nor did she lament her fate. She did not say

"Ah, miserable woman that I am, repeatedly wretched time and again! Seven children have I borne, and I am the mother of none. In vain were my seven pregnancies; futile the ten-months burden borne seven times, fruitless the nursing, and wretched the suckling. In vain, my children, did I endure those many travails for you; and the harder anxieties of your upbringing. Alas for my sons - some unwedded, other married, but to no purpose; I shall never see your children, nor shall I ever be blessed with the title of grandmother. I had children, both numerous and handsome; and now am a woman forsaken and solitary with many sorrows. Nor when I die, shall I have any of my sons to bury me" (IV Mac 16:6-11).

Because of this she is called "holy and God-fearing ... soldier of God through religion, Elder, woman! By your constancy you have vanquished even the tyrant; and by your deeds and your words discovered yourself more stalwart than a man" (IV Mac 16:12-14).

This woman who was given great status in the narrative, achieved this not through mundane events, but through her heroic acts of martyrdom which "destroyed the tyrant's violence and foiled his evil ideas and showed forth the nobility of faith" (IV Mac 17:2-6).

Despite her status, the mother in this work is not given a name. However in rabbinic literature where the martyrdoms recounted in both *II Maccabees* and *IV Maccabees* are assigned to the Hadrianic persecutions, she is sometimes called Miriam bat Tanhum. In Syrian Christian accounts she is called Shamone and/or Maryam whereas a Spanish reviser of *Sefer Josippon* named her Hannah, "no doubt under the inspiration of the story of Hannah in *I Samuel* 2:5" (Charlesworth 1985:540).

4.4 THE TESTAMENT OF JOB

Spittler (1985:833) in his introductory comments on the *Testament of Job* dates the writing of this work to sometime between the first century BCE and first century CE. In all likelihood it came from the Egyptian sect known as the Therapeutae, as they allowed women a significant role in their sacred meetings. Furthermore many aspects of the text resemble those found in the sectarian Qumran texts.

Although Christian editing is possible, the work is essentially Jewish in character and the theological outlook is in keeping with Hellenistic Judaism. Spittler (1985:836) maintains that the chief contribution of this work “lies in its witness to the sectarian diversity of Hellenistic Judaism (and is) typical Hellenistic monotheistic propaganda and moral exhortation ...”

The book is a re-writing of the canonical *Book of Job*. In the *Book of Jubilees* biblical Rebecca is elevated to the extent where she overshadows her husband, Isaac. In the *Book of Job* women play almost no role but in the *Testament of Job* they attract a great deal of interest. Wives, widows, slaves and daughters are discussed in detail. Van der Horst (1986:274) points out that 107 out of 388 verses in this work deal with women. This represents thirty times as much space as in the biblical book. This shift in emphasis may indicate a surge of interest in women because of their increased participation in areas of social and political activity in the Near East of the time.

4.4.1 Women in negative roles

Women play both a negative and positive role in this Book. In the first section, Job is in direct conflict with Satan. A servant girl and his wife are unable to see through Satan's disguises. Job instructed the slave girl to give a burnt loaf to Satan who was disguised as a beggar. However she was ashamed to do so and “took a good loaf of her own and gave it to him” (TJob 7:6). When she was criticised by Satan for her

disobedience she declared him to be correct and changed the loaves around. Collins (1974:43) points out that “For this piece of kind-hearted generosity which accords so perfectly with Job’s own actions ... she is categorised as an ‘evil servant’, no doubt because she did not obey her master. The woman is weak and fails to recognise Satan, therefore she cannot rely on her own judgement and must listen to her master”.

Job’s wife, Sitidos, had worked as the slave of a rich man in order to earn bread for herself and her husband. When after eleven years her master withheld Job’s portion of bread, she went to market to beg for bread for him. Satan disguised as a bread-seller was not recognised by Sitidos, and when he asked for money she replied, “Where would I get money? Are you unaware of the evils that have befallen us? If you have any pity on me show mercy ... And he answered her, saying,

“Unless you deserved the evils, you would not have received them ... if you had no money ... offer me the hair of your head and take three loaves of bread’ ... she said to herself, ‘What good is the hair of my head compared to my hungry husband?’ ... showing disdain for her hair, she said to him, ‘Go ahead, take it’” (TJob 23:4-9).

Here we see a devoted and loving wife who is prepared to do her utmost to feed her husband. She even undergoes the humiliation of having her hair shaved rather than let him starve. Like the slave girl the motive for her behaviour is honourable. However both of them lack “the awareness of insight into the invisible background of things that happen” (Van der Horst 1986:278).

Sitidos’ goodness and virtues are almost negated by her lack of spiritual intelligence and she errs repeatedly. The task is left to Job to reveal the machinations of evil and Van der Horst (1986:278) feels that both these women “serve as a foil to show off Job’s superior handling of the situation”. He goes on to state that this is typical comment on the religious awareness of wise males and foolish females. Sitidos belongs to the category of “ignorants and fools whom Satan can easily get into his grip”. Women are weak and need to be protected against themselves and can best be

kept inside the home as much as possible: Sitidos has a very low spiritual rating and cannot discern where “evil powers lie in wait, neither does she see what God is doing; she is spiritually blind. Kind though she may be, she is dull, and it is only fitting that it is the cows that are the first to bewail her death” (1990:279).

Chesnutt (1991:117-8) corroborates this view when he says that the portrayal of Sitidos is all the more uncomplimentary because she never intentionally takes Satan’s side; but unwillingly, like the slave girl, becomes his accomplice. “... the text leaves the strong impression that women are spiritually unintelligent and therefore easy prey for Satan”.

Many of the apocryphal and pseudepigraphal writings of the Hellenistic and Roman periods reflect these attitudes, but perhaps they are not as exaggerated in this work because men as well as women are depicted as lacking insight and it is required that Job explains the realities of the situation. An example of this is the visit of the four kings. When Sitidos asked them to dig through the ruins of the house which had fallen on her children “so that at least their bones might be preserved as a memorial... Let us see them ... my ten children have died and I have not arranged the burial ...” (TJob 39:9-10), Job forbade them from taking action for their search would be in vain. “For you will not find my children, since they were taken up into heaven by their Creator their King”. The king replied “Who then will not say you are demented and mad when you say, ‘My children have been taken up into heaven!’ Tell us the truth now!” (TJob 39:12-13). These men too, did not have the vision or understanding with which Job was endowed.

4.4.2 Women in positive roles

In contrast to the slave girl and Sitidos, in the later chapters of the book, Job’s three daughters by his second wife, Dinah, played a remarkably positive role, and we have a complete reversal of attitudes. When Job divided his inheritance among his seven sons, and his daughters received nothing, they protested and asked “Our father, sir, are we not also your children? Why then did you not give us some of your goods?”

Job replied "Do not be troubled, my daughters: I have not forgotten you. I have already designated for you an inheritance better than that of your seven brothers" (TJob 46:2-4).

He "brought out three multicoloured cords whose appearance was such that no man could describe, since they were not from the earth but from heaven ... and he gave each a cord, saying 'Place these about your breast so that it may go well with you all the days of your life'" (TJob 46:7-9). When Kasia, his second daughter, remarked that they could not make a living from these girdles, Job replied, "Not only shall you gain a living from these, but these cords will lead you into a better world, to live in the heavens" (TJob 47:2-3). He called them the "protective amulet of the Father". "Rise then, gird yourselves with them before I die in order that you may be able to see those who are coming for my soul, in order that you may marvel over the creatures of God" (TJob 47:10-11). Nickelsburg (1981:246) points out that by distributing his earthly possessions to his sons, and his heavenly gifts to his daughters, he "ascribes a higher religious status to women than to men, surely a reversal of values in the contemporary world". In fact when Job died, only his daughters saw his soul ascending to heaven in a gleaming chariot with angels in attendance. When his body was buried they led the way, girded with their heavenly sashes and singing hymns to God. Job's daughters took the leading roles and are shown as superior to their brothers and uncle.

Here is a complete reversal of the female stereotype. Job's daughters are "the knowledgeable ones who ... do not become distraught over earthly afflictions but take comfort in heavenly reality" (Chesnutt 1991:119). Van der Horst (1986:282) says that this image of women is "rather unique in early Jewish literature, (and) it is precisely for this reason that some scholars have contested both the authenticity and the Jewish character of those chapters".

Because of the complete contrasts in attitudes to women in *Testament of Job* it has been suggested by commentators that more than one author is responsible for this work.

4.5 CONCLUSION

The revelatory experiences both in the *Testament of Job* and *Book of Jubilees* which are attributed to women “provide significant if indirect evidence for at least some elevation of women’s position in the real world of early Judaism ... (and) therefore contribute to the growing body of evidence indicating that not all Jewish women in the Hellenistic age were as oppressed and repressed as some stereotypes, both ancient and modern, would suggest” (Chesnutt 1991:125). Job’s daughters as well as the mother in *IV Maccabees* experience the highest spiritual values of Judaism.

However, generally the pseudepigraphal literature did not view women in a favourable light. The status of Jewish women at this period did not measure up to that of women in Hellenistic culture, who seemed to hold a higher position in religion and society. Swidler (1976:54) attempts to answer this question by suggesting that there was a need for the Jewish people to stress the identity and unity of the Jewish people and to “ward off outside influences which could confuse and dilute that identity and unity”. The Hellenistic culture was becoming increasingly attractive to many Jews who felt the influence very keenly.

It is the opinion of this dissertation that while there is a modicum of truth in this explanation, unfortunately these negative attitudes towards women remained to a marked degree unshaken. They were to influence the thoughts of later legislators and persons of influence in the Jewish world. These attitudes were evident during the period of rabbinic Judaism which culminated in the redaction of the Mishnah. Despite many rabbinic statements showing appreciation of women, the negative comments may very well have been a continuation of attitudes which evolved through apocryphal and pseudepigraphal writings.

CHAPTER 5

JEWISH WOMEN IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN PERIOD (THIRD - FIRST CENTURY BCE) IN PALESTINE AND THE DIASPORA¹ AS DEPICTED IN LITERATURE BEYOND APOCRYPHAL AND PSEUDEPIGRAPHAL WRITINGS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

During the reign of Alexander the Great (336 - 323 BCE), Hellenistic civilisation became superimposed on all local civilisations in the region. This process was to continue under the Diadochi, Rome and Byzantium and was only to end with the Islamic conquest in 634/5 CE. Soggin (1985:284) points out that although this process came up against heavy resistance, not only in Israel, Jewish Palestine was profoundly affected by it. He mentions the most interesting fact that at the beginning of the second century CE the ultra-nationalist movement of Bar Kochba in some cases used Greek in its own correspondence.

The death of Alexander in 323 BCE left the question of succession open. He had two sons, one legitimate and the other illegitimate and as both of them were minors, a regency was necessary. Alexander's generals who were called Diadochi, which means successors in Greek, assumed responsibility for this, but quarrelled amongst themselves about the succession.

Alexander's empire was divided as follows :-

¹ The word diaspora comes from the Greek meaning "dispersion" and is used for the voluntary dispersion of the Jews as distinct from their forced dispersion. By far the most important diaspora during the period of the Second Temple was that of the Graeco-Roman world (*EJ* 1971, Vol 6:9).

- (a) Macedonia and Greece went to Antigonos;
- (b) Egypt and Libya were taken by Ptolemy Lagides;
- (c) Syria and Persia became the property of Seleucus.

It is important, therefore, to form some idea of the way in which women were regarded in the Graeco-Roman world. There was a varied attitude to women but during the Hellenistic period there was a change so vigorous that "one must speak of a women's liberation movement which had a massive and manifold liberating impact on the lot of women ..." (Swidler 1976:24). The queens and other prominent women among the Diadochi families often overshadowed the men by their shrewd exercise of political power; the legal rights of women were enhanced; their property rights were improved; they could marry and divorce on their own initiative and even choose their own names. With the acquisition of property, it is highly probable that the accumulation of wealth became an important and liberating factor enabling them to engage in trade. Meeks (1974:168) makes the point that there was a more liberal attitude to class structures and "mixed marriages between freed slaves and free women, between Greek and barbarian, between partners of different economic status ... became more and more common". It was against this background that formative Judaism developed and evolved. Meeks (1974:174) adds that despite the uniqueness of their laws and customs the Jewish communities in the Graeco-Roman Empire "seem to have reflected all the diversity and ambiguities that beset the sexual roles and attitudes of the dominant society".

Ancient Israel, together with all Near Eastern cultures, was dominated by the male. Their marriage laws "gave women an honourable but circumscribed and decidedly subordinate place" (Meeks 1974:174). He goes on to say that older wisdom literature only recognised two classes of women: good wives or dangerous seductresses. This chapter will discuss how Hasmonean Jewry turned this concept completely around with women like its ruthless queen, Salome-Alexandra.

Unfortunately of all the wealth of literature of this period called "Late Judaism" by Guigenbert (1968:12), only fragments remain, and our information must rely

primarily on the works of Josephus and Philo if we wish to acquaint ourselves with conditions and attitudes towards women at that time.

5.2 JOSEPHUS

5.2.1 Background

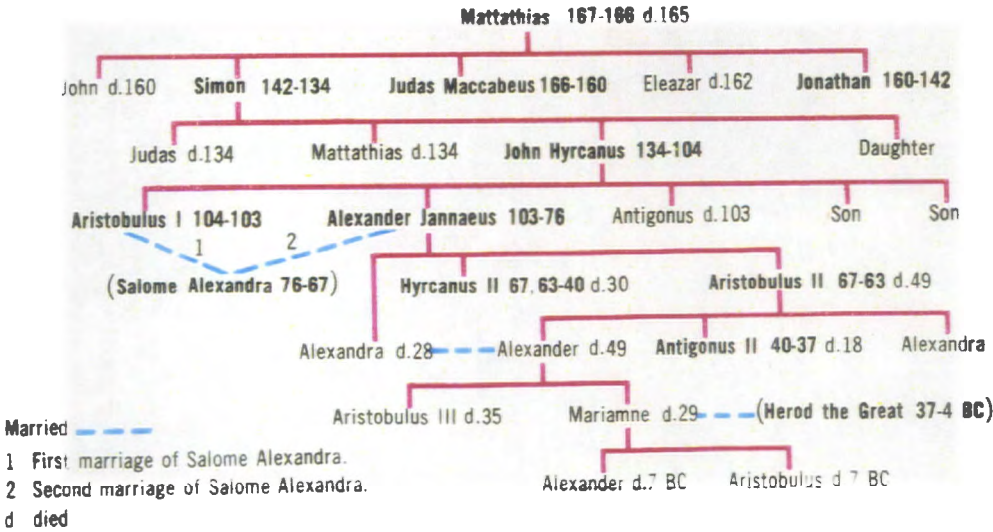
Josephus, a Jew of Jerusalem was born into a priestly family in 37 or 38 CE and through his mother was related to the Hasmonean dynasty. In describing his youth, Josephus tells that he was renowned for knowledge of Torah which brought High Priests and leading men of the city to consult him on matters of *halakhah* (EJ 1971, Vol 10, 251). In *Life* (1:12) he describes himself as a Pharisee endowed with great leadership qualities. He wrote in Greek and Aramaic and his works included *The Jewish War* (*Bellum Judaica*), *Antiquities* (*Antiquitates Judaicae*), *Life* (*Vita*) and *Against Apion* (*Contra Apionem*).

In evaluating Josephus as an author, The *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, (1971, Vol 10:263) states that he ranks among the leading writers in world literature. However, as an historian he does not reach these heights. But Josephus must not be judged according to the criteria of a modern historian as in ancient times “the historian was a writer and his craft part of general literature ... and most often the writer prevailed over the historian”.

Whilst it is unfortunate that his sources are no longer extant, and one must rely on his comments to assess their validity or authority, one certainly does obtain a clear idea of his attitudes. These are “not that of an historian who chronicles and explains, but of the apologist who accommodates his facts and the conclusions he draws from them to his own preconceived ideas and theories” (Guigenbert 1968:18).

Feldman (1989:17) points out that although Josephus has been reviled as a “careless, self-serving, lying propagandist”, both in the events leading up to the war against the Romans, and also in the account of the war itself in which he played such an

200 BC	<p>Palestine comes under Seleucid Syrian control 198</p> <p>Maccabean Period</p> <p>Judas Maccabeus leads revolt of Jews 166-160</p> <p>Temple rededicated 164</p> <p>Jonathan 160-142</p> <p>Simon 142-134</p> <p>John Hyrcanus I 134-104</p> <p>Aristobulus I 104-103</p>	<p>Ptolemy VI 181-146</p> <p>Antiochus IV campaigns in Egypt</p> <p>Ptolemy VII 146-116</p>	<p>Parthian Empire</p> <p>Mithridates I 171-138</p> <p>Mithridates II 124-88</p>	<p>Battle of Magnesia 190</p> <p>Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) 175-163</p> <p>Antiochus V 163-162</p> <p>Demetrius I 162-150</p> <p>Demetrius II 145-139</p> <p>Tyre independent</p>	<p>Spain annexed by Rome</p> <p>Empire of the Roman Republic</p> <p>3rd Punic War</p> <p>Romans destroy Carthage and Corinth 146</p> <p>Reforms of the Gracchi</p>
100 BC	<p>Alexander Jannaeus 103-76</p> <p>Alexandra 76-67</p> <p>Aristobulus II 67-63</p> <p>Pompey takes Jerusalem for Rome 63</p> <p>Hyrcanus II, high priest 63-40</p> <p>Antipater governor 55</p>	<p>Ptolemy VIII 116-81</p> <p>Ptolemy XI 80-81</p> <p>Cleopatra VII 51-30</p>	<p>Tigranes of Armenia</p> <p>Phrates III 70-57</p> <p>Orodes I 57-38</p> <p>War with Rome 55-38</p> <p>Crassus defeated</p>	<p>Mithridatic Wars</p> <p>Antiochus XIII 68-67</p> <p>Anatolia and Syria under Roman control</p>	<p>Sulla dictator 82-79</p> <p>1st Triumvirate</p> <p>Pompey's campaigns in Asia 66-63</p> <p>Caesar's Gallic Wars 58-51</p>
50 BC					



**The House
of Maccabees
and Hasmoneans**

ambiguous role, there is no doubt that he is the most important source of historical information from the end of the second century BCE until the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 CE. He further states that Josephus' importance far transcends his role as chronicler of the political and military events of those turbulent years. He is also a most important source of knowledge of the biblical Canon and text; crucial for our understanding of Jewish law, antedating as he does the Mishnah by a century and the Midrash by several centuries. Furthermore Josephus is indispensable for the understanding of the political, social, economic and religious background of the rise of Christianity and of the Jewish sects of the time, as well as of Jews in the diaspora.

5.2.2 Josephus' attitude to women

During the Hasmonean Dynasty in the Hellenistic period, women played a more significant role in ruling circles, especially among the Ptolemies in Egypt. Feldman (1989:26) supposes this was probably because of the large and influential Jewish community in Egypt, assessed by him at 200 000 in Alexandria alone. Furthermore four commanders-in-chief of the Ptolemaic armies were Jews. He goes on to state that although Josephus belonged to "a Hasmonean family he was less than generous in his appraisal of women of this group". Josephus mentions that his mother was descended from the royal house of the Hasmoneans, but he does not mention her name. Nor does he mention the names of any of his four wives. According to Feldman (1989:27) Josephus writing in his book, *Life*, praises his third wife as having surpassed many women in character but does not name her. In *The Jewish War* VII:399 Josephus refers to an old woman who escaped mass suicide at Masada as being "in intelligence and education superior to most women ...". The writer of this dissertation agrees with Feldman (1989:27) when he says that it would appear from this remark that women in Josephus' opinion can be praised only in comparison to other women, and quotes *Antiquities* IV:219 as further evidence of Josephus' prejudice when the latter states that women are not accepted as witnesses in Jewish law because of the levity and boldness of their sex. The rabbis (Sifrei 109b) while also declaring women's evidence inadmissible, give no such reason. In *Antiquities* V:294

Josephus shows his misogyny when he writes that there is “nothing more deceitful than a woman who betrays your speech to you”.

In *The Jewish War* I:71, Josephus tells of the wife of John Hyrcanus who was designated as his successor and left in supreme charge, indicating the position a woman was able to achieve. However, her influence was short-lived as she was imprisoned and starved to death by her son, Judas Aristobulus. Salome-Alexandra, the wife of Judas, was also designated as successor after her husband’s death. She took command without difficulty and appointed her son, Hyrcanus II, High Priest. She recruited mercenaries and doubled the size of her army. She sent an army to Damascus to fight Ptolemy, but this was unsuccessful. She sent gifts to Cleopatra in order to avert a feared invasion of Judea. She was indeed a powerful and capable woman and Josephus in *The Jewish War* wrote that “woman though she was, she established her authority by her reputation for piety”. Her reign coincided with the growing power of the Pharisees, a Jewish sect described by Josephus as more pious than the rest. Salome-Alexandra, being devoted to religion “paid too great heed to them, and they, availing themselves more and more of the simplicity of the woman, ended by becoming the effective rulers of the state ...” Josephus concluded that if she ruled the nation, the Pharisees ruled her (BJ I:111).

Sievers (1989:139) states that Salome-Alexandra was disparaged by Josephus for listening to the Pharisees with too great deference and for allowing them to take advantage of an ingenuous woman. From initially displaying a certain admiration for this woman, who used her initiative for organising armaments and military and diplomatic activity (essentially male activities), Josephus later adopted a negative attitude and spoke of her in the most unflattering terms.

In *Antiquities* XIII:417, 432 Josephus stated that Aristobulus (Salome-Alexandra’s younger son) and his supporters were to blame for “letting a woman gone mad in her lust for power, rule unreasonably, even though her sons were in the prime of life”. He said she “paid no attention to what was honourable or just ... (and) power was soon taken away from her house because of her desire for things unbecoming a

woman ... and even after her death she caused the palace to be filled with misfortunes and disturbances which arose from the public measures taken during her lifetime". Sievers (1989:139) suggests that all the negative things written about Salome-Alexandra also reflected on her Pharisaic mentors and supporters. These attitudes may have been occasioned by Josephus' antagonism to the Pharisees as during his command in Galilee, a predominantly Pharisaic delegation had tried to arrest and kill him.

This negative portrayal of Salome-Alexandra is in direct contrast to the attitude of rabbis who report that during her reign as queen, rain fell every Wednesday and Saturday and "grains of wheat, oats and lentils grew to extraordinary sizes, and were kept to show to future generations what piety could achieve" (*EJ* 1971, Vol 14:693). Her accession to the throne in 76 BCE was considered a moral and political victory for the Pharisees and the close relations between the queen and that sect are referred to in rabbinic traditions.

Simeon ben Shetah, leader of the Pharisees (Ber 48a; Gen R 91:3) was reputed to have been received by Salome-Alexandra at the palace during the time of her husband's dispute with the Pharisees. After her accession he was recalled from Egypt and appointed joint judicial and religious head of the Sanhedrin² with Judah ben Tabbai.

Although Salome-Alexandra was the only Jewish Queen to rule in her own right, many other Hasmonean women became active in politics. In writing of these women, Josephus does not name them. A remarkable woman, the daughter of Aristobulus II and his unnamed wife, who "exercised extraordinary courage, skill and ingenuity ... to resist Herod for several years" also remained nameless (Sievers 1989:141). Alexandra, a daughter of Hyrcanus II was the mother of Mariamne who was to become Herod's second wife. Sievers (1989:142) states that through her

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The Sanhedrin was the supreme political, religious and judicial body in Palestine during the Second Temple period.

daughter, Alexandra became part of Herod's inner circle. He quotes Josephus (Ant XIV:351) who said Herod "trusted her as a very sensible woman", and in fact he took them both to safety at Masada when he fled there to escape the Parthians. Alexandra-Salome is described by Sievers (1989:143) as "one of the proudest Hasmoneans who apparently used all possible means to save the cause of her family ... If she failed it was not because of her lack of energy or ambition". Mariamne's death is given a dramatic account by Josephus in *Antiquities* XV 232-236 where he emphasises "her greatness of spirit and her nobility ...". That these women played a very important role in the history of the Hasmonean period is evident. "... (they) were ready, willing and able to shape the world around them, to take risks, and often to assume painful responsibilities" (Sievers 1989:144). They serve to highlight the achievements which were attainable in the political and military spheres by Jewish women of noble birth during the Hellenistic era.

5.2.3 Biblical women as portrayed in a favourable light by Josephus

In Josephus' portrayal of biblical women, Amaru (1988:145) states that he develops the personification of the ideal woman in the three heroines of Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel.

5.2.3.1 Sarah

Sarah, the first of these women emerges as "the ideal spouse for a dominant, strong founding father. Beautiful, pious and ... devoid of character blemish ... she is most notable for her submissiveness and chastity". Josephus is at great pains to emphasise Sarah's chastity in his reconstruction of the story of her sojourn in Egypt. She is persuaded by Abraham to pose as his sister for fear her beauty will lead to his death at the hand of the Egyptians. She is taken into Pharaoh's household and Abraham is given great wealth. "... and he had sheep, oxen, he-asses, menservants, maidservants, she-asses, and camels ..." (Gen 12:16). Josephus, in emphasising Sarah's great beauty and fearing that this may be misconstrued as seductive or erotic, is at

pains to show that this deception is justified by the Egyptian “frenzy for women” (Ant 162-3). Josephus is intent on confirming that Pharaoh had not touched Abraham’s wife and by so doing Amaru (1988:145) points out that he combines contradictory *Midrashim*³ as evidence to that effect. On the one hand Josephus states that God thwarted Pharaoh’s “criminal passion” by “bringing an outbreak of disease and political disturbance” (Ant I:164). On the other hand Josephus has Pharaoh tell Abraham that he did not plan to take Sarah as anything other than a legal wife. Thus there is no question of any impure act having taken place between Pharaoh and Sarah. Josephus has taken care to show that Sarah’s beauty is not erotic and if her appearance arouses the passions of the Egyptians it is due to a moral flaw in their characters “and not a seductive quality in Sarah” (Amaru 1988:146).

In *Genesis* 16:2-3 we read that Sarai⁴ told Abram because she was unable to bear a child “... go in to my maid; it may be that I shall obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai ... (who) ... took Hagar, the Egyptian, her maid and gave her to Abram, her husband as a wife”. Josephus, however shifts the incentive to God. “And by God’s command, Sarah brought to his bed one of her handmaidens” (Ant I:187). When Hagar conceived, Sarai felt she was despised in her (Hagar’s) eyes and she dealt harshly with her. Josephus has the angel who meets the fleeing concubine not simply to urge her return, “And the angel of the Lord said unto her, ‘Return to your mistress and submit to her’” (Gen 16:9) but also to chastise her for her “arrogance and presumption towards her mistress” (Ant I:189). By contrast, the rabbis tend to condemn Sarah for her treatment of Hagar (Gen R 45:4-8). Furthermore Josephus (Ant I:215) says that Sarah at first cherished Ishmael “no less than if he had been her own son” but nowhere in the Bible do we read of this affection. The biblical motive (Gen 21:10) for Sarah casting out Hagar and Ishmael “Cast out this slave woman and her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son, Isaac” is played down by Josephus who cites fear for her son’s life as the reason for her doing so (Ant I:215).

³ See footnote p72.

⁴ It is only in *Genesis* 17:5 and 17:15 that God changes their names from Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah respectively.

5.2.3.2

Rebecca

Biblical Rebecca was a most assertive woman who was manipulative and in fact overshadowed all the male characters in the narrative. However she fell short of the idealised virtues with which Josephus wished to endow her as a founding mother of Israel. As he had done with Sarah, so he depicted Rebecca as a less assertive heroine without the “feminine wiles or masculine forcefulness in her dealings with the male heroes” (Amaru 1988:148). His description of Rebecca did not include any characteristics which could be associated with seduction. In fact in *Antiquities* I:247 he ascribed to her “nobility”, “goodness of heart” and as having no hesitation “to serve another at the cost of her own toil”. Josephus attributed her with assertiveness both in coming to the assistance of the male stranger (as portrayed in Gen 24:45-47) and in allowing her to speak directly to Abraham’s servant. Going beyond the biblical record of *Genesis* 24:23-25 when the servant asked to pay for his lodging, in *Antiquities* I:251 she accuses him of suspecting her family of inhospitable meanness. Amaru (1988:149) points out that in both these cases “the self-assertiveness of the heroine is presented in the context of hospitality, a virtue dear to the Hellenistic world and to Josephus”. However Josephus also wished to maintain a traditional picture and in spite of the firm response Rebecca had given the servant regarding lodging, Josephus in *Antiquities* I:251 “makes the invitation contingent on her brother’s approval”. In *Genesis* 24:28 Rebecca runs to her mother’s house to tell of a stranger. In *Genesis* 25:23 God speaks to Rebecca in response to her request for offspring, but Josephus indicates that the news regarding Esau and Jacob was received by Isaac (Ant I:257) thus removing Rebecca from direct contact with God. Amaru (1988:149) points out that Rebecca instructs Jacob what to do in order to deceive Isaac and oust Esau. “Josephus’ Rebecca is the organiser, not the effector, of the action ... it is he, not she, who prepares the meal, and without maternal assistance, puts on the skins for deception. She is supportive of her son, but not to the extent of the biblical Rebecca”, who in *Genesis* 27:13 says “Upon me be your curse, my son; only obey my word, and go, fetch them to me”. Josephus portrayed Rebecca as the force behind the action and not the manipulator. This makes her less tainted by the deception and manipulation of Isaac.

Amaru (1988:150) states that Josephus subtly ascribed to Rebecca skills that appear more than matters of chance, and in some way indicate that the Matriarch served as a divine agent. She had the wisdom to gain God's favour for her son, and the foreknowledge to send him to marry Laban's daughter.

5.2.3.3 Rachel

Rachel is the third Matriarch to attract Josephus' attention as an ideal female. She is a beautiful, affectionate young woman whose charm overwhelms Jacob. Rivalry with her sister Leah is underplayed and in fact Josephus makes little mention of her. In *Antiquities* I:285-291 Rachel greets Jacob "with childish delight" and overpowers him with questions about himself. When she hears who he is she bursts into tears and flings her arms around Jacob and "tenderly embraces him". Amaru (1988:152) points out that this is quite a different picture to the reticent biblical Rachel who stood quietly by as Jacob watered her flocks at the well. Actually in the biblical narrative it is Jacob who kisses Rachel and then for an unknown reason, weeps (Gen 29:9-12). This portrayal of Jacob did not fit the Hellenistic image of a strong male character and so Josephus reconstructed the scene and the overt demonstrations of emotion associated with females was given to Rachel. This meant he did not have to explain the reasons for a tearful male who would not appear in any way as a hero to his readers. Rachel was the romantic beautiful wife of Jacob, the hero of the story, and Josephus emphasised the deep love of Jacob for the younger sister.

5.2.4 Josephus' villainesses

Josephus finds the villainesses in the form of Potiphar's wife and the Midianite women. Unlike the heroines, Josephus did not need to re-work biblical texts to portray them as "anti-heroines whose vices run directly counter to the virtues of his matriarchal heroines" (Amaru 1988:153). Potiphar's wife "seduced" Joseph (Gen 39:7-20) as a result of which he was imprisoned. The Midianite women and their people were slain on instruction from Moses (Num 25:1-9 and 31:1-20) because of their evil doing. Amaru (1988:153) states that Sarah's chastity is in contrast to Potiphar's

wife's driving passion; Rebecca's assertiveness in assisting the future of Israel's destiny stands above the efforts of the Midianite women to destroy that future. These two villainess models differ, because Potiphar's wife "seduces" Joseph because of a "female sexual passion, a desperate, base quality which ... leads to betrayal", whilst the Midianite women's urge to seduce and deceive "is rooted in wilful, calculated deception".

It will be clear from this discussion that Josephus manipulated and distorted much biblical narrative in order to present the Hellenised reader with a respectable picture of Judaism, its founders and leading figures. Amaru (1988:143) says that as an historian "he is committed to de-theologizing and historicizing the biblical narrative". Furthermore, as the "eulogizer of the Jewish people, as 'defender of the faith' he is intent on painting an appealing picture of the founders and subsequent leaders of the Jews". This dissertation is of the firm opinion that one must always bear in mind that in his writings Josephus had an eye on his audience, many of whom were not Jewish, and to whom he wished both to explain his Jewishness and yet be part of their world. This fact greatly influenced his attitudes and writings which were adapted to satisfy these criteria.

5.3 PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA

Jewish philosophy began in the Diaspora community of the Hellenistic world during the second century BCE and arose out of a confrontation between the Jewish religion and Greek philosophy. Its aims were the philosophic interpretation of Judaism, and an apologetic purpose to show that the religion was a kind of philosophy whose concept of God was spiritual and whose ethics were rational (*EJ* 1971, Vol 13:426). Philo of Alexandria is the only Jewish Hellenistic philosopher from whom a body of work has survived. He was a native of Alexandria as his name implies and was usually alluded to as Philo Judaeus. Born about 25 or 20 BCE he died in about 50 CE and belonged to the noblest family of Alexandrian Jewry. Writing in Greek it is assumed he received his education in Greek schools, and it is doubtful that he had any knowledge of Hebrew. As he died before the Romans destroyed the Temple in

70 CE, the Temple had living significance for him, but his life as a Jew was remote from that Temple. However his “writings reflect some ingredients of Synagogue Judaism, the Judaism that flourished in local centres and which survived after Temple Judaism ended” (Sandmel 1979:3).

A vast range of writings by Philo has been preserved by the Christian Church in the original Greek and others in Armenian translation. The first series of works deal with the Pentateuch as a legal code and include *On the Creation (De Opificis Mundi)*, *The Life of Moses (De Vita Mosis)*, *On the Decalogue (De Decalogo)* and *On the Special Laws (Specialibus Regibus)*. The second series is a philosophical interpretation of the Pentateuch comprising eighteen exegetic treatises, the last one *On Dreams (De Somnis)* drawing its basic material from the various dream narratives of *Genesis*. The third series consists of questions and answers on *Genesis* and *Exodus* “in the form of a Hellenistic commentary, where each paragraph is headed by an exegetic question answered subsequently by a short literal, and lengthy allegorical, explanation” (EJ 1971, Vol 13:410).

In addition to these three series, there is a group of treatises devoted to purely philosophical topics that contain only occasional allusions to Jewish motifs. There are also two books on contemporary history. *Flaccus (In Flaccum)* which deals with the pogroms in Alexandria in 38 CE and *On the Embassy to Gaius (Legatione ad Gaium)* which deals with Philo’s mission to Rome to protest against the erection of statues of the Emperor in Alexandrian synagogues and later in the Temple in Jerusalem. Finally, *On the Contemplative Life (De Vita Contemplativa)* gives information on the Therapeutae Sect, the only source of information on this group.

5.3.1 Philo’s attitude to women

Philo held very definite views on women, but Wegner (1982:551) points out that “he had no great interest in women as a topic for sustained discussion”. Philo viewed the Bible in an allegorical sense, and defined gender with certain characteristics of the human soul. He maintained that the mind or intellect was the “sovereign element of

the soul" and the mind was a "masculine attitude", whilst "feeling" or "sense-perception" was a feminine attribute. Mind was superior to sense perception hence masculine attributes were superior to feminine attributes. Generally in his discussion of masculine and feminine attributes, Philo had a markedly male chauvinist attitude. He did, however acknowledge the indispensability of the female in the role of the reproduction process. His acknowledgement that, in the final analysis man cannot function without woman, perhaps suggests that his true attitude was one of ambivalence toward women rather than the prejudice against them which seems to be presented in many of his statements.

Wegner (1982:555-6) states that Philo could be insulting to women even when the context did not invite this. She quotes Philo's explanations in 4:160 "*Questions and Answers on Genesis*" (*Questiones et Solutiones in Genesis*) for the preference of Jacob over Esau, the elder twin, as being biological nonsense. "But a distinction should be made between 'first-born' and 'first begotten'. For the one is (the offspring) of female and material matter, for the female gives birth; but the first-begotten is a male and (the offspring) of a more responsible power, for it is the property of the male to beget".

Wegner (1982:556) quotes another example of Philo's "gratuitous insult to females" which appears in "*Questions and Answers on Exodus*", concerning the prescription of the male animal for the Pascal sacrifice.

“Question: Why does (Moses) command (them), to take a ‘perfect male sheep of one year’? (Ex 12:5).

Answer: (It is to be) perfect ... for an imperfect (sacrifice) is not worthy to be brought to the altar of God. And it is to be a male, first, because the male is more perfect than the female. Wherefore it is said by the naturalists that the female is nothing else than an imperfect male”.

Wegner explains that the classification of female as nothing but an imperfect male is found in Greek sources, such as the works of Aristotle and Plato, indicating Philo's borrowing from Greek philosophical ideas and attitudes. The Jewish reason for the Pascal sacrifice being a male animal was linked to the death of the firstborn Egyptian males, thus making a male sacrifice more significant or appropriate.

However, Philo was obliged to acknowledge the excellence of some women in scripture and one such person was Sarah, the Matriarch. She was to receive praise as the founding mother of the Hebrew people. Her main significance for Philo was allegorical and she personified virtue. Nevertheless he wished to prove that she was an exception to the rule of female inferiority. This he does in "*Questions and Answers on Genesis*" 4:15 by interpreting *Genesis* 18:11 thus :-

"The literal meaning is clear. For (Scripture) by a euphemism calls the monthly purification of women 'the ways of women'. But as for the deeper meaning, it is to be allegorised as follows. The soul has, as it were, a dwelling, partly men's quarters, partly women's quarters. Now for the men there is a place where properly dwell the masculine thoughts (that are) wise, sound, just, prudent, pious, filled with freedom and boldness, and kin to wisdom. And the women's quarters are a place where womanly opinions go about and dwell, being followers of the female sex. And the female sex is irrational and akin to bestial passions, fear, sorrow, pleasure and desire, from which ensue incurable weaknesses and indescribable diseases. He who is conquered by these is unhappy, while he who controls them is happy. And longing for and desiring this happiness, seizing a certain time to be able to escape from terrible and unbearable sorrow, which is (what is meant by), 'there ceased to be the ways of women' ... this clearly belongs to minds full of Law, which resembles the male sex and overcome passions and rise above all sense - pleasure and desire".

Despite the fact that Philo was greatly influenced by Hellenic attitudes, his interpretation of the Law was totally Judaic. Family law has always been interwoven with traditional religion and cultures, and even when a certain amount of assimilation has occurred, adherents remain faithful to this aspect of tradition. Analysis of his work

On The Special Laws reveals that Philo attempted to "demonstrate that a true understanding of the Mosaic code reveals it as the supreme code for practical administration" (Goodenough 1968:214).

In *The Special Laws* I:105-6 he finds it appropriate that the High Priest is required to marry a virgin (Lev 21:13-14) because it is easier to mould the character of a virgin; in 2:24 he voices his approval of the law in *Numbers* 30:4 ff. whereby fathers and husbands can annul religious vows of daughters and wives.

Philo's attitude to the institution of marriage was that it was a means of perpetuating the human race and marital relations between husband and wife were permitted only for this purpose. The rabbis, unlike Philo, considered sexual relations not seeking procreation a marital obligation. Philo voiced strong opposition to marriage as a means of satisfying personal desires. In *The Special Laws* III:36 he states that "men who marry virgins in ignorance of how they will turn out regarding their prolificness, and later refuse to dismiss them, when prolonged childlessness shows them to be barren, deserve our pardon ... But those who marry women who have been tested by other men and ascertained to be barren merely covet casual enjoyment like so many boars and goats and deserve to be inscribed among the list of impious men as enemies of God".

In his work, "*Hypotetica*" 11:14-17 Philo launches a vitriolic attack on women. "For no Essene takes a wife, because a wife is a selfish creature, excessively jealous and an adept at beguiling the morals of her husband and seducing him by her continued impostures. For by the fawning talk which she practices and the other ways in which she plays her part like an actress on the stage she first ensnares the sight and hearing and when these ... have been duped, she cajoles the sovereign mind. And if children come, filled with the spirit of arrogance and bold speaking, she gives utterance with more audacious hardihood to things which before she hinted at ... and casting off all shame she compels him to commit actions which are all hostile to the life of fellowship. For he ... becomes a different man and has passed from freedom to slavery".

This misogynistic diatribe finds parallels in the writings of Ben Sirach and other works of the time. There is some doubt as to whether Philo was expressing his own views or that of the Essenes. It is also highly possible that these views may have been prevalent in many cultures of the ancient Near East of the time. However the opinion of this dissertation is that although there was a more liberalising attitude in the world in which Philo lived and wrote, one sees none of this having influenced his attitude. Extreme prejudice and inability to temper his judgement of women seems only to have increased.

5.4 JEWISH GROUPS

During the period under review, the Palestinian scene was filled with violent controversy, out of which there emerged certain sectarian movements. Josephus identified these groups as the Sadducees, the Pharisees and the Essenes. Philo wrote of another group whom he called the Therapeutae who lived in Alexandria and were thought to be an offshoot of the Essenes.

5.4.1 The Sadducees

The Sadducees were a group active in political and economic life and were comprised largely of the wealthier elements of the population; priests, merchants and aristocrats. They dominated the Temple worship and its rites and many were members of the Sanhedrin (see p85). They were a conservative group and opposed to the Pharisees. The main differences between these two concerned their attitude to the Torah. Although the supremacy of the Torah was acknowledged by both groups, the Pharisees accepted the Oral Law as equally authoritative. **The Sadducees rejected changes and refused to accept oral traditions.** They came under the influence of Hellenism and were in good standing with the Roman rulers. However the common people did not support them, and as their power and *raison d'être* was bound up with the Temple Cult, the group ceased to exist after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE (*EJ* 1971, Vol 14:622).

5.4.2 The Pharisees

This group maintained a strict observance of the Law, but “introduced new subtleties of interpretation, analysing and commenting, extending its scope and increasing its rigour by their glosses” (Guigenbert 1968:164). They introduced reforms which affected women favourably. One of these was the abolition of the humiliating ordeal by which women accused of adultery were treated according to biblical law.⁵ Johanan ben Zakkai, a Pharisee teacher, head of the Academy of Jabneh about the time of the destruction of the Temple repealed this law, citing the text from *Hosea* 4:14 in which it is said “I will not punish your daughters when they play the harlot, nor your brides when they commit adultery; for the men themselves go aside with harlots, and sacrifice with cult prostitutes, and people without understanding shall come to ruin”.

In other words men could not demand that their wives undergo such an ordeal because of their (the husbands’) suspicions without being beyond suspicion of the crime themselves. Maccoby (1989:54) says this was a typical example of Pharisee reform and ben Zakkai seems to be saying “Perhaps men were righteous enough to submit their wives to such an ordeal in time gone by, but they certainly are not now”.

Despite the strict adherence to the Law, the Pharisees were willing to institute religious innovations and Josephus remarked in *Antiquities* XIII 10:297 that they imposed ordinances on the people which were not contained in “the Law of Moses”. Obviously the Pharisees regarded their religion as a living one and “were particularly conscious of the need for expanding the old Judaism and incorporating whatever additions the religious needs of their time demanded” (Guigenbert 1968:166).

Married women did not lose property rights; every husband was obliged to settle a substantial sum on his wife at the time of marriage, which was to be paid to her in the

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In Numbers 5:11-31 we read of this ordeal for a woman suspected of adultery. In a solemn Temple rite the woman was to drink water containing dust from the Temple floor mixed with the ink of written curses. If she was guilty this would cause her “belly to swell and her thigh to rot”.

event of divorce or death of her husband. She had the right to divorce and marriage was regarded as a contract between a man and woman and not an indissoluble union. All these aspects of liberalising the women's position according to Jewish law, reflected the attitudes to women in the Graeco-Roman era in Palestine and also in the diaspora. More will be said of the Pharisees in Chapter 6.

5.4.3 The Essenes

This group was numerically small and its first appearance in Palestine is generally associated with the end of the Hasmonean revolt. By the end of the first century BCE their main group was located on the north-western shore of the Dead Sea region, and was organised as a quasi-monastic order. Although Essenism dates from the time in Israel's history when it was subject to strong foreign influences, its formation may have been a reaction to the accepted form of religion among the Jews. There is no evidence to suggest that they regarded themselves as heretics and they remained Jews strictly adhering to the law, however much they separated themselves from their fellow-countrymen. Until fairly recently what was known of this group came from three sources, namely Philo, Josephus and the Roman writer Pliny.

The discovery of the Damascus Document in the storeroom of a Cairo synagogue at the end of the nineteenth century was thought to be Essene in character and this was demonstrated to be so when fragments of the work were found among the Qumran scrolls in 1947. This provided the link between this sect and the settlement at Qumran. Davis (1956:67) says it is impossible to read *The Manual of Discipline* without being immediately struck by the marked similarities between it and those of the Essenes described by Josephus. He says if the community was not a settlement of the Essenes themselves, then it was at least Essenic. The similarity between the Damascus Document and *The Manual of Discipline* are so close that Davis (1958:68) feels they must come from the same source or from related sources within the same movement. The Essenes' attitude to women followed closely the tradition of misogyny evident in wisdom, apocryphal and pseudepigraphal literature. Josephus in *Life* 11-12 claims that he was an Essene novice for a number of months, and that

women were considered a source of dissension. "They never bring their wives into the community nor do they own slaves, since they believe that the latter practice contributes to injustice and that the former opens the way to a source of dissension" (Ant XVIII:21). In *The Jewish War* II:120 Josephus states "Scorning wedlock they (the Essenes) select other men's children ... and fashion them after their own pattern - not that they wish to do away with marriage as a means of continuing the race, but they are afraid of the promiscuity of women and convinced that none of the sex remains faithful to one man". This implies that the Essenes lived a celibate life.

However, such a state is foreign to the teachings of Judaism. Schürer (1973:674) says "The rejection of marriage is of course something heterogeneous to genuine Judaism. But even this can be explained on Jewish premises. Since the marriage act as such makes man unclean and necessitates a Levitical purification bath, the effort to attain the highest possible degree of purity and holiness could very well lead to the complete rejection of marriage". However, this does seem like a very extreme interpretation of the Essene attitude to women and marriage. It would appear that the understanding of the position of women among the Essenes remains ambiguous, despite the Qumran texts and archaeological evidence. Josephus' acknowledgements (BJ II: 160-161) of "another order of Essenes" which existed and differed in its attitude to marriage, perhaps goes some way to solving this perplexing question.

"There is a second order of Essenes, which agrees with the other in its way of life, customs, and rules, and differs only in its views on marriage. They think that the biggest thing in life - the continuance of the race - is forfeited by men who do not marry, and further, if everyone followed their example mankind would rapidly disappear. However, they put their brides on probation for three years, and do not marry them till the regularity of their periods proves them capable of child-bearing. When conception has taken place intercourse ceases - proof that the object of the marriage was not pleasure but the begetting of children. When women bathe they wear a dress just as the men wear a loincloth. Such are the customs of the order" (BJ II:163).

Philo on the other hand nowhere acknowledged that there were Essenes who married. He regarded them “unequivocally as monastic misogynists who claim that women by nature work against the common good ...”. He argued that the community was composed exclusively of “men of ripe years who are no longer carried away by the flux of the body nor drawn by passions ...”, there were “no children of tender years ... nor even adolescents or young men, because their character is at this age still unstable and not yet mature, and like women, they too may cause confusion in the ordered atmosphere of the communities” (Callaway 1988:69). This is entirely in conflict with Josephus’ assertion that youths were admitted as novices albeit for short periods and also that other men’s children were selected and brought up as members of their congregations. Perhaps this difference of opinion originates from the fact that unlike Josephus, Philo did not have personal contact with members of this group.

5.4.4 The community at Qumran

“The Dead Sea community has been identified with almost every known Jewish group in the Hellenistic-Roman period ... (but) ... a scholarly consensus has emerged identifying this community with the ancient Essenes” (Callaway 1988:63). This select few gave up individual ownership of property and possessions and pooled their assets which were administered for the common benefit by officials appointed for this purpose. When the movement started, most, if not all men of marriageable age would have taken wives as was customary among the Jews. This condition could not be changed and it must have been at a later stage that some of the members were encouraged to lead celibate lives. Those people already married could not live at Qumran, but possible lived in settlements.

Sutcliffe (1960:93) states that there was a whole series of regulations composed for the members of the Congregation who lived in settlements and not at Qumran. Those living at Qumran are spoken of as “men of perfect holiness”. They lived very strict lives over and above anything demanded by the most severe interpretation of the Law of Moses. They made a complete surrender of themselves and their possessions. However, those living in camps or settlements had private property and would

continue to live in these settlements and would be free to receive new members wishing to live that way of life. Sutcliffe (1960:99) continues by asking the question as to the motives which led to the introduction of the practice of celibacy at all.

The possible reasons given by him are many. He states that as the group set such store on ritual purity, one of the chief reasons for establishing a base in the Qumran wilderness was to be separated from the midst of men living in iniquity. Life in this area would be severe and too great a tax on women's health. Moreover their presence as mothers of families would be a hindrance to the maintenance of a spirit of comradeship in a close community living by these strict regulations. Furthermore there would not be room for the accommodation of numerous families. In order to maintain strict ritual purity, Sutcliffe (1960:99) suggests that the community at Qumran would spurn the matrimonial state, thus eliminating any pleasure-seeking. "This avoidance of self-indulgence was characteristic ... of the Qumran community". Although The Community Rule has no mention of women and marriage, The Messianic Rule and The War Rule make open references to married members and none of the Qumran writings allude to celibacy as such. These facts seem to re-inforce the fact that there were two groups of Essenes: those who felt in order to achieve perfect holiness it was incumbent on them to live celibate lives without the ties of family life, and others who espoused the basic tenets of the sect, but realised that people who do not marry cut off the propagation of the species, and if everyone adopted the same opinion mankind would quietly cease to exist.

Archaeologists working in the large cemetery at Qumran have uncovered on the fringes of the graveyard a few female and child skeletons. This has given rise to much speculation as to how this was possible in a celibate community. In fact these graves do not pose a serious argument against the celibacy of the community. It is logical to suppose that women will at times have visited relatives in the monastery and some may well have died during their stay. Sutcliffe (1960:100) proposes that people from the settlements would have most likely made pilgrimages to Qumran from time to time, and "recognising and honouring the stricter life there in force ... probably asked for the privilege of being buried there". Furthermore these burials

could re-inforce Josephus' assertion that there were two orders of Essenes and perhaps when the Qumran community was first established, there were married members living there. Another logical explanation for the presence of female skeletons is the possibility of staff members who were not members of the sect, for example cooks and domestic workers who lived within the precincts of Qumran, and were buried there.

Allegro (1978:115) states that the "Covenanters" did not have a high opinion of women believing them to be potential seducers of men. One of the documents from the Fourth Cave warns against the wiles of the harlot. Swidler (1976:64) states that this diatribe outstrips any descriptions of prostitutes from *Proverbs* or elsewhere or any description of the seductive ways of women from ancient Jewish literature. He calls this "the fountainhead of misogyny". The text of this scroll describes the harlot as one who utters vanities and mockingly flatters. "Her heart's perversion prepares wantonness ... the fouled organs of passion descend to the pit of her legs to act wickedly ... the sins in her skirt are many ... her adornments are touched with corruption ... her beds are couches of corruption ... depths of the pit. She resides in the tents of the underworld, in the midst of everlasting fire ... she is foremost in all the ways of iniquity; Alas! ruin shall take all who possess her ... for her ways are ways of death, and her paths are the roads to sin; ... she wantonly raises her eyelids to seek out a righteous man and lead him astray; ... to make the humble rebel from God ... to lead men astray ... and to seduce by flatteries the sons of men".

5.4.5 The Therapeutae

Philo wrote of a group of Jewish ascetics who lived on the shores of Lake Mareotis outside Alexandria in Egypt, who were devoted to the contemplative philosophical life. Although they presented certain similarities to the Essenes their members included women as well as men. Kraemer (1992:113) states that the women participated in the Sabbath meal together with men but they stayed in areas of the sanctuary which were separated by a wall " ... that extended partway to the ceiling". This allowed the women to hear everything but preventing any eye-contact with the men.

However women were as fervent in their beliefs and possessed the same sense of purpose as the men. Winston (1981:53) states that in Philo's description of the society's major festival, thought to be Shavuoth, he categorises the women as mostly ageing virgins who had maintained their virginity voluntarily through their sincere desire for wisdom. This is in contrast to some of the priestesses among the Greeks who were forced to remain virgins. Eager to enjoy the fruits of wisdom they were unconcerned with bodily pleasures. They desired "a progeny not mortal but immortal, which only the soul that loves God is capable of engendering unaided, since the Father has sown in her intelligible rays whereby she can behold the teachings of wisdom". At the end of the modest meal devoid of animal flesh, the festival reached its climax with a sacred choral performance. Initially the men and women sang separately, but later they re-arranged themselves and mixed singers became one chorus.

Kraemer (1989:350) points out that Philo's discussion of these women indicates that they had received a classical Greek education similar to that which he himself must have had, and they were favourably disposed to the "allegorical interpretation of Jewish scriptures". Few women, Jewish and non-Jewish would have been so highly educated. However, the evidence from "papyri, inscriptions, and literature suggests that at least some women in Alexandria and other communities with substantial Jewish populations in this period were well educated".

Kraemer (1992:115) states that these women were childless, unmarried and possibly menopausal. "Unattached to husbands and children, beyond the restrictions of menstruation and potential fertility, they became suitable candidates for mystical union with the divine: they left behind the feminine and attained the masculinity/virginity necessary for the soul to unite with the divine in the mystical bridal chamber".

If this were indeed so, one is able to understand Philo's admiration of the Therapeutae. They fulfilled all the requirements recommended by Philo for women. They removed themselves from the spheres of public activity and spent most of their time in seclusion. They were in fact not able to adversely influence husbands and children as they were not wives and mothers. In *The Special Laws* III, Philo says "women are

best suited to the indoor life which never strays from the house ... Organised communities are of two sorts, the greater which we call cities and the smaller which we call households. Both of these have their governors; the government of the greater is assigned to men ... that of the lesser, known as household management, to women. A woman, then, should not be a busybody meddling with matters outside her household concerns, but should seek a life of seclusion. She should not show herself off ... before other men ... The audacity of women who (join in) when men are exchanging angry words ... is reprehensible and shameless to a high degree”.

Kraemer (1989:366) makes the amusing statement that the Therapeutae accepted women into their society on a basis “fairly close to equality, provided, of course, that the women came as close to being men as possible”. However this society was not a haven for women who were looked down upon because they were not married and mothers of families. Clearly becoming a Therapeutae was limited to those Jewish women who already had the requisite education “which included not only literacy, but also favoured the allegorical schools of interpretation” (Kraemer 1992:116).

5.5 ANCIENT SYNAGOGUES IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD

After the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE and the cessation of the sacrificial cult, synagogues became stabilised and were established throughout the diaspora. However they had made their appearance centuries before and were of cardinal significance in the development of Judaism. According to *The Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1971, Vol 15:579) there are almost no historical dates concerning the origin of the synagogue. “As its birth is lost in the mists of antiquity and apparently took place unheralded, so it grew to maturity in conditions of obscurity ...” and it was not until the first century CE that it emerged as a “fully grown and firmly established institution”.

In addressing this question, Levine (1987:9) defines the meaning of the term synagogue by stating that during the Second Temple period it possibly had two meanings;

a group or community of people or a building or institution. These two definitions, far from being mutually exclusive, presuppose the existence of each other. It is most likely that at the beginning of its development, the synagogue did not refer to a specific building but to a group of people who met regularly for religious purposes. Levine goes on to postulate that it was more than likely that an alternative form of worship developed at the end of the First Temple period, or at the very latest, during the Exile in Babylon. The Exiles, deprived of the Temple and finding themselves in a strange land, would have felt the need for meeting from time to time, to seek consolation in their distress. In *Ezekiel* 8:6, 14:1 & 20:1 there is the repeated mention of the assembly of the elders and The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1971, Vol 15:580) suggests that this could possibly point to the actual beginning of the synagogue. Although no mention is made of the synagogue in *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* or the post-Exilic prophets, it is perfectly logical to assume that the returned Exiles brought with them the basis of the institution of the synagogue which had served them during the years in exile.

The establishment of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, attracted the main religious loyalties of the people. Despite the many diaspora Jews who made the pilgrimages to Jerusalem to celebrate the festivals, the diaspora needed local places of worship. It is therefore not surprising that archaeological remains have been found in the diaspora, especially in Egypt, of the remains of early synagogues. In Shedia, twenty-six kilometres from Alexandria, a marble slab was unearthed which bore the inscription that the Jews dedicated that synagogue to Ptolemy III Euergetes (246-221 BCE) and his queen, Berenice. In lower Egypt a dedicatory inscription was found granting rights of asylum to the synagogue. The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1971, Vol 15:581), states that this infers that the institution of the synagogue was already well established and the mention in III *Maccabees* 7:20 of the founding of a synagogue at Ptolemais during the reign of Ptolemy IV (221-204 BCE) is entirely credible.

However, it was in the first century CE that the synagogue emerged as a well established and ancient institution “the very centre of the social and religious life of the

people, unrivalled in the Diaspora, and harmoniously co-operating with the Temple in Erez Israel" (*EJ* 1971, Vol 15:581).

All literary sources, the Talmud, Philo, Josephus and the New Testament, as well as much archaeological evidence, attest to the existence of the synagogue as anything but a new phenomenon.

Philo (*Leg* 132) states that the large population of Alexandria had many synagogues; a great synagogue there is mentioned in the Talmud (Suk 51b; TJ5:1,55a). It was so huge that the acoustics did not allow for great audibility, so flags had to be waved to indicate to the worshippers when to make responses. This synagogue was destroyed during the reign of Trajan (98-117 CE).

Josephus writes of synagogues in Israel in Tiberius (*Life*:280) Dora (Ant 19:305) and Caesarea (JB: 2:285-289). The New Testament mentions those of Nazareth (Mt 13:54) and Capernaum (Mk 1:21). The Talmud adds the synagogue in Jerusalem of the Alexandrians (Tos Meg 3(2):6) and of the "Tarsians"⁶ (Meg 26a). In TJ Meg 3:1 the number of synagogues at the time of the destruction of the Temple is given as 480. In *Sotah* (7:7-8); and *Yoma* (7:1) mention is made of a synagogue on the Temple Mount itself. With the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of the sacrificial service the synagogue remained without rival as the focus of Jewish religious life.

The synagogue filled a wide variety of functions within the Jewish community. Levine (1987:7) points out that it "universalised official Jewish ritual practice while democratising worship by taking it out of priestly hands ... (opening the way) for any Jew to participate and officiate in the recognised community ritual ... (and) welcomed ... the presence of the congregation as a whole ..." This was in contrast to the Temple where people were kept at a distance and were often far removed from the scene of the ritual.

5.5.1 Women leaders in ancient synagogues

In her study on the role played by women in the ancient synagogues, Brooten (1982:1) maintains that women served as leaders in a number of synagogues during the Roman and Byzantine periods and quotes as evidence of this, nineteen Greek and Latin inscriptions which nominate women as “head of synagogue”, “leader”, “elder”, “mother of the synagogue”, and “priestess”. Because previous scholars assumed Jewish women played no active role in synagogue life it was thought these titles were honorary. Perhaps the most quoted inscription is that of “Rufina, a Jewess, head of the synagogue” which was found in Smyrna and dates to the second century CE. She built a tomb for her freed slaves and those raised in her house. It goes on to read “No one else has the right to bury anyone (here). If someone should dare to do, he or she will pay 1500 denars to the sacred treasury and 100 denars to the Jewish people. A copy of this inscription has been placed in the (public) archives” (Brooten 1982:5). Although at a later stage “head of the synagogue” (*archisynagogos*) became an honorary title, Brooten (1982:5) claims at the early stage it had a genuine function. Many scholars refute Brooten’s claim, finding it highly unlikely, if not absolutely impossible, for a woman to hold such a position. It has been suggested that Rufina was the wife of an *archisynagogos* and that the title was purely honorary. Alternatively if she were not the wife of an official, she was perhaps someone whom the congregation wished to honour but it could hardly have entrusted to her the actual charge of any office.

It is the opinion of this dissertation that Brooten has put forward a convincing argument by stating that in Rufina guaranteeing a burial place for her freed slave, she acted in her own name, leaving us ignorant as to whether or not she was married. Furthermore there is no evidence to support the theory that any of the titles of the synagogue organisation were honorific at this period. Rufina was obviously a wealthy woman who, according to the customs of the time, conducted her business affairs in an independent way. Kraemer (1991:43) considers this inscription is surprising for several reasons :

- (a) Rufina, who has a Latin name, “commissions an inscription in Greek”;
- (b) She calls herself “head” or “president” of the synagogue;
- (c) Rufina acts “both autonomously and publicly without any reference to a father, husband, son, or male guardian”;
- (d) She oversees her own household of slaves and former slaves;
- (e) She “lives in sufficient social proximity to the non-Jewish community to prescribe a double penalty for anyone audacious enough to violate the tomb”.

In Crete a sepulchral plaque dating to fourth or fifth century CE states “Sophia of Gortyn, elder and head of the synagogue of Kisamos (lies) here. The memory of the righteous one for ever. Amen” (Brooten 1982:11). We are not given any background to Sophia, but like Rufina, no mention is made of a husband, so one cannot assume that she was married. She was obviously an important figure in the community of Kisamos.

In Myndos, Crete, an inscription reads “[From Th] eopempte, head of the synagogue, and her son Eusebios”. Brooten (1982:14) points out that this woman must have possessed sufficient funds to make such a donation. Having had a son, one may assume she had been married, but no mention is made of a husband. “The donation, the formulation of the inscription, the funds for the donation were either hers if the son was a child, or hers and her sons if the son was an adult. The donation, the formulation of the inscription and the title betray not a hint of dependency. The figure which emerges is an independent, at least moderately well-to-do, leader of the synagogue in Myndos ... a woman”.

The prominence of women as financial supporters of ancient synagogues is also widely documented by inscriptions, especially from cities and towns in Asia Minor. At Apamea in Syria most of the inscriptions record the fact that women made the donations. A beautiful stone mosaic housed in the Brooklyn Museum in New York commemorates the donation of Juliana, who financed the mosaic floor of the synagogue in Hamman Lif in North Africa. A woman called Tation, from Kyme in Asia Minor, paid for an assembly hall and the enclosure of the open courtyard. In grati-

tude the synagogue honoured her with a golden crown and the privilege of a seat of honour.

In proposing that *archisynagogos* was a title bestowed on women in their own right, and that these titles were not purely honorific, Brooten (1982:31) says that scholars should not assume that it was inconceivable for women to be leaders in the ancient synagogue. Many of these scholars bring preconceived ideas and attitudes to the subject of women and their role in the religious life of the times. These attitudes rely heavily on rabbinic literature but non-rabbinic sources, such as inscriptions and papyri, often reflect a different set of circumstances. If one relies solely on the fact that “rabbinic piety and rabbinic laws were the norm for diaspora Jewry as well”, then one must assume these titles were honorific. But “we have no reason to assume that all the archi-synagogues of Palestine and the diaspora promoted the same type of Judaism and conducted the same type of service, (so) we have no reason to assume that two communities in Western Asia Minor, and one community in Crete, could not have allowed their services to be conducted by women” (Cohen 1980:26).

This dissertation agrees with Brooten (1982:32) who says female synagogue leaders were “active in administration and exhortation” like their male counterparts. Furthermore, although one cannot be sure of the extent of their formal education, they must have been able to read and write. We must assume that they “had a knowledge of the Torah in order to be able to teach and exhort others in it”.

5.5.2 Seating in the synagogues. Was there a women's gallery?

In the Second Temple in Jerusalem there was a Court of the Women which had a balcony surrounding it. Grossman (1992:20) states that the idea that this served to segregate male and female worshippers is a popular misconception. The only time when the sexes were separated was during the Water-Drawing Festival held on the

second night of *Sukkot* (Festival of Tabernacles). Safrai (1992:41) proved that there is no archaeological evidence from the ancient period, either in Israel or the diaspora, to indicate that there was a special separate place for women in the synagogue.

Brooten (1982:130) says that “no scholar is of the opinion that ancient Jewish literature attests to a general regulation that the sexes were separate in synagogue worship”. Sukenik (1930:47) adds further positive evidence in the statement “the ancient literature nowhere mentions a specific regulation to the effect that men and women must be kept apart at public worship; still less is it prescribed that the women’s section shall be built in the form of a gallery”.

Brooten (1982:133) observes that in describing the life of the Therapeutae, Philo talks of “one portion set aside for the use of the men, the other for the women”. Although this was probably true of this particular monastic community, this dissertation agrees with Brooten who says this “gives us no licence to generalise that all or even most first century Jews followed the example ...” Just as one would not assume merely by studying this group that celibacy or the contemplative life were the norms for all Jews, so would one not assume that the arrangements in the synagogues followed the pattern set by them. Brooten (1982:134) states that perhaps the fact that Philo found it interesting to describe this partition could indicate a “rare custom rather than one so widespread that describing it is unnecessary”. Scholars who looked for evidence of a gallery invariably found one, but there is little archaeological evidence for such a structure in Palestine and no evidence in the ancient synagogues of the diaspora.

Although none of the original galleries is extant, the fact that they did exist is not in question. What is in dispute is not whether there were galleries or side rooms, but whether they were used for the segregation of the sexes. This dissertation maintains it is safe to assume that there is no positive evidence that men and women were separated during worship in the synagogues of antiquity.

5.6 CONCLUSION

A study of the Graeco-Roman period in Palestine and the diaspora demonstrates the strong influence the Hellenistic cultural world had on the Jews living within its boundaries. Although their laws and customs set the Jews apart as a unique group, their religion was in a state of flux and the status of women at this time underwent many changes. There was a liberalising effect felt in the communities and women enjoyed certain freedoms hitherto unknown: many women participated in communal life, led financially independent lives and wielded great influence. They were able to make decisions for themselves and find fulfilment for their lives, both outside and inside the home. This enhanced stature of women was not accepted easily by the society at large, and one found attitudes towards them still patronising or antagonistic. Josephus and Philo, the chroniclers of this period maintained harsh attitudes towards women and only grudgingly acknowledged their capabilities. Women who achieved fame or influence were regarded as unusual, and womankind as a whole was still thought of as inferior in intellect and capability. Despite these attitudes women such as Salome-Alexandra, the Therapeutae, and women leaders in the ancient synagogues managed to achieve much in the spheres of leadership and religion. Although they may have been relatively few in number, their examples signified that opportunities did exist for women to achieve positions of influence during this period.

CHAPTER 6

THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN RABBINIC JUDAISM

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The very term “rabbinic Judaism” poses a variety of problems. Although it has often been studied in isolation and treated as the centre of Judaism, cognisance must be taken of the many outside influences which have helped to shape it and give it form. This legal, cultural and social system developed in Palestine and Babylon during the first six centuries of the CE, and the classic texts include the Mishnah, Tosefta, Talmud and Midrash. These works were destined to govern virtually all Jewish communities until the present day.

Included in this period are the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha and Graeco-Roman literature all of which have been discussed in Chapters 3, 4 and 5

Saldarini (1986:440) makes mention of the other streams of Jewish thought and practice especially those existing before the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, “Greek-speaking Jews in the Diaspora (such as Philo and Josephus), Samaritans, Essenes, and the ... groups who authored the Pseudepigrapha must take their place alongside Rabbinic Judaism ...” He also points out that Palestinian Judaism was deeply influenced by Hellenism and “... any reconstruction of Judaism in the early centuries will be complete only if account is given of ... these tendencies and movements within Judaism”. Wegner (1991:69) reinforces this statement by acknowledging that the formulators of rabbinic literature were inevitably influenced by various surrounding cultures. Apart from Hellenism which influenced the Mishnah, Tosefta, the early Midrashic collections and the Palestinian Talmud, Zoroastrian Persia placed its stamp on the Babylonian Talmud which was edited about 500 CE. In all

these texts a system was perpetuated in which the image of women in the cultural, social and legal fields played a subordinate role in a patriarchal society.

Rabbinic legislation was considered by its authors as divinely ordained and women were considered only in their relationship to men. As long as they fulfilled their filial or marital obligations they were revered and honoured. Rabbinic literature is not lacking in praise for the "supportive, resourceful and self sacrificing wife, nor is there a lack of consideration for her physical and emotional needs and welfare" (Baskin 1985:5). However the rabbis living during the period under review, namely before the redaction of the Mishnah, expressed many negative attitudes to women.

Hillel¹ said "more flesh, more worms: more treasures, more care: more maidservants, more lewdness: more menservants, more theft: more women, more witchcraft" (Ab 2:8). Women were regarded as being a medium of evil and temptation. Rabbi Joshua who lived in the first century CE said "A woman would rather have one kab (measure of food) with lechery than nine kabs with modesty" (Sot 3:4). He also said: "A foolish saint and a cunning knave and a woman that is a hypocrite and the wounds of the Pharisees, these wear out the world" (Sot 3:4).

Rabbi Simon ben Jochai, of the second century CE said "Kill the best of the heathens in time of war; crush the brain of the best of serpents; the most worthy of women indulges in witchcraft" (Cohen 1965:228).

As has been illustrated in previous chapters, the positive statements about women were mostly made about them not as independent persons, but rather in relation to men. The rabbis in their writings and comments followed this trend of maintaining a "curiously ambivalent attitude to women" (Segal 1979:121).

¹ Hillel, the elder, lived in the first century CE and was considered one of the greatest sages of the Second Temple period. Described as a man of great humility he set himself the task of bringing men closer to the teachings of the Torah

6.2 THE MISHNAH

The Mishnah, the oldest code of Jewish Law, is a record of decisions reached by scholars and edited by Rabbi Judah the Patriarch in ca 200 CE. Together with the Tosefta, it is the most important source for understanding rabbinic Judaism at its earliest phase. It is, however, difficult to use this body of work as a historical source because it does not tell us directly how it came into existence nor what its purpose was. Saldarini (1986:440) notes that tradition holds that the Oral Law (which began with Moses) began to develop some time between Ezra (fifth century BCE) and the second century BCE “though form and content of that law are much disputed”. Nor can we be certain that these writings reflected the way things actually were or whether they represented the rabbis’ “idealised view of the way things should be” (Wegner 1991:70).

Although the main thrust of the Mishnah contains rules concerning personal status and civil and criminal law, it also refers to matters of the Temple which had no practical application at the time of its redaction. However Saldarini (1986:438) points out that the social reality reflected in these texts may be distorted by the interpreters. It is thus possible that many of the stories, anecdotes, *halakhic* and historical statements underwent a complex development in response to the human and theological needs in a changing society. But in general, the rabbinic Judaism of the Mishnah was seen as the core of Judaism as it developed from the post-Exilic period, and will be used as the self-contained basic text for purposes of this discussion.

6.2.1 Divisions of the Mishnah

The Mishnah addresses the issues of all aspects of religion, gender, social structure, wealth and property transactions and the organisation of the different strata of society.

Neusner (1992:63) states that the principal focus of a social vision that is framed by men also encompasses and focuses on women, who are seen within the larger struc-

ture defined as the household. This is because woman forms half of the whole that is the householder and the household itself forms the basis of society envisioned by the Mishnah's redactors. Israel is seen as being made up of households and villages and "... the economic unit also framed the social one, and the two together composed, in conglomerates, the political one, hence a political economy. ... initiated within an economic definition formed out of the elements of production". The Mishnah sees the household as the unit of economic production although, as Neusner (1992:63) points out this vision does not take cognisance of substantial numbers of people who were "craftsmen, ... unemployed, ... landless and the like". The Mishnah makes no provision for the economic activities of isolated individuals "out of synchronic relationship with a household or village made up of householders". So one can see that these individuals ... "enter the world of social and economic transactions only in relationship to the householder".

6.2.2 The Mishnaic order of women

Neusner (1979:140) states that the system defines the position of women in the "social economy of Israel's supernatural and natural reality. That position acquires definition wholly in relationship to men ... the principal interest (being) the point at which a woman becomes, and ceases to be, **holy** to a particular man, that is, enters and leaves the marital union". Five of the seven tractates that pertain to women and family are devoted to the transfer of women and the formation and dissolution of the marital bond.

In analysing the Mishnaic Laws governing women one finds two important factors. Firstly the system does not treat all women the same and secondly, even women who fall under male authority are treated as persons, not chattels, in all contexts save one, and that is when "her biological function belongs to a specified man and the case poses a threat to his control of that function" (Wegner 1988:vi). In posing the question whether women were legal chattels or legal persons Wegner continues "In the domain of private law the Mishnah treats all women as persons some of the time and some women as persons all the time".

Most of the rules governing women's status appear in *Seder Nashim* (Division/Order of Women). The formation of marriage is discussed in tractates *Kiddushin* (Betrothals) and *Ketubot* (Marriage Deeds). In *Gittin* (Bills of Divorce) the dissolution of the marriage and delivering a writ of divorce are discussed.

Tractate *Nazir* refers to the special vow to become a *Nazir*² and the right of a husband to veto this vow when it impaired conjugal relations. Tractate *Sotah*³ (suspected adulteress) deals with the only Jewish law which permits trial by ordeal. It should be noted that in this kind of treatment the results were easy to rig and the "bitter waters" of the *Sotah* ordeal were revoked on the instructions of Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai just before the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. *Yebamot* (Sisters-in-Law) discusses the levirate marriage and the ceremony of *halitzah*⁴ which took place when a levirate marriage was either not desired or not possible.

Neusner points out that these seven tractates do not cover every aspect pertinent to women and in fact the "most blatant exclusion" is the tractate of *Niddah*, on the menstrual period. This is placed in the order of *Tehorot* (Purities) because it is relevant in that tractate, which deals mainly with things that transmit or absorb cultic pollution. Wegner (1988:63) states that menstruation itself has no bearing on the topic of women's personal status but only that of cultic purity. The menstruant is the subject of a cultic taboo that placed her off limits to all Israelite men, who had to keep themselves in a state of fitness to engage in cultic or religious practices. Furthermore the sages "rely on the woman to examine herself properly, keep track of her cycle, and deal honestly with her husband in this critical matter". If this is not carried out a man could never be sure of his own purity and ran the risk of divine punishment. The woman's integrity and honesty is relied upon to protect men from

² The Nazirite vow is one of self-dedication whereby a man (or woman) may dedicate himself or herself to the service of God. This requires the Nazir to abstain from wine, refrain from cutting the hair and to avoid contact with dead bodies. It was often the custom to take this vow when in trouble or danger and could be taken for any length of time (usually for a period of thirty days) (Num 6:1-21).

³ See footnote Chapter 5.

⁴ Halitzah is the ceremony of unshoeing, a biblical form of divorce releasing the levirate widow from her automatic tie to her late husband's brother (see Deut 25:7-10).

sin, indicating the rabbis' trust in her ability and sense of responsibility to adhere strictly to the required procedures. "To permit a woman to make such judgements (on the provenance of bloodstains) is to recognise her intelligence, responsibility and personhood" (Wegner 1988:165).

In the private domain of personal status, the Mishnah divides women into those who are dependent and those who are autonomous. Each of these classes in turn breaks down into sub-classes defined by who has control of women's sexual and reproductive functions.

The Mishnah recognises three kinds of dependent women: the minor daughter, controlled by her father; the wife under her husband's authority, and the levirate widow, whose husband's death without male issue transfers her to her husband's brother. These form a mirror image of the three kinds of autonomous women:- the unmarried adult daughter who has been emancipated from her father's jurisdiction at her coming-of-age at 12½ years; the divorcee who is no longer subject to her husband's authority; the widow who has produced a male heir and thus is exempt from the levirate marriage⁵.

Here are the cases where "A women's freedom from male authority rests precisely on the fact that no man can lay claim to her sexuality" (Wegner 1988:114). The autonomous woman has equality in all transactions of private law. Most significantly the autonomous woman is able to arrange her own marriage. This rule according to Wegner (1988:118) allows her to "control her most important asset - her sexuality". As the decision to marry could be the most important decision a woman may take in her entire life, it is clear that the sages credited her with sufficient intelligence to control all aspects of this vital step.

5 The Levirate widow has been discussed in Chapter 2.

It is interesting to note that not all systems of law permitted women this degree of freedom. Roman law in Mishnaic times kept women under perpetual tutelage regardless of their marital status. However there was a statutory exception whereby women who had borne three or more children did attain autonomy. Wegner (1988:236) suggests that Roman culture shared the Mishnaic view that a woman's most important function was the production of children and adequate performance of that function was rewarded by her emancipation.

As will be shown, in the discussion on the Order of Women in the Mishnah, many of the laws formulated and enforced by the rabbis were intended to protect women who found themselves in difficult or untenable situations and were in need of such rules to safeguard their lives.

6.2.2.1 Tractates Kiddushin, Ketubot, Yebamot and Gittin⁶

In the first five chapters of the tractate *Kiddushin* women are grouped together, not with slaves and children but with beasts and property. This dissertation is in agreement with Swidler (1976:117) who says, "What they all have in common is very revealing in regard to the relative status of women; namely how each of these 'items' is acquired by a man". A woman was acquired as a wife in three ways: through money, or writ, or by sexual intercourse. A Jewish slave could be acquired by money, a document or by usurpation (Kidd 1:2).

A big beast is "acquired by the act of delivery and a small animal by lifting up" (Kidd 1:4). But "property that carries security can be acquired by money, or by document or by usurpation" (Kidd 1:5). The parallels in these examples, are, to the way of thinking of this dissertation, quite extraordinary. Women could be acquired in the same fashion as slaves, beasts and other goods. This grouping indicates the inferior position of women. They were on the whole regarded as "inferior to men in

mind, in function and status" (Swidler 1976:118). This is in direct contrast to the freedom afforded the autonomous woman as discussed on page 118.

Closely related, and interwoven with the tractate *Kiddushin* is tractate *Ketubot* which deals with material rights. It presents information on the marriage contract and it deals with the material claims of the girl and those of the father and husband; the reciprocal obligations of husband and wife during marriage, and finally the settlement of the marriage contract in the event of death or divorce.

Both married and unmarried women were expected to work. Any profits resulting from such work went to their fathers or husbands in return for maintenance. When a woman married, her economic position legally improved, for although a father was not liable for his daughter's maintenance, her husband was "under the obligation of maintaining and ransoming her and providing for her burial" (Ket 4:6). Rabbi Judah ruled that "even the poorest man in Israel must provide no less than two flutes and one lamenting woman (for burial)" (Ket 4:4). Furthermore the husband was obliged to issue a *Ketubah*⁷ which Neusner (1979:147) describes as functioning as alimony in the case of divorce and an annuity in the case of a husband's death. In return the wife had to perform certain duties for the husband, amongst which were "grinding flour and baking bread and washing clothes and cooking food and giving suck to her child and making his bed and working in wool..." (Ket 5:5).

This structure of the institution of marriage clearly indicates that while the woman played a largely menial role in the marriage relationship there were mechanisms put in place which secured her position and prevented her total exploitation by her husband.

The special case of the *yebamot* or levirate widows goes back to biblical times and is prescribed in *Deuteronomy* 25:5-10.

7 The *Ketubah* is a document recording the financial obligations which the husband undertakes toward his wife, in respect of, and consequent to, their marriage, obligations which in principle are imposed on him by law (EJ 1971, Vol 10:926).

"If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead shall not be married outside the family to a stranger; her husband's brother shall ... take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his brother who is dead, and his name may not be blotted out of Israel. And if the man does not wish to take his brother's wife, ... (the) wife shall go up to the gate to the elders, and say, ' My husband's brother refuses to perpetuate his brother's name in Israel; ... Then the elders of his city shall call him, and speak to him: and if he persists, ... then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, and pull his sandal off his foot, and spit in his face; ... And the name of his house shall be called in Israel, The house of him that had his sandal pulled off'.

Here the levirate widow is automatically the possession of her husband's brother. Unlike marriage this union required no act of betrothal by the levir, and should he wish to reject the union, the widow must be released by *halitzah* which is in effect a form of divorce or release from marriage. Wegner (1988:99) makes an interesting observation. Through the entire process of the levirate law, the widow has no option but to comply with the will of the levir. But if he decides to release her she is treated "very much as a person". She is the one who plays the active role as she initiates the ritual by publicising his refusal to marry her. Still more surprising it is she who actually performs the ceremony by removing the shoe, spitting in his face and declaring his shameful refusal to build up his brother's house. This ceremony is still required by Jewish law before a *yebamah* may re-marry. Wegner (1988:235) notes that this requirement has led to documented cases of serious abuse in the form of extortion by unscrupulous levirs. It must be noted that in *Deuteronomy* only the deceased brother is mentioned, but in *Yebamot* (4:5) the duty of levirate union rests first on the eldest brother and devolves on each brother in turn if the eldest does not wish to marry the widow. This interpretation is far more restrictive of the widow and this dissertation is in agreement with Wegner (1988:100) who states that this cares more for the per-

sonhood of the dead man as expressed in the persistent attempt to secure him a surrogate son, than for the living woman's freedom to control her life.

De Beauvoir (1968:109) in discussing the position of widows in patriarchal societies states that the levirate is found among many Oriental peoples. In all societies where woman was under guardianship, the problem of what to do with widows had to be resolved. Very often the widow was handed over to the husband's heirs. Sometimes the levirate took the form of polyandry. To forestall the uncertainties of widowhood, all the brothers in a family were given as husbands to one woman. This custom also served to protect the tribe against the possible infertility of the husband. However this was a very radical situation and was not established everywhere.

The differences in the attitude of the rabbis to the normal widow and the levirate widow are possibly based on two factors. The latter is indispensable to the production of a surrogate son for the deceased, and the brother who acquires her also acquires his dead brother's entire estate. But the normal widow by having produced a son, and having no estate to hand on to brothers-in-law, is in fact a liability to the heirs. The heirs in turn must, by law, maintain her as long as she chooses to remain in the matrimonial home (Ket 4:12).

De Beauvoir (1968:112) writes of one of the problems arising in a society which is based on inheritance through the male line when there are no male descendants. The Greeks established the custom of *epiclerate* by which the female heir had to marry her eldest relative in her father's family. By so doing the property left to her by her father would be passed on to children belonging to the same group and would remain the property of the family. One may draw important parallels with the levirate marriage. The *epiclere* was not a female heir, but merely a means of producing a male heir. Naturally she was placed at the mercy of the man she was to marry who was often an old man.

The Laws of Hammurabi in Babylon acknowledged certain rights of woman. She received part of the paternal estate and on marriage she was provided with a dowry

by her father. In Persia polygamy was customary. The wife was required to be obedient to her husband who was chosen for her by her father when she was of marriageable age. Incest was not forbidden and marriage between brother and sister often occurred. The wife was responsible for the education of the children and would receive part of her husband's estate if the son showed himself unworthy. If she was a privileged wife she was entrusted with the guardianship of minor children and management of business affairs if the husband died without an adult son. One can see the importance the existence of posterity had for the head of family.

In Egypt women enjoyed very favourable conditions. They had the same rights as men and the same standing in courts of law. They could own property and marry without compulsion. If widowed, a woman could re-marry when and whomsoever she wished. The man practised polygamy but although all the children were legitimate there was only one real wife. She was the one bound to him legally, the others were slaves with no rights at all. The chief wife retained her property and was able to conduct business.

As a woman is acquired by three means, (money, document or sexual union) so she regains her freedom by two methods: divorce by decree, or by the death of her husband. In ancient Israelite days divorce was an "arbitrary, unilateral, private act on the part of the husband and consisted of the wife's expulsion from the husband's house..." (Swidler 1976:154). In *Deuteronomy* 24:1 the husband was required to deliver a bill of divorce on her expulsion. "When a man takes a wife, and marries her, if then she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a bill of divorce, and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house ...". This ceremony was done privately before two witnesses.

There was a certain amount of male chauvinism in this arrangement as the husband alone could issue the bill of divorce or *get*. The Mishnah clearly states "The man who divorces is not like the woman who is divorced, because the woman goes forth with her consent or against her will, whereas the man divorces her only with his own free will" (Yeb 14:1).

The Mishnah lists many grounds for divorce starting with an evil woman who is a plague to her husband and must be divorced so that he may be healed of his plague. In *Ketubot* (7:1-5) there is a long list of vows which if enforced by her husband, and broken by her, may be grounds for divorce. Examples of these are that she should not eat certain kinds of fruit, or wear ornaments, or go to a house of feasting or mourning. On the surface these restrictions may seem trivial but against these the Mishnah states that if a man placed his wife under intolerable vows, such as restricting her attendance at legitimate social functions, forcing her removal to a new town, cutting off her support; or if he refused or was incapable of fulfilling his conjugal obligations, a wife was entitled to claim a divorce. Here, once again, the woman had equal redress to unfair and untenable treatment.

There was a tradition of polygamy among the Jews. The story of creation in the Bible may be cited as the ideal marriage, i.e. monogamy, and according to biblical records the early generations were monogamous. Epstein (1942:3) points out that Isaac was monogamous and Jacob intended to follow his example, but was forced into bigamy by Laban's deception. Polygamy gradually infiltrated Hebrew life from foreign sources such as Canaan or Egypt. However there are sufficient cases of polygamy recorded in the Bible to assume that polygamy was not uncommon. For the Hebrews, marriage represented acquisition and ownership. This form of marriage called *ba'al* where the husband owned his wife as he owned slaves, lent itself to polygamy which was considered proper and permissible.

At the beginning of the Common Era polygamy was legally permissible and instances were found in the highest level of society. Josephus (*Ant XVII:13:1*) talks of Herod's two sons contracting second marriages. Members of priestly families such as Alubai, Caiphus and Josephus had more than one wife and the son of Simeon ben Gamaliel I is recorded as having two wives at the same time. Josephus (*Ant XVII 1,2*) informed the Roman world, "It is the ancient practice among us to have many wives at the same time".

Epstein (1942:19) points out, however, that just as in the biblical period plural marriage was permitted but excessive polygamy was resisted, so in the rabbinic period the "Jewish moral sense rose against too many wives". Polygamy was quite rare in actual life during the rabbinic period. Not only moral aversion but economic conditions curtailed the practice.

Adultery was a very strong reason for divorce and in view of the fact that the Jewish culture allowed polygamy for much of its history, this had a profound effect on the Jewish legal concept of the term. Adultery is prohibited in the Decalogue (Ex 20:1; Deut 5:18). Like all sexual wrongs it defiles those who commit the act (Lev 18:20; Num 5:13). Its gravity is understood by being punishable by death for both man and woman.

The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1971, Vol 2:313) states that the extra marital intercourse of a married man is not *per se* a crime in biblical or later law. This was because of the economic aspect of Israelite marriage where the wife was the husband's possession and adultery constituted a violation of the husband's exclusive right to her. The wife being the husband's possession had no such right to him. A married woman was considered to have committed adultery when she had sexual relations with any man other than her husband. A man was only legally an adulterer when he had sexual intercourse with another man's wife. To our present day perceptions this constitutes a blatant case of double moral standards, placing the wife at a distinct disadvantage. In the Decalogue itself one is enjoined not to covet one's neighbour's wife, no mention being made of the neighbour's husband. Could this in fact be an indication that women did not have to be reminded to behave morally in their sexual endeavours, or perhaps the punishment for so doing was harsh enough not to warrant a further reminder?

However, despite all these instances cited, there were some limitations placed on the husband's power to divorce his wife, two of which were Biblical restrictions. In *Deuteronomy* 22:28-29 we read "If a man meets a virgin who is not betrothed, and seizes her, and lies with her, and they are found, then the man who lay with her shall

give to the father of the young woman fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife, because he has violated her; he may not put her away all his days". In *Deuteronomy* 22:13-19 we read, if a man wrongly accuses his wife of not being a virgin, he "may not put her away all his days". To these restrictions the Mishnah adds two more. In *Yebamot* 14:1 a man could not divorce his wife if she became insane, and in *Ketubot* 4:9 the restriction held for a wife who remained unransomed after being taken captive. These were indeed most enlightened conditions endeavouring to protect the wife and treat her in a most positive manner.

The *Ketubah* became not only a safeguard for the welfare of the separated wife, but also an obstacle to divorce by the husband if he was obliged to pay out a substantial sum of money in the event of a divorce. However there were cases where the husband was not obliged to pay the *Ketubah*. This was only payable when the woman was divorced through no fault or failing of her own. In *Ketubot* (7:6) we read "These are they that are put away without their *Ketubah*: A wife that transgresses the Law of Moses and Jewish custom. What (conduct is such that transgresses) the Law of Moses? If she gives her husband untithed food, or has connection with him in her uncleanness or does not set apart dough-offering⁸ or utters a vow and does not fulfil it. And what (conduct is such that transgresses) Jewish custom? If she goes out with her hair unbound, or spins in the street or speaks with any man". In *Ketubot* (7:7) another category of women is listed who would forfeit their claim to a settlement, They were those who, prior to marriage, had subjected themselves to vows about which they had not informed their husbands, or had physical defects which they had not revealed.

Although it was impossible for a wife to divorce a husband there were, according to the Mishnah, circumstances where a wife could claim the right to a divorce before a Jewish Court. These circumstances represented an advance in thinking from biblical and early rabbinic times. In *Ketubot* 7:10 we read "And these are they for which

they compel him to give divorce: one afflicted with a skin disease or one who has a polypus, or one that collects or one who mines copper-ore or a tanner". All the wife had to say was "I thought I could endure it, but now I cannot endure it".

These professions were considered honourable although repugnant. However there were dishonourable or suspect trades, such as politicians, tax collectors, usurers and gamblers who were despised by society at large. Another category of undesirable occupations were those where men were suspected of engaging in immoral dealings mainly because of their direct contact with women. These included goldsmiths, peddlers, weavers, launderers, bloodletters and bath attendants.

As stated earlier, a man could not divorce his wife on grounds of insanity and the converse applied but in *Yebamot* (14:1) we read "if a husband becomes a deaf mute or if he went out of his mind he may never set her free". But if the wife were to be so afflicted, the husband could divorce her. This is a totally biased ruling in favour of the man, and the argument that the woman could not hope to lead a normal married life whereas the man could do so by taking another wife, does not alter the fact that the conditions are unequal for the sexes.

If the husband deserted the wife and had vanished without trace, the court could not grant a divorce unless "they saw valid grounds for presuming death" (Swidler 1976:63). The position of a woman in this case was the same as one whose husband refused to issue her with a *get* and thus prevented her from re-marrying. Such a woman is called *agunah* (chained woman) which is a vexing problem plaguing Orthodox Judaism to this day. In an article which appeared in "The Mail and Guardian" on November 3, 1995, Michael Freedland, writing from London, reported on a group of women, wreathed in chains, who demonstrated outside the office of the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Dr Jonathan Sacks. They protested against the ties that bind them in marriages that the divorce courts of the land have already decided are over. Not only is the 2000 year old religious law preventing the annulment of their marriages without the religious *get*, but it also bars them from re-marriage in a religious ceremony. Furthermore any children born of an unsanctified second marriage

are regarded as bastards (*mamzerim*), and such children can only marry other illegitimate children.

As mentioned previously a levirate marriage is one in which the marriage of a widow whose husband died without offspring is obliged to marry the brother of the deceased. Whilst this was intended to afford the widow physical and financial protection, as in all probability she was separated from her own clan, it did, in fact, often cause hardships for her. Her brother-in-law had to either marry her or release her by means of a *halitzah* or by his own death. In the ceremony of *halitzah* the *levir* or brother of a married man who died childless renounced his obligation to marry the widow and released her to marry anyone of her choosing. If, however the surviving brother neither married the widow nor performed the ceremony of *halitzah* she too, became an *agunah*.

If the surviving brother was below *barmitzvah* age (i.e. under thirteen years old) and unable to marry, the *agunah* had to wait for him to become a man. Biale (1984:102) says the fate of the *agunah* "is perhaps the most tragic consequence of the laws of marriage and divorce. The *agunah* is a woman whose marriage is in fact ended or suspended, but who legally remains a married woman, unable to re-marry; (she) is bound to a husband who no longer lives with her, but she cannot ... be free to marry another man".

Wegner (1988:230) quotes the case of Israeli widows of sailors in the submarine "Dakar", which disappeared without trace in 1968, who were tied to obviously dead husbands for thirteen years. In 1981 the Israeli Rabbinical Court finally found a way to declare the men officially dead, despite the lack of eyewitness testimony.

For the redactors of the Mishnah, the levirate widow possessed one important feature: her reproductive potential. As part of the deceased husband's property she was inherited by his nearest kinsman. Just as the wife could not initiate divorce proceedings, so the levirate widow could not ask for a release from the obligation to marry her husband's brother. It is Wegner's opinion (1988:112) that "Even more

than the minor daughter (precisely because she is no child but a grown woman) this constitutes the ultimate example of the Mishnah's treatment of women as chattel when her biological function is uppermost in the sages' minds".

When a man divorced a woman he had to do so unconditionally, and once she was released from his authority he lost his power to control her life. She was free to marry any person she chose. In other words the husband relinquished all control over her. Wegner points out that a divorcee's level of "personhood" became higher than before, as she was first subject to her father's authority, and then that of her husband but after divorce she was able to manage her own private life. As well as relinquishing sexual control over her, the husband also forfeited any financial assets she had acquired from the *Ketubah*. As can be seen the *Ketubah* was an inhibition to divorce. The rabbis were concerned with the welfare of widows and as an extension that of the divorced wife as well.

The Jewish approach to divorce, even in rabbinic times was inferior to that of the Hellenistic world, in which a woman had the same right as a man to institute a divorce. It is interesting to note that the Elephantine papyri⁹ dating to the fifth century BCE give testimony to the fact that women had the right to divorce their husbands by making a declaration before the congregation that they were divorcing them. Sigal (1976:235) makes the point that the Elephantine *halakhah*¹⁰ was influenced by Hellenistic culture, whilst in post-Maccabean Palestinian *halakhah* the sages reacted against this "as against other Hellenistic standards". This dissertation feels there is merit in this statement and unfortunately this retrogressive step adversely affected Jewish women in the rabbinic period. The differences between the rights of husband and wife were enormous. Unlike him she had to "present sufficient cause for her

⁹ Elephantine is situated at the southern end of a small island in the Nile. It was, under the Persian rule of Egypt (from 525 BCE), the site of a large military camp of mercenaries which included regiments of Jewish mercenaries. At the beginning of the twentieth century documents known as the Elephantine Papyri were discovered. The main significance of these lies in their legal aspect.

¹⁰ The Elephantine Jews brought with them to Egypt the religion of the early prophets and Jeremiah before the destruction of the first Temple (587 BCE). But they saw nothing wrong in having their own temple even though a Temple to the God of Israel existed in Jerusalem. Whether the order of worship was the same as that observed in the Jerusalem Temple, cannot be ascertained. The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 1971, Vol 6:608 states that this is improbable "if only for the reason that Yahu was not the only God who dwelt (there) ...".

claim for separation ... she had to be informed (and) aware of the grounds on which she was entitled to sue for divorce ... she herself could not divorce: the union could only be dissolved by the husband issuing a bill of divorce. She therefore had to work through a court which considered her case at its discretion ... even if (the court) did decide in her favour, the husband could still refuse her the necessary document of release” (Archer 1990:220). To this day, the wife often experiences great difficulty in obtaining a *get* from her husband.

6.2.2.2 Tractate Niddah

Judaism contains a taboo on contact with the menstruating woman like many other cultures, both in the ancient Near East and in the world at large. Ritual uncleanness involves protecting sacred things and places from defilement. Douglas (1966:10) states that these taboos were often inspired by fear and were taken as precautions against malignant spirits, and often took the form of rules of uncleanness. The separation of sanctuary and consecrated things and persons from profane ones is a normal part of religious cults. Neusner (1973:108) states that two important ideas about purity and impurity come down from ancient Israel. Firstly these are considered as cultic matters and they may serve as metaphors for moral and religious behaviour primarily regarding matters of sex, idolatry and unethical action. Purity is closely related to holiness. Therefore the land which is holy must be kept clean. Secondly the sources of uncleanness are varied and not all are cultic. Certain animals, women after childbirth and during menstruation, corpses, sexual misdeeds, bodily discharges are but a few of these. He suggests that these impurities served as a basis for moralistic allegory in Palestine after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE.

As mentioned above, this important aspect of women does not appear under the Mishnaic Order of Women, but under the Purity Laws. The menstruating woman in Jewish Law is called a *niddah* or one who is ostracized or excluded. The laws defining this status are very complex and rest on the foundation of the two different contexts in which the menstruating woman figures in the Bible, namely the Laws of

Purity and Impurity and the Sexual Prohibitions. The Laws of Purity were a cornerstone of the ritual practice of the Temple. Naturally many of the biblical injunctions had been expanded and interpreted by Oral Law, which was expected to augment and fill any gaps left by the Written Torah.

In *Leviticus* 15:19 it is stated "When a woman has a discharge of blood which is her regular discharge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening". Further on in *Leviticus* 15:24 "And if any man lie with her, her impurity is on him, he shall be unclean seven days ...". This indicates impurity and not sin.

However in the later books of *Ezra* and *Ezekiel*, the term *niddah* "appears as a metaphor for moral impurity and debasement" (Biale 1984:154). Ezra, in his attempt to convince the people of Judea to send away their foreign wives and thus purify the race, reminds them that they must not mingle with the local population whose immoral sexual practices have defiled the land. "The land which you are entering, to take possession of it, is a land unclean with the pollutions of the peoples of the lands ... Therefore give not your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons ..." (Ezra 9:11-12).

"The word of the Lord came to me: 'Son of man when the house of Israel dwelt in their own land, they defiled it by their ways and their doings; their conduct before me was like the uncleanness of a woman in her impurity'" (Ezek 36:16-17). Both Ezra and Ezekiel were priests and they displayed the sensitivity of the priestly tradition as the Laws of Impurity were closely associated with the Temple and Temple ritual. Furthermore they were determined to establish their people as holy once again in the holy land. In effect, the result of the Exile was to firmly entrench the attitude and laws governing marriage, divorce, monogamy and incest and to place these on a level of moral behaviour which was to be pleasing to God.

With the destruction of the Temple, the place and justification for the Laws of Purity fell away and made way for the latter laws of *niddah*, namely sexual prohibitions.

“This transformation also meant a shift from the sphere of public cultic life to the sphere of family life” (Biale 1984:147).

In the rabbinic period the laws relating to the menstruant “comprise some of the most fundamental principles of the *halakhic* system, while a scrupulous observance of their minutiae has been one of the distinguishing signs of an exemplary traditional Jewish family life” (*EJ* 1971, Vol 12:1142).

Swidler (1976:133) quotes Koltun, who asks “Why were the restrictions imposed on the menstruating woman retained after the destruction of the Temple, while all other forms of *tu'mah* (impurity) were allowed to lapse?” She goes on to say “It is difficult to avoid the implication that we are dealing here with the residue of an ancient taboo based on a mixture of male fear, awe and repugnance toward woman’s creative biological cycle ... She (the menstruant) is treated ... as though bearing a rather unpleasant contagious disease”. A menstruating woman was unclean and contaminated everything and everybody she came into contact with, even in an indirect way. The *niddah* state became a “monthly exile from the human race, a punitive shunning of the menstruant” (Swidler 1976:138).

Swidler (1976:134) quotes Epstein who gives reasons for the Niddah Laws. This dissertation is in full agreement with Epstein when he says “They promote sexual hygiene, physical health, marital continence, respect for womanhood, consecration of married life and family happiness”.

With the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE the emphasis of the Purity Laws shifted from the public sphere to the home and they formed the guidelines for the relationship between husband and wife during the time of her menstruation. The early authorities forbade a woman to make herself physically attractive during her *niddah* period. However, Rabbi Akiva overturned the rule by saying she should be allowed to use makeup and wear becoming clothes so that the husband should not lose interest in her. Biale (1984:162) points out this is a conflict between “the desire to eliminate any form of sexual arousal during the *niddah* period ... and the need to sustain

enough attraction between husband and wife to weather the period of separation without damage to the marital relationship". Rabbi Akiva in his pragmatic reasoning felt that if a woman is not appealing to her husband for twelve to fourteen days a month, "he might come to disregard her, even despise her and eventually divorce her" (Biale 1984:163). Akiva was of the opinion that a man was permitted to divorce his wife if he had found another woman more attractive (Gitt 90a) and he was in fact trying to prevent just such an occurrence by permitting a woman to remain attractive to her husband during the *niddah* period.

6.3 RELIGIOUS LIFE AND EDUCATION

The life of any traditional Jew or Jewess is guided by the commandments or *mitzvot*. The great majority of these *mitzvot* apply to both sexes. The exceptions fall into two categories, namely those biologically linked to gender (e.g. circumcision and laws of the menstruant) and those not directly linked to biological differences, but which are nevertheless gender biased.

The Mishnah states a general principle of exemption for women based on two criteria. The first concerns prohibitions and the second concerns time. So we have either positive or negative *mitzvot*; and in each of these categories there are those that are time-bound and those that are not time-bound.

Women are exempted from all positive *mitzvot* limited to time and season. They are not required to wear ritual garments (*talit*, *tzitzit* and *tefillin*)¹¹ or engage in daily prayer. They were not obliged to make pilgrimages or to dwell in the *sukkah* (booth) during the festival of Succoth. These *mitzvot* are linked to time and season.

¹¹ Talit - prayer shawl

Tzitzit - tassels attached to the four corners of the talit

Tefillin - phylacteries. These consist of two black leather boxes containing scriptural passages which are bound by black leather straps on left hand and on the head and are worn for morning services on all days of the year except Sabbath and scriptural holy days.

One can understand that it would be difficult for women to carry out these *mitzvot*, partly because of their role as mothers and housewives and partly because of their physiological make-up. The female physiology calls for special consideration. Cognisance is taken of the fact that pregnancy, breast-feeding and the onset of the menstrual period may inhibit female observance of sundry demands of the law, such as fasting.

The three positive time-bound *mitzvot* the woman is obliged to observe are the Laws of Family Purity (*Niddah*) the separation of a small piece of dough prior to baking the loaves of bread for the Sabbath and the kindling of the Sabbath lights. Goldfield (1976:246) has noted that all three of these *mitzvot* are centred on the home and when considered against the *mitzvot* required of men, seem to "indicate the different modes of experience that men and women participated in and for which they were educated".

Besides the legal aspects of the rabbinic period there were many informal rules and regulations which placed women at a disadvantage. The first of these was the question of education. Study of the Torah was given enormous prominence in Jewish life. Whilst there was no official injunction not to teach women Torah, there were statements made that bordered on the prohibition of such activity. In the first century CE Rabbi Eliezer claimed he taught only what he learned from his teachers, and he said, "If any man teach his daughter Torah, it is as though he taught her lechery" (Sot 3:4). Not all the rabbis endorsed this sentiment as witnessed by rabbi Ben Azzai who said, "A man ought to give his daughter a knowledge of the Law so that if she must drink (the bitter water) she may know that the merit (that she had acquired) will hold her punishment in suspense" (Sot 3:4). However all the rabbis agreed that it was incumbent on men to teach sons Torah.

"All the obligations of a father toward his son enjoined in the Law are incumbent on men but not on women" (Kidd 1:7). There was no obligation of the mother to teach her daughters, or of the daughters to teach themselves. Since women did not study Torah, it may be concluded that they normally received no formal education since

study at that time was largely limited to Torah study. This lack of learning when education was becoming more important to the Jewish people, seems to re-inforce the belief that women were considered inferior to men. This belief was no doubt encouraged by the contact Hellenistic Palestine had with the Greek world, where women were regarded as inferior “or at best necessary evils in a male-orientated society. One aspect of this negative attitude was the belief that women were naturally light-minded and irresponsible” (Archer 1990:88-9).

Women could not be counted for a *minyan*¹², and the daily prayer which was to find its way into services, and to this day is still found in Jewish orthodox prayer books, “Praised be God that he has not created me a woman”, epitomises a male chauvinist bias. Not only did women not study Torah but were thought to distract men from their studies. Conversations with women were to be kept to a minimum. Rabbi Jose ben Johanan in 150 BCE said “Talk not much with womankind” and later Tannaitic rabbis said “This they said of a man’s own wife: how much more of his fellow’s wife! Hence the sages have said: He that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the Law...” (Ab 1:5).

However, despite all these restrictions on women learning and participating in the religious life of the community there can be no doubt that women were in fact not solely closeted in the homes and totally excluded from contact with the religious festivals and rituals. Exempted from obligation to study and generally unable to aspire to the high level of education enjoyed by their male counterparts, they were not totally excluded from these activities, even if they were merely passive onlookers. Although they were not actively involved in the activities which were meant to educate and instruct the male members of society, attendance of women was not prohibited.

12

Minyan - a quorum of ten male adults, aged 13 years and older, necessary for public synagogue services and certain other religious ceremonies.

6.4 BERURIA, IMMA SHALOM, RABBI JUDAH'S MAID AND ABBA HILKIAH'S WIFE

As women were not obliged to learn Torah, and no-one was obliged to teach them, one may assume the cases of Beruria, Imma Shalom, Rabbi Judah's maid and Abba Hilkiyah's wife were totally anomalous with prevailing conditions. But these exceptions to the rule merely serve to highlight the reflection of the male-dominated society in which they were nurtured.

Beruria, the daughter of Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion and wife of Rabbi Meir, was reputed to have studied three hundred laws from as many teachers every day for three years and was held up as an exemplary student. She took part in discussions and debates and was even praised for having bested her brother in Torah interpretation. Being a brilliant scholar she went on to teach Torah and lived an intensely moral life. She endured much suffering. She lived at the time when the Romans destroyed Palestine in 135 BCE and lost her father during this period. She witnessed his persecution by the Romans, and her sister being forced into a brothel by the Roman authorities. Most tragic of all, she lost her two sons. Her response to this overwhelming tragedy was one of immense courage and consideration for her husband. Not wanting to grieve him on the Sabbath, she waited until after the *havdalah*¹³ prayer and then couched the bad news in an allegorical fashion. She likened the children to precious gifts left in trust by God, who had now requested their return. When Meir wept, she took "the more intellectual approach" and showed great strength, thereby, as it were, reversing the stereotyped sex roles. Swidler (1976:101-102) states "In the rabbinic writings Beruria is seen only as a rabbinic student, disputant, *halakhic* decision-maker, and above all a teacher ... always with men. Moreover, she is always superior to the men whether as a model of studiousness, a teacher, or as a superior and even at times triumphant disputant and exegete. If such a strong positive image comes through even the totally male memorised, written and

¹³

Havdalah prayer - blessing recited at termination of Sabbath and festivals in order to emphasise the distinction between the sacred and the ordinary.

edited rabbinic materials, what must Beruria have been like?" Certainly she was most unusual and did not fit the female stereotype of her day. She was aware of the subordinate position women held in the society around her. The story is told of her meeting with Rabbi Jose the Galilean who asked her "By what road do we go to Lydda?" She reminded him of the injunction not to engage in much talk with women, and by asking "By which to Lydda" he could have satisfied the sages. She once again "followed the traditional Rabbinic pattern of disputation by rebutting a statement with a quotation from the Written or Oral Law" instead of attacking the Rabbi in an aggressive fashion (Swidler 1976:102). One can only stand in awe at the respect Beruria commanded in her day, for this legend to have been remembered for hundreds of years, and made permanent in the final redaction of the Talmud.

Beruria's immortality rests as much on her devotion to her husband as on her piety and scholarship. It is assumed that she achieved a high level of learning and this through formal education. Was she the exception and if not, why do we not know of any other women of this period who were taught Torah? Archer (1990:97) says her knowledge of certain rabbinic sayings and rules did not prove she had any formal education at a rabbinic school. For example the rabbinic dictum, "Engage not in much talk with women" was part of the common code of conduct between men and woman, "and as such would be well known outside of academic circles". The rule about the purification of kitchen ovens also need not indicate any formal education as girls in a rabbinic household would be trained in Purity Laws relating to the kitchen. However her knowledge of rabbinic exegesis on scriptural verses could only have been gained by formal teaching at an advanced level. All this points to the fact that it was possible for a woman to achieve this high level of education, but in no way are we appraised of the fact that Beruria was one among many learned women, and so must assume that she was an exception to the rule.

Another woman of the early rabbinic period who is mentioned by name as one who knew Torah is Imma Shalom, sister of Rabbi Gamaliel II and wife of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, who has been mentioned previously as saying "whoever teaches his

daughter Torah, it is as though he taught her lechery". Although she was not as thoroughly versed in Torah as Beruria, there are references to her in rabbinic writings, perhaps the best known being her retort to a sceptic whom she heard mocking her brother : "Your God is not strictly honest, or He would not have stolen a rib from sleeping Adam". She asked the man to call a police official and when he asked the reason for the request, she said, "We were robbed last night of a silver cruet and the thief left in its place a golden one". The sceptic replied, "If that is all I wish that thief would visit me every day!" Imma Shalom retorted, "Why do you then object to the removal of a rib from a sleeping Adam? Did he not receive in exchange a woman to wait on him?" (Swidler 1976:104).

A maid of Rabbi Judah in the second century CE is described as learned as she commented on Bible verses which were difficult to understand. Interestingly enough she remains nameless and is only referred to as the Rabbi's servant. She did know at least some Hebrew and "was an imposing and responsible enough member of Rabbi Judah's household to be able to levy an excommunication and intone a powerful prayer at the death of the Rabbi" (Swidler 1976:107).

Two scholars came to Abba Hilkiyah and asked him to pray for rain. He and his wife went on to the roof; he stood in one corner, she in the other. The clouds first appeared in the corner where the wife stood. When Abba Hilkiyah was asked why the clouds first appeared in that corner he replied "Because a wife stays at home and gives bread to the poor which they can at once enjoy, whilst I give them money which they cannot at once enjoy. Or perhaps it may have to do with certain robbers in our neighbourhood; I prayed that they might die, but she prayed that they might repent (and they did repent)" (B Taanit 23b). Goldfield 1976:268 comments on the fact that Abba Hilkiyah's wife's attempts at making rain drew more response than his. She suggests the reason for this may possibly have been that her mastery of Torah surpassed that of her husband, and she had arrived at a new insight into the verse about sinners upon which her actions were based, and thus she was rewarded with a superior ability to make rain.

From these examples one can see that women could fulfil the functions of scholars but only in the most unusual situations. They, together with unnamed women in Talmudic literature, in no way changed the status of Jewish women. They merely “attest to the capability of the tradition to recognise and respect such women” (Goldfield 1976:269).

6.5 PROPERTY

According to the Law of Property women enjoyed definite rights. They could own property in their own right, which could be acquired or inherited “in accordance with a statutory scale of priorities in which male heirs have precedence from or through either parent ...” (Loewe 1966:34). Loewe continues by saying that furthermore they were entitled to receive certain sums of money from their husbands which they could bequeath to heirs “through one or more marriages”. But they were not able to dispose of any property without the husband’s consent during a marriage “inasmuch as he has rights to usufruct in it” (Ket 8:1-5).

6.6 PUBLIC APPEARANCES

As far as public appearances were concerned, this varied between small villages and cities, as well as between the upper and lower classes. In the country, women enjoyed more freedom working in the fields, drawing water from the wells and selling produce at the doors. In wealthier families this was not at all customary. In the diaspora the restrictions were even more severe. Philo wrote of the Egyptian Jews, (*Flaccus*, 89) “Their women are kept in seclusion, never even approaching outer doors, and their maidens are confined to the inner chambers ...” This may have been due to genuine concern for the women whom the men wished to protect from attack and exploitation by the general population. In fact one of the reasons for a husband not being obliged to honour the *Ketubah*, is if a wife “goes with her hair unbound, or spins in the street, or speaks with any man” (Ket 7:6). In Alexandria the Jewish women lived a harem existence. When they went out they wore veils which usually



covered the whole face. Not only were they seen as little as possible but they were to be heard as little as possible and spoken to in the briefest fashion.

A complex set of rules were brought to bear on the freedom of movement on women at all times of their lives, but various codes of conduct did not have equal application to all women or all occasions. Differentiation was made according to age and marital status. According to rabbinic teaching a married woman was allowed to leave the confines of her home to attend specific social functions, notably weddings and funerals. A woman was allowed to visit parents, and denial of this right by the husband meant she could have a claim to divorce through the courts. Women were allowed to attend synagogue, but their household duties and caring for the family took precedence. Women were permitted to go to the bathhouse at a reasonable time of day.

No greeting was ever to be exchanged between a man and woman in public, "not even through the agency of a third party" (Kidd 70). A man was to walk ahead of a woman as "It is better to walk behind a lion than behind a woman" (Kidd 81). This prevented the man from "indulging in lascivious thoughts through observing the female form" (Archer 1990:245). When appearing in public women were to do nothing to attract attention to themselves either in the way of dress or behaviour and never to speak to a man under any circumstances.

6.7 WOMEN'S POSITION IN SURROUNDING CULTURES

This view of what constituted a "woman's place" in Jewish society of the time did not differ greatly from that of the surrounding cultures of the time. Pomeroy (1975:150) points out that the weakness and light-mindedness of the female sex were the underlying principles of Roman legal theory that mandated all women to be under male custody.

As a child, a daughter was under the custody of the eldest male member of the family (*pater familias*). His power extended to the determination of life or death for all

household members. The only way females could have legal exemption from this situation was if they were Vestal Virgins, a cultic role reserved for very few. A guardian was required when a woman performed important transactions, such as accepting an inheritance, making a testament or assuming a contractual obligation.

The Greeks considered females to be so inherently different from males that they spoke of a *genus gynaikon*, a race of women. Men were born to rule and women to obey, and the treatment of wives followed this principle. A woman had total lack of social independence and was perpetually under the guardianship of a man, either the father or, if he were dead, the male next-of-kin. When she married, the woman passed into the guardianship of her husband in most matters. One important limitation was that her father or whoever had given her in marriage retained the right to dissolve the marriage. Men and women lived in separate quarters and the women were so secluded that they could not be seen by men who were not close relatives.

Just as Jewish women were expected to stay at home caring for household tasks while the men went to synagogue to pray and to the academies to learn Torah, Greek women stayed at their spindles and looms whilst their men went out to discuss politics in the public squares or wage war on the battlefields. The exclusion of women from the public domain was generally taken for granted.

The work of the Greek wife was not different to that of her Jewish counterpart. The housework was entirely her responsibility and if she were wealthy it entailed the supervision of the slaves. As for a woman's intelligence, Aristotle, for example, taught "the deliberative part of a woman's soul was impotent and needed supervision" and his disciple, Theophrastus said "more education would turn women into rather lazy, talkative busybodies" (Berkovitz 1990:26-7). The handling of property in the Greek world was also determined by women's limited knowledge. Women in Greece acquired property through their dowries or by gifts or inheritances but their property was managed by male guardians. They did not go shopping for food as purchase and exchange were considered as transactions too complicated to be entrusted to women.

One of the most significant differences between Greek and Jewish society at this time was that the Jewish father was the guardian of his minor daughter but he could not give her in marriage against her will. Once married she came under her husband's authority but should she divorce, she remained free and under her own control. The Greek woman returned to her father's guardianship in the event of a divorce. This divorce could in fact be instituted by outside interference, which in turn did not make for a secure marital bond.

De Beauvoir (1968:116) makes the important point that "abstract rights are not enough to define the actual concrete situation of women; this depends on large part on her economic role ..." Although legally more enslaved than the Greek woman, the Roman woman was in practice more integrated in society. She was not hidden away in the *gynaecium* but sat in the atrium which was the centre of the home. She directed the work of slaves and guided the education of the children. She was considered co-owner of property with her husband. She was man's companion, present at meals and celebrations. Gradually the legal status of Roman women was brought into agreement with her actual condition, but the power of the state, while making her independent of the family made her legally incompetent in various ways.

6.8 CONCLUSION

Women experienced many disabilities during the rabbinic period. The rabbis' negative attitude to them which evolved from the post-exilic period and was manifest in the wisdom, apocryphal and pseudepigraphal literature, continued.

The rabbis did not regard all the commandments given at Sinai were equally binding on all members of the community. The entire Law was binding only on free adult males. All others, i.e. children, women, slaves of any age or gender were exempt to varying degrees from certain religious observations and observances.

The exemption of women from the observance of certain religious rituals was "tantamount to preclusion" (Segal 1979:121). Women were virtually ineligible to act as

judges and witnesses and even in matters of personal status they were at a great disadvantage. The result of exempting women from certain rituals meant that they could never take a lead in the religious life of the community, a position which was only to be filled by adult males who were required to observe all the *mitzvot*.

Women did, however, enjoy a privileged status in everyday life in matters centering around the home and in their roles as wives and mothers. The ceremonial aspects of the Sabbath relating to the home found a woman in an important position and she was honoured and respected by her husband and children. Nevertheless, this dissertation feels the honours these duties bestowed were such that they limited her role to that circumscribed by men and excluded her from those very activities which were most highly valued by men. The rabbis had very little to say about women, as their appropriate behaviour was taken for granted. It was only when women deviated from what was expected of them "when they became emancipated minors, divorcees, or widows, or threatened male relationships with the divine through the transference of ritual impurity, did the rabbis devote any extensive discussion to them" (Kraemer 1992:105).

Just as de Beauvoir describes the difference between abstract and actual conditions of women in Greece and Rome, the same applied to Jewish women during Mishnaic times. Although women were separated and secluded from men and excluded from many aspects of public life; although they were unable to attend the academies of learning and were veiled and secluded for a large part of the time in their homes; although they were discouraged from participation in communal prayer and urged to stay at home for fear that those who ventured outside would succumb to temptation, this condition was not the total reality of the situation. Wegner (1988:6) points out that the Mishnah often treats women as virtually equal to men, "ascribing to them the same rational minds, practical skills and moral sensibilities". The rabbis acknowledged a woman's competence to own property, conduct business, engage in law suits, present legal testimony on specified matters and, if an autonomous woman, she was able to manage her personal affairs, including her sex life, without male guidance or control.

From this it will be seen that the Mishnaic view of women is ambiguous, sometimes regarding her in one way and sometimes in another. As Wegner (1988:8) notes, woman presents an anomaly to the framers of the Mishnah creating a “legal hybrid”; sometimes viewing her as the property of man and sometimes as a person with legal rights, duties and powers.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has demonstrated that by returning to the study of early biblical culture, it has been possible to trace the attitudes to women which have had a bearing on the subject throughout the ages.

7.1 BIBLICAL WOMEN

In Chapter 2, mention has been made of biblical women who rose to positions of power and influence over and above the deference afforded mothers and good wives. Some of the women who took the lead in their relationships with men were :

- Sarah, who prevailed upon Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael in order to ensure Isaac's position as his father's heir (p13), and
- Rebecca who used deception to influence Isaac in blessing her favourite son, Jacob as his successor (p14).

Yet other women used their bravery and feminine charm to save their people from destruction at the hands of their enemies, Esther being the prime example of such a person (p27).

Women judges and prophetesses held important positions :

- Miriam was an exceptional character who wielded great influence during her sojourn in the wilderness, both as a prophetess and a leader (p24).
- Deborah was a judge who inspired Barak to fight Sisera and was extremely popular (p24).

- Wise women, such as those of Tekoah and Abel, used their persuasive powers to avert catastrophes (p21).

In view of all these examples, this dissertation is of the opinion that although the Bible espoused many sexist attitudes to women one must view these in relation to the times prevailing then. Although few in number, there certainly were women whose meaningful activities outside the domestic sphere gained them the respect of the community as a whole. They were accordingly held in high esteem.

7.2 CHAPTERS 3 AND 4 - WOMEN IN APOCRYPHAL AND PSEUDEPIGRAPHAL WRITINGS

The writer of this dissertation has discerned a link between the story of Judith and that of Deborah and Jael in the *Book of Judges* (p39). Examples have been given of similarities of methods of destruction of the enemy, as well as historical events which fostered religious and national fervour. Portrayed as a beautiful seductress, Judith was admired by authors for her courage and devotion to her religious beliefs as well.

Ben Sirach used the biblical genre of The *Book of Proverbs* in order to present his views in an authoritative fashion. He not only had very little good to say about women, he also used some extremely derogatory terminology, especially in his comments about daughters (p52). This dissertation is of the opinion that Ben Sirach, undoubtedly a misogynist, was conceivably reflecting the general attitude prevailing at the time.

The importance of living a good, pure life was shown to reap rewards in the story of *Susanna* (p57). Many legal aspects of Jewish life were discussed in *Tobit* (p58) and the reader is given an insight into marriages and how they were arranged (p58). Burial procedures, as well as prayer, charity and adherence to the law are clearly defined. The apocryphal writings reflected the emphasis placed on ritual purity at that time.

The author of the *Wisdom of Solomon* (p62) also used the biblical genre of the *Book of Proverbs*. He gave it a Hellenistic slant reflecting the influence of the surrounding culture.

In the Pseudepigrapha, biblical women emerged in a new guise. Their status was heightened and emphasised giving greater credence to the narratives. Rebecca, in the *Book of Jubilees*, as well as being a resourceful and dominating woman was depicted as a leader who overshadowed her husband and played an important role in the salvation history of Israel. In *IV Maccabees*, the mother was acknowledged as a martyr, outshining the fortitude of her sons. She was likened to Abraham whose trust in God and adherence to the Law were the epitome of holiness (p74).

In the biblical *Book of Job* women played a very minor role but in the pseudepigraphal *Testament of Job* they attracted a great deal of interest. Job's daughters were the knowledgeable ones to whom he ascribed a higher religious status than to his sons. They were the ones who saw his soul ascending to heaven in a gleaming chariot. The revelatory experiences in both this work and the *Book of Jubilees* seem to provide evidence for some elevation of women's position at that time.

7.3 **CHAPTER 5 - JEWISH WOMEN IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD**

This dissertation found that the writings of Josephus and Philo were greatly influenced by the surrounding cultures. Since practices prevailing in these societies differed one from the other, and each had its own religious and historical traditions, these commentators were at pains to explain the reasons for the differences. Where possible they attempted to reconcile them, and bring them into harmony. Josephus often wrote as an apologist for Jewish law and customs, and clearly had an eye on the audience for whom he wrote, namely his Roman counterparts.

In his portrayal of the biblical characters of Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel, Josephus manipulated their narratives in order to present a respectable picture of Judaism :

- Sarah is said to have cherished Ishmael like her own son. The fact that she cast him out is played down by Josephus. He gave the reason for her doing so as her fear for her son's life (p89).
- He depicted Rebecca as a character devoid of any seductive qualities. She was happy to be of service to others and displayed hospitality to strangers, a virtue held in high regard in the Hellenistic world (p90).
- In discussing Rachel, very little mention is made by Josephus of her rivalry with her sister Leah. He reconstructed the scene of her meeting with Jacob at the well. She is the one who weeps, not Jacob as was the case in the biblical narrative (Gen 29:9-12). A tearful man would not fit the Hellenistic image of a strong male character (p91).
- Potiphar's wife, according to Josephus, seduced Joseph, as a result of which he was imprisoned (p92).
- The Midianite women were slain on instruction from Moses because of their evil ways (p92). This was a clear manipulation of biblical text to present Judaism in a favourable light.

Philo presented a philosophical interpretation of Judaism in order to bridge the confrontation between the Jewish religion and Greek philosophy. He did this by means of three series of works :

- (i) dealing with the Pentateuch as a legal code;
- (ii) interpreting the Pentateuch according to philosophical principles;
- (iii) formulating questions and answers on *Genesis* and *Exodus* in the form of a Hellenistic commentary.

Although few in number there were women who participated in communal life and led financially independent existences during this period. Salome-Alexandra was a powerful and capable woman who was left in supreme charge after her husband's death. She recruited mercenaries, doubled the size of her army and engaged in diplomatic missions (p86). Alexandra, a daughter of Hycranus II, became a member of Herod's inner circle through her daughter, Mariamne who was Herod's wife. She

warned Herod not to trust the Parthians. He held her in high regard and when he had to flee from them he took her, together with Mariamne, to safety at Masada.

Furthermore it has been proved that there were women leaders in ancient synagogues who were sufficiently well educated to teach Torah and to be active in the administration of the institutions. Still others like Rufina were wealthy enough to be able to conduct business affairs in an independent fashion (p109).

7.4 **CHAPTER 6 - POSITION OF WOMEN IN RABBINIC JUDAISM**

Cohen (1966:156) states that during rabbinic times there was an interchange of legal ideas between the Jews and Romans which was unacknowledged at the time. "The influence was subtle and indirect but none the less real. The rabbis were living in no intellectual ghetto, and were susceptible to the ideas current in the Graeco-Roman world". He goes on to say that the numerous discussions recorded in the Talmud are evidence of a great deal of intellectual exchange between the learned Jews and the pagan Romans. In fact the view of what constituted a woman's place in Jewish society of the time did not differ greatly from that of the surrounding cultures. In many areas women's status was improved under rabbinic law, e.g. :

- Women were not to be given in marriage against their consent;
- The conditions of direct inheritance by daughters were expanded. However a wife was denied direct inheritance from her husband;
- The *Ketubah* gave women security and protection in the event of a divorce. It also tended to discourage hasty decisions. This document was perhaps the most enlightened and sensitive step taken by rabbis.

However, women still faced certain legal and social disabilities. The rabbis made the decisions that affected their lives. Women were never consulted on these matters and the rabbis had sole power to determine women's rights and obligations.

Through the ages attitudes to women and religious study have been modified by the rabbinic authorities adapting to the needs of the time. In the Bible women were created together with men in the image of God. Yet the study of Torah and prayer was denied women. The rabbis who compiled the Mishnah were divided on this issue. Ben Azzai said that a father was obligated to teach his daughter Torah, but Rabbi Eliezer insisted that “woman’s only wisdom is the loom”, and “it is better that the words of the Torah be burnt than given to women” (Sot 3:16a). This negative view won the day and except for a few exceptional women such as Beruria and Imma Shalom (p135), the field of study was reserved for men. Maimonides, the twelfth century sage suggested that most women were not prepared to dedicate themselves adequately to such study and therefore could only gain superficial knowledge. In the twelfth century the “Book of the Pious” (*Sefer Hasidim*) stated that women did not have to study *halakha* since they were excluded from positions of cultural or political leadership. Over the last \pm 1500 years religious law has changed very little. The *halakhic* authorities have always been exclusively male and women have been effectively denied study of *halakhah* and its interpretations.

Despite the emancipation of women in the secular sphere there are still many areas within Jewish religious law (*halakhah*) in which women are disadvantaged to this day. Orthodox Jewry, whilst insisting that woman’s role is complementary to that of men, does acknowledge difficulties with regard to religious studies, participation in synagogue ritual and divorce. The belief that the roles of the sexes differ underlies these difficulties.

Orthodox women have no role in public prayer. They are not obliged to take part in synagogue services and are separated from men often by a screen or curtain (*mechitzah*). They are not counted for a *minyan* (quorum for worship) nor can they recite a blessing over the Torah or read from the Holy Scroll. The problem of the *agunah* has not been satisfactorily solved and problems with obtaining a *get* often present themselves.

Conservative and Reform Judaism have shown a willingness to respond to contemporary issues. Their synagogues have mixed seating, mixed choirs and bat-mitzvah (confirmation) ceremonies for girls, corresponding to the boys' religious induction at thirteen years. Reform and Conservative women may be counted in a *minyan*, participate fully in religious observances and are recognised as witnesses in the eyes of Jewish law. They are able to initiate divorce and study for the rabbinate and be inducted as rabbis and trained as cantors. Their *siddur* (prayer book) includes blessings for women to put on the *talit* (prayer shawl) and they may be called to read from the Torah. These are changes which are inconceivable according to Orthodox Jewry. But it must be emphasised that *halakhah* is important not only to the strictly Orthodox; its rulings affect all those within the traditional groupings of Jewish religion. These biblical and talmudic laws still influence the religious rights, duties and status of the majority especially in the laws pertaining to marriage and divorce. As Biale (1984:4) points out, the law sometimes lags behind social reality, but "its fundamental impetus is to preserve the customs of the past".

For the writer of this dissertation the entire exercise has been an enlightening and educational experience. Having come to the subject with certain pre-conceived ideas, it has often been necessary to re-examine and question these notions.

Although Jewish women were discriminated against and considered unsuitable to take their place as equals alongside men; and that in the religious sphere they were not able to study Torah and perform certain *mitzvot* (commandments); it has been edifying to learn that their positions differed little from women in surrounding cultures, suggesting that these attitudes were universal at that time.

The approach of the rabbis, who were the law-makers, was a paternalistic one and women were not consulted in matters relating to them. The rabbis made rules regarding women which they felt were important or necessary for their well-being and for the survival of the Jewish people.

Whilst one must caution against imposing twentieth century standards on events which occurred two thousand years ago, it is this very question which is a cause for concern today for many Jews.

The writer of this dissertation finds difficulty in accepting the fact that women must always be assigned to the position which prevailed so many centuries ago and would like to endorse the sentiments expressed by Greenberg, an Orthodox Jewess and a feminist. She remarks that through the ages increasing protections, safeguards and expansions of women's rights occurred. This indicates that *halakhah* influenced and responded to changes in society at large. Greenberg goes on to cite "One of the virtues of the *halakhic* system is that it has tried to maintain the balance of needs between community and individual ...". However, in this century "... *halakhic* authorities have been concentrated overwhelmingly in the change-resistant sector of society" (1983:5).

Together with Greenberg, this dissertation hopes that changes can be made as "Judaism throughout the centuries has always been open to other social philosophies as a means of upgrading and enhancing its own religious system. There is ample precedent for the integration into Jewish tradition of the best values of the society in which we live, especially where these illuminate or confirm central themes in Judaism - the dignity of man and woman as created in the image of God" (1983:11).

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