

Women's settlements in the Old Testament

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Abstract

This article attempts to collect and evaluate women's settlements in the Old Testament. The stories that include women's settlements are taken from Genesis and other books to broaden the perspective. The research has shown that the women were mainly indoors or at least in the protection of a settlement, which could be displayed in many texts from the Old Testament. The women briefly portrayed in some examples of this work have their own houses and earn their living. They can move freely in the cities. They often take an active part in what is happening, show initiative, help to ward off enemies and rebuild buildings and walls. However, in some passages in the text, the opposing sides of this freedom of movement are shown. Women in the ancient Orient were more tied to the house or the living space assigned to them the higher their social position was. The upper-class women had servants who did the work outside so that these women rarely came into contact with the outside world. In a detailed reading of the Old Testament, many examples can be seen where women are connected to a settlement mentioned. The texts can be divided into different groups and subgroups according to the women's places. The sanctuaries and the places around the temple form a separate group because it is often difficult to tell whether the shelters are inside or outside the of the settlement. However, only the settlement is dealt within this work.

Introduction

The Old Testament's patriarchal form of family existence assumes that a woman "lived in the shadows rather than in the light of life." She was first under her father's authority, then her husband after marriage, and, in the eventuality of his death, her husband's brother. This subordination of all aspects of a woman's life was somewhat symbolized by the fact that though she was a member of the covenant community, she possessed no sign of it as did the male in circumcision (Jewett, 1975:68-94). This woman's stance under man meant that her "essence as a human being is linked with her function as a companion" to him (Gladson, 1984:37).

Women generally fared better in Hebrew society than in the ancient Near East, as shown by a comparative study of Semitic laws. In the Hebrew codes, the highest ideals of femininity were being striven for, and she generally enjoyed a favorable position in both the family and religious context. These quick observations indicate that Hebrew society was a cut above other ancient nations in Old Testament times but was still short of God's ideal (Gladson, 1984:38).

As a result of a detailed reading of the Old Testament, many examples of places where women are connected to a site mentioned in the text can be seen. The texts can be divided into different groups and subgroups according to the women's places. Since it is often difficult to tell whether the shelters are inside or outside the settlement, the sanctuaries and the places around the temple form a separate group. However, only the settlement is dealt within this work.

At this point, one question comes to my mind is whether, according to common prejudice, women stayed almost exclusively in the house or tent and how big their radius of movement was. It can be explained briefly using the picture of women in the tent. Jacob's women stand (Genesis 31:33-34)¹ in the tent², and in the Vienna Genesis manuscript (fol. 10r,10v), only their heads can be seen. The rest of the body is covered. Under the protection of a man, they are inside. Although women are in the story, they are excluded from men's work. In fact, Rachel's hiding of Laban's deities indicates her leading role in the story. Does this representation depict the reality of life for women in ancient Israel? Were they simply spectators of an outside world constructed by men? Or were the women in the narratives simply the women men wanted to see.

Women's place in social life in the Old Testament

The Old Testament reflects a specific stratification of female in Hebrew society. At this period, there was little middle class of specialists and business people, or nouveaux riches, which made the next class the "free" married women. Then would come the unmarried "free" women-the divorcee and the widow. The final group would appear to be the handmaids who had become secondary wives, concubines, and female Hebrew enslaved people. This last group represents those in various states of bondage (Vine, 1984:34). The man was dominant, which is reflected in social, religious, and legal affairs in the Old Testament. The father had absolute authority over children, married sons living with him, his wife (wives), and the household. This power extended even over life and death in some cases. Women also are rarely mentioned in genealogies (Vine, 1984:36; Vaux, 1961:20-39; Heaton, 1956:68-69).

¹ 33 And Laban went in and searched in the house of Lea, and found (them) not; and he went out of the house of Lea, and searched in the house of Jacob, and in the house of the two maid-servants, and found them not; and he went also into the house of Rachel. 34 And Rachel took the idols, and cast them among the camel's packs, and sat upon them.

² The place is seen as a tent in the picture but is mentioned as a house in the text. When the Septuagint was written, it seemed that the form of the space did not matter.

However, women who became good and diligent wives and mothers were respected and occupied an important place in Israel. However, God's plan is reflected in its fullness, not in the patriarchal society of the Old Testament but instead in Genesis 1 and 2, where man and woman were created equal, complementary, and compatible within the divine sphere operation assigned (Vine, 1984:36). However, in the later chapters, the distinction between men and women with the cultural codes became apparent with the supremacy of masculinity.

Women's settlements in the Old Testament

Talking about metaphorical space helps to understand people's current way of life. In this way, the space becomes an integral part of social life. However, when we look at the Old Testament, we need to simplify the matter and refer to the importance between "inside" and "outside." The outside world is an uninhabitable, sometimes dangerous wilderness that people should avoid as much as possible. If the settlement is a city or a detached house, it is a safe zone.

But in some cases, this safe zone can also become the most unsafe zone, as in the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. For ancient Israel, where the most common way of life was actually in an (extended) family, the question of whether women were able to contribute their needs, e.g., when building houses or settlements, cannot be answered unequivocally. Possibly they had a more direct influence on the design of their living space than women of the modern bourgeoisie in an agriculture-based society in which family groups were small economic units.³

According to the Bible, Israelite women had their separate living quarters in nomadic times. Isaac brought his new wife Rebekah to the tent of his late mother Sarah (Genesis 24:67). Jacob, Leah, Rachel, and their female slaves had separate tents (Genesis 31:33). Yet, from the information of archaeological studies, it is hard to tell whether women had separate quarters in the traditional houses of the Iron Age. Excavations have shown a ground plan of three or four rooms for most places (Weippert, 1988:393-407,449,530-532,594-597). Generally, scholars assume the houses had two stories. The ground floor had space allocated for food processing, small craft production, stabling, and storage; the second floor was suitable for dining, sleeping, and other activities (Stager, 1985:17). Researches have pointed to the presence of stairs and their location as an indicator of spatial division for men and women (De Geus, 1992:81). This kind of house for wealthier houses – is where the women's quarters may have been located. Yet, the fact that dwellings had a division between male and female areas does not necessarily mean that women were confined to these areas. It told that the women's quarters probably were not visited by (male) strangers to the family. Probably the higher the social status of women, the more private and restricted to the quarters they lived (De Geus, 1992:79-80). Here, it is seen that social status and living conditions are intertwined. A woman of high social status would have servants to do outside work, such as drawing water and working in the vineyards. At the same time, the fact that the woman lives in a large house means that there will be enough space to distinguish between men and women. However, there were also women working in the jobs mentioned above. For example; Rachel looks after her father's flock in Genesis 29:7,9, Samson's mother is outside in the field when she meets the angel of God (Judges 13:9), Ruth picks up the ears of wheat behind the workers in the area and also eats with them (Ruth 2), the girl in the Song of Songs tanned from working in the field (Song of Songs 1:5) and works as a shepherdess (1:8). Men and women also met at the city's fountain.

³ In Egypt, the nuclear family was the most common family type. However, in Israel, the extended family was of great importance for a long time. In early Israel, such large families lived in the villages of the mountainous country. Although there was a shift from the extended to the nuclear family, the former likely remained influential in the monarchical era. The family always had an important symbolic function, which gained importance again in the post-exilic period (Marsman, 2003:167).

Women from the upper classes did not have to do such work. So they probably stayed in the house more often.

The kings of Israel and Judah probably had separate residences where their wives and concubines lived secluded. However, they can have freedom of movement and contact persons outside the female place. Solomon built an independent house for Pharaoh's daughter (II Chronicles 8:11⁴). The book of Esther mentions the women's apartment (*γυναικῶνα*) several times (Esther 2:9,11,13,14) as a place where Esther lived a life of seclusion, although she did have the opportunity to contact her uncle Mordecai.

In biblical texts of the post-exilic period, women's general impression tends to be valued more negatively. An honorable woman was believed to stay inside the house (Marsman, 2003:162⁵). Archer assumes that in the Graeco-Roman period, young girls, especially marriageable virgins, were secluded inside the house and not seen by male strangers (Archer, 1990:101-122). On the other hand, married women were not as restricted in movement as young girls. They would perform household duties, go to the temple, attend ceremonies, and visit their own families (Epstein, 1948:70). Safrai has a more favorable opinion, claiming that a young Jewish woman did not live a life of solitude but could go out (Safrai, 1976:725).

Some examples of women's settlements in the Old Testament

The first example is from Abraham's story. Genesis 18:1 locates the following action in the oaks of Mamre and thus connects to the narrative thread of Genesis 13:18. In the story of Genesis 18, three men visit Abraham and Sarah. There Lord shows himself as Abraham sits at the entrance of his tent in the midday heat. Abraham welcomes the guests with great courtesy and hurries to do everything for their well-being. He also runs into the tent to his wife Sara and orders her to bake bread (Genesis 18:6). After the men have eaten, they do not address their word to Abraham as expected but ask after Sarah (Genesis 18:9): So they said to him, where was Sarah, his wife? He said she was in there in the tent. The three guests are not interested in Abraham. To the improper question about the host's wife, the latter only answers briefly: "Inside in the tent." So Sara was in the tent the whole time, as the visit is a man's business (Nowell, 1997:8-11).

It was proper for the female family members to stay out of sight while the host welcomed the male guests. She didn't even greet the three men. Although Sara does not leave her tent, her room in this scene, and does not take part in the plot, the conversation, she is the central figure. The author does not let her leave her place and come to the men, as this would undoubtedly have been unusual. Sara has her own space in the tent, which is even referred to as her tent in some areas. So it can be assumed that this is a place that she had available for herself (Fischer, 1995:40-43). Other women in the Old Testament also have their tents. In Genesis 31:33, Laban searches for a missing item in Lea's tent, Rachel's tent, and that of the two maids. Jael also has her own tent (Judges 4:17), into which Sisera flees, where she then kills him. As a tent inhabitant, Jael can be assigned to the nomadic (or semi-nomadic) population, and that the nomads were responsible for setting up tents. This situation also explains why Jael had a tent peg and a hammer at hand in this situation so quickly to kill Sisera (Jost, 2006:129).

The En-Dor necromancer in 1 Samuel 28 is portrayed as a solid and confident figure throughout the narrative. Although the woman of En-dor remains nameless, she is known

⁴ 11 And Solomon brought up the daughter of Pharaoh from the city of David to the house which he had built for her: for he said, My wife shall not dwell in the city of David, the king of Israel, for (the place) is holy into which the ark of the Lord has entered.

⁵ For example; Proverbs 7: 11 And she is fickle, and debauched, and her feet abide not at home. 12 For at one time she wanders without, and at (another) time she lies in wait in the streets, at every corner.

beyond her place of work. She appears wealthy and acts as a specialist in her own home, a landlady, and a hostess. Her independence is also expressed because she is not identified as “wife of” or “daughter of.” Perhaps through her “work” as a necromancer, she is economically independent and not dependent on the support of a man (Schroer, 2002).

Their independence is also evident in the preparation of the meal (28:21ff). Since the woman of En-dor seems to live alone, she cannot delegate the job of baking bread. She also slaughters the fattened calf herself, which is not unusual for her. In all this haste, the woman develops a level of hospitality that the Bible only attributes to the women Rebekah (Genesis 24:18,20,46) and Abigail (1 Samuel 25:18,23:42).

The story is strongly reminiscent of Abraham preparing a meal for his guests. Like him in front of his tent in Mamre, she offers her visitors a bite of bread before they go on and, like him (Genesis 18:6; 1 Samuel 28:24), she hurries to the calf to fetch the fattened calf Abraham’s story of slaughter is out of the question (Fischer, 2002:145). Therefore, the woman of En-Dor is able to look after herself and entertain guests in her own house in an appropriate manner, unprepared. Perhaps through her “work” as a necromancer, she is economically independent and not dependent on the support of a man. Her ability to serve the community makes her widely known, and she is sought out by people who need her services. I would also like to add here there were no prohibition of fortune-telling and witchcraft at that time (Schottroff et al., 1995:112).

In the 5th/4th. century BC, chapters 1-9 and 31 of the Proverbs were editorially created as a frame for the corpus of the collections of sentences.⁶ In Proverbs 1-9, the personified wisdom appears in different roles but always in the image of a woman. As the personification of everything that was connected with the word “wisdom” in Israel, it primarily unites the various doctrines of the sentences into one doctrine. As wisdom, she steps into Israel’s public squares or city walls and preaches repentance and justice; she builds her house and invites you to a feast (Schroer, 1994:105).

On the one hand, the display of wisdom as a woman can be seen as a continuation of the goddesses’ positive or negative indelible belief in this period. On the other hand, wisdom may also lie in opening up to an image of God made possible by reflection on the concept of monotheism. The figure also appears with divine authority and claims to exist before creation (Kauz, 2009:10). It is shown in the text the place of wisdom is a seven-pillared house.⁷ She invites you to eat and study together in this house. At the same time, the foolish woman also invites you into her house. In Proverbs 9, the two opposing women each utter their invitation in six verses. The reason for the invitation from wisdom to all listeners is the inauguration of the house that she built herself, just as she did the stonework for the columns herself. Due to the number of columns, the house can be described as a magnificent building. These pillars have given rise to various interpretations. In addition to attempts to determine an actual structure, be it a palace, house, or temple, some studies symbolically interpret the number (Maier, 1995:232).⁸ It seems obvious to think of the place with the seven pillars as a real Israelite house of a wealthy family, since Proverbs 9:2,14 mentions the table and armchair that belonged to the furnishings of a rich home (Maier, 1995:231).

In this story, Wisdom appears as a noble lady of society who has her servants invite you to a banquet. The invitation of Wisdom, however, is more than a social event. The invitation aims

⁶ See detailed Maier (1995), Baumann (1996), and Fischer (2006).

⁷ Proverbs 9: 1 Wisdom has built a house for herself, and set up seven pillars.

⁸ Baumann points on the figure of wisdom in Proverbs 1-9 to the possibility of a symbolic interpretation of the “seven pillars.” She suggests that the “seven pillars of wisdom” could refer to the seven sections of Proverbs, identified by headings (Baumann, 1996:206).

to give people insight and guide them to a good life. Wisdom is presented as a teacher whose house functions as a teaching house. Wisdom invites people into the home of life.⁹

The house-building wisdom has its model in historical circumstances. After returning from exile, women played a vital role in reconstructing houses and cities.¹⁰ In addition, the idea of house-building Wisdom is through Proverbs 14:1;23:4 proven as a wisdom motif. This house of the woman's Wisdom is built by the knowledge of women; both are drawn very similarly in the proverb. On the other hand, a foolish and bold woman did not prepare a banquet like Wisdom. She invites the men to enjoy herself. The foolish woman is portrayed as a prostitute sitting in front of her house (Proverbs 9:14), which, like Mrs. Wisdom's house, is in a central location and invites all passers-by to come to her (Proverbs 9:15). The Folly woman, like the wise woman, offers her body, not her knowledge. Like, the foolish woman in 9: 13, the man who accepts her invitation is also described as one who does not consider the consequences of his actions and therefore runs to his destruction (Maier, 1995:249). Whoever follows the folly in their house destroys their existence (Proverbs 9:18).

The final chapter of the Proverbs (31:10-31) glorifies the powerful and talented Israelite woman. Here, as in the story about the woman of En-Dor, it is about a woman who leads a house: What is praised in this passage is not the virtuous, hardworking housewife with her family day and night and corresponds to the modern Christian-bourgeois ideal marriage.¹¹ Instead, this woman is a woman who runs an entire household. Responsible for the whole economy of the house. She helps the poor (Proverbs 31:20)¹² and defends her husband's dignity even when he is out (Proverbs 31:23).¹³

Palaces as women's living places also appear in the Old Testament. The primary example about palaces is the book of Esther and its namesake since the whole story takes place at the court of King Xerxes and thus allows a vivid consideration of the "palace" room.

The glory of an ancient oriental King's court was reflected in the wealth and beauty of the king's wives, the princesses, and young women at the court. The author of the Book of Esther was undoubtedly also aware of this (Moore, 1971:LVII-LXIV). Queen Vashti is dethroned at the beginning of the story due to disobedience (Esther 1:12-19). After that, the search for a new queen begins. In this context, Ester is introduced. The king has the first right to the girls in his country but also possesses a large "harem."¹⁴ In such a place, or at least in its vicinity, there were also very likely female relatives of the king such as his mother, other wives of the father, daughters, and sisters (Kiesow, 1998:61). In the Esther story, young women, more precisely virgins, from all provinces of the kingdom with beautiful looks are called to the royal court in the "House of Women"¹⁵ (Esther 2: 3). All these women, including Esther, are brought to the "King's harem."¹⁶

⁹ The idea of house building as a wisdom motive can also be seen in Proverbs 14: 1 and 24: 3. The genesis and function of wisdom are described in detail in Proverbs 8.

¹⁰ For example, in Nehemiah 3: 12, it is mentioned that the daughters of Shallum helped build the wall in Jerusalem, and according to Nehemiah 5: 1-5, it was the wives of the poor who were responsible for maintaining land and property used (Schroer, 1991:158).

¹¹ 31: 15 And she rises by night, and gives food to her household, and (appointed) tasks to her maidens. 31: 21 Her husband is not anxious about those at home when he tarries anywhere abroad: for all her household are clothed. 31:27 The ways of her household are careful, and she eats not the bread of idleness.

¹² And she opens her hands to the needy, and reaches out fruit to the poor.

¹³ And her husband becomes a distinguished (person) in the gates, when he sits in council with the old inhabitants of the land.

¹⁴ Kiesow points out in her thesis the term "harem" should be avoided not only for reasons of precision but also because of the cliché of the "oriental harem" as the epitome of female dependence and decadence applies and to replace this with more neutral expressions such as "women's wing/house/palace" or "women (of the king)" (Kiesow, 1998:52).

¹⁵ Such a "women's shelter" is only mentioned in the Old Testament for the Persian court (Kiesow, 1998:71).

¹⁶ "House of the king" does not mean that the women were brought into the king's private chambers but instead stayed in the palace complex for the time being (Moore, 1971:21).

The young women complete a long preparation in the women's wing and then spend a night with the king in the palace. Only then are they finally accepted into the royal "harem." When Esther is called to the king and goes to his private apartment in the palace, the king falls in love with her on the spot (Ester 2:16¹⁷). This story in the book of Esther contains much about the harem. In particular, how women were taken into the harem reveals their captivity under the splendor of the palace.

The stories about wise women often occur in a royal court, the Davidic, Solomonic, or even a foreign king. We can also see the story about the wife of Tekoa (2 Samuel 14), in which Joab sent her to King David's palace on a diplomatic mission.

Conclusion

The examples in the Old Testament mentioned above are too pretentious to say that women were kept in a particular place in ancient Israel. Even if such a place in the house, this does not show us that the woman is forced to keep there. However, if a visitor came to the house, she was more likely to be drawn to her private place, as in Abraham's story. Of course, this situation was also related to the social status of women. The higher-status women, the more sheltered or secure they could live in a home. The high standard of living also allowed women to have their place.

Women were seen as founders who run the house, but as spaces expand and work in the home increase, the house becomes a potential prison for women. However, it should not be forgotten that there are women who are independent and directly participate in the economy. In the light of all these various examples, it is not easy to answer whether the Old Testament woman is free. The restriction of women's freedom of movement in ancient Israel depended on their social position. In general, it can be said that women from the lower class do not live in isolation at home, and they communicate with other people, including men, while working.

As a result, the research has shown that the women were mainly in houses, palaces, or at least in the protection of a settlement, which could be displayed in many texts from the Old Testament. It should not be forgotten that men describe women as they see them in the Old Testament. If women of that era had a chance, how would they express themselves?

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¹⁷ 16 So Esther went in to king Artaxerxes in the twelfth month, which is Adar, in the seventh year of his reign.
¹⁷ And the king loved Esther, and she found favour beyond all the (other) virgins: and he put on her the queen's crown.

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