

8. WOMEN IN THE ISRAELITE STATE

In this section of the study we shall confine ourselves to the period of the Israelite State, both before and after the Exile. That in itself is an enormous slice of time if we were able to give a full picture of the period from 1050 B.C. down to 400 B.C. But we are not able to do that, and so it is possible to give a survey of the main passages in the Bible on our subject.

The material for the study is largely the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. Anyone familiar with this material will realize immediately that it is concerned mostly with leaders and not the common person. To be sure, there are the Naboths and the Shunamites -- but they are few and far between, and they usually are part of the larger drama within the leadership of the nation. So our picture of women drawn from this period will also mostly be of women in the royal courts, and not the common world.

The Court of David

There are some notable women and some important experiences with women in the life of David that should be surveyed here, although the treatment of each cannot be exhaustive.

Michal

Michal was the daughter of King Saul who was given to David as a wife when David served Saul well (see 1 Samuel 14:49; 18:20-28; 19:11-17; 25:44; 2 Samuel 3:13, 14; 6:16-23; 21:8; 1 Chronicles 15:29). Michal was a princess, but does not appear to have a regal character, due undoubtedly to the times and the circumstances in which she lived (her father and her husband at war, and kingship being new). She was a very

passionate woman, eager for prestige, somewhat strangely misunderstanding holiness and its ritual, and ultimately drawn to idolatry even though she believed in Yahweh.

She loved David, her husband. “Michal, Saul’s daughter, loved David,” we are told in the text. He was the young, handsome youthful warrior, and she was greatly attracted to him. Saul had promised Michal in marriage to the one who slew Goliath; when David won the right Saul out of jealousy devised a plan whereby David would be killed by the Philistines--the bride price would require the death of 100 Philistines. David complied, and Saul could not withhold Michal.

She delivered David. Saul had David’s house surrounded to kill him in the morning, but Michal heard of it and helped David escape through the window. She then used a *teraphim* (household god) to trick the killers. When confronted by Saul she said that David had threatened her if she would not help. Here was Michal’s dilemma--she loved and was loyal to David, but she wanted to remain a loyal Saulide.

She forsook David. For the next period life with David became difficult, living in the wilderness with the band of loyal warriors always hiding from Saul. So Michal left David and was joined to Phalti of Gallemlah who was himself on his way to royal position. This was an illegitimate union since David was alive. When Saul died things changed. David would unite the tribes under himself in a United Monarchy--but he must have Michal back. It would be a major problem for the wife of the reigning king to be with another man. But Michal was glad to come back to David now that he was in the palace. And in one of the most pathetic descriptions we are told that Phalti went after her weeping, but was turned away by Abner. Apparently Michal did not weep over leaving this good man who cared for her deeply. We do not know Michal’s feelings or motives; did she actually care that much for David, or did she want the position in court? She could never be David’s ideal love, for she had been with Phalti; but as his first wife she could have a better position in the state.

She despised and lost David. If Michal had loved the LORD as much as she seemed to have loved David, she would have survived in her relationship to him. When David moved the ark up to Jerusalem and danced before the LORD with all his might, Michal, watching from a window, despised him. David’s actions in this open demonstration shocked her royal dignity. Her words are filled with biting sarcasm when he came home: “How glorious was the king of Israel today, who uncovered himself in the eyes of all the handmaidens of his servants, as one of the vain fellows

shamelessly uncovers himself.” For Michal there was not the pious affection for the ark that there was for David. Rather, the whole event embarrassed and annoyed her. She had missed the essential point of David’s career, that although he had weaknesses and excesses he was a man whose heart beat for God. In the end Michal becomes a mirror for wives whose prideful sense of personal status and dignity make them demanding and critical of their husbands.

The text says that because of this “Michal the daughter of Saul had no child until the day of her death.” In short, she lived apart from David (2 Sam. 6:16). No doubt the separation was hastened by David’s living with other wives now. She ended her years caring for her sister’s five children, all of whom were ultimately beheaded.

The lesson from David’s marriage to Michal is that misunderstanding arose because of a clash of family loyalties, personal emotions and temperaments, spiritual sensitivities, and purpose for the monarchy. The fault was not all Michal’s--that was shared by Saul and David--but she could have made a difference if her passion for power had been first a passion for the LORD to match David’s. In the final analysis, nothing could have worked to make this a wonderful marriage, because she was caught between two royal families at war. If she had heeded the advice of Psalm 45 and abandoned her father and remained loyal to David, then things would have been different.

Abigail

What a marriage Abigail had. She was beautiful and wise and deeply pious. But she was married to Nabal. He was a fool and evil (1 Sam. 25:3). This word *nabal*, “fool,” as in Proverbs, describes one who is a bear of a man, harsh, rude, and brutal. Nabal was also avaricious and selfish; he was a drunken wretch, unmanageable, stubborn, and ill-tempered. He was also an un-believer, a “son of Belial.” A “fool” is one who is a practical atheist, one who lives as if Yahweh does not exist. Verse 25 plays on his name: “*Nabal* is his name, and folly (*n^ebalah*) is/in with him (or: is his game).”¹ Furthermore, as a follower of Saul he rejected David as king.

¹ It is unlikely that the man’s name was “Fool,” for no mother would name her baby that. There probably was a different verb with the letters n-b-l in them, such as a word like *nablu*, “one sent,” perhaps a godsend. But in time he showed himself to be a fool, and so it was easy to pronounce his name *nabal* with the more appropriate meaning.

Abigail met David through a wise action. David was camped nearby and had often helped Nabal's men in exchange for food. When he sent a kind request to Nabal, he was answered with a rude and blunt refusal. David, being in a mentality of war, thought to destroy and plunder Nabal--an act of violence he later acknowledged was rash and wrong. But it was Abigail who came and pleaded for mercy. She intervened in just the nick of time.

To Abigail's credit, she returned home to Nabal afterwards, to her wicked partner to take up her bitter lot in life. She did not leave him, nor seek for divorce from him. In fact, she had saved his neck. But ten days later Nabal's life ended by divine stroke. Death came as the great arbiter or divorcer, and she had no tears of regret. Amid much suffering and difficulty she had kept her vows.

David then "communed with" Abigail (a term to say he sought her in marriage; compare Song 8:8 with 25:39). She married David and entered into a much happier state. Her child was called Chileab, or Daniel (there is a real textual difficulty here, but all evidence points to "Daniel" as the name of the boy; see 1 Chronicles 3:1, Josephus, and the Dead Sea Scrolls). "Daniel" means "God is my vindicator (or judge)," and this certainly would have been how she saw her lot now.

What we learn from Abigail is that there probably were many very unhappy marriage relationships, especially if a wonderful woman was married to such a lout. No doubt her marriage was arranged by a family that was more impressed with his wealth than with his character. But even today such mistakes are made when the man or the woman arranges the marriage independently of the parents--so that does not assure success either. But God would ultimately reward this courageous woman of virtue, who used her brains to spare her husband and find favor with a king.

David's Wives

2 Samuel 3:2-5 lists David's wives and their sons:

"His firstborn was **Amnon** the son of Ahinoam of Jezreel;
 his second, Chileab (**Daniel**) the son of Abigail the widow of Nabal of Carmel;
 the third, **Absalom** the son of Maacah daughter of Talmai king of Geshur;
 the fourth, **Adonijah** the son of Haggith;

the fifth, **Shephatiah** the son of Abital;
and the sixth, **Ithream** the son of David's wife Eglah.

It is interesting that Michal was not listed here; perhaps it was because she forsook David, or was given to Phalti, or had no children. And, of course, Bathsheba was yet to come. Her son **Solomon** would be the heir, as each of the above managed to disqualify himself.

In the Rabbinical literature there is a fascinating passage about how many wives a king could have. The Law in Deuteronomy 17 said that a king was not to multiply wives to himself. But David had a number of wives, and the Scripture did not criticize him for that as it did Solomon. So in the *Mishnah Sanhedrin 2:4* the Rabbis ruled on this (ideally, since they had no king), saying, "Neither shall he multiply wives to himself--only eighteen. R. Judah (dissenting) says, He may so multiply to himself, only provided that they do not turn away his heart." In the continuation of the discussion in the *Talmud* the number eighteen is explained this way: when Nathan rebuked David for his sin, he quoted the LORD as saying, "I gave your master's house to you . . . and if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more" (12:8). The expression "even more" translates two Hebrew words, "like such, like such," or something similar. They reasoned that if he had six wives, like such and like such would be twelve more, and so God had approved eighteen wives for David. This is how a slavishly literal interpretation can take over common sense (but then, we still have to explain what God meant). The simple fact of the matter in this passage is that multiple wives in the royal family brought factions and palace intrigue for the throne. We here meet Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah--they would soon be at each others throats for the prize.

Bathsheba

In the account of David's sin in 2 Samuel 11 we are introduced to the beautiful Bathsheba, with whom David would commit adultery, and to whom David would eventually be married, and from whom Solomon would come.

Bathsheba has received a negative report in much preaching and teaching because of the exposure she gave to David "to cause him to sin" (as many say). But that is not the view the Bible presents--if the Bible is allowed to speak. Bathsheba was the daughter of Eliam, who was the son of Ahithophel; she became the wife of Uriah,

the Hittite, one of David's most loyal heroes. She and her family and her husband were God-fearing people, and the references to her in the account bear this out.

The story of the sin is told simply in terms of David's lapsing into the attitude and action of a pagan king. The narrative tells us that it was a time when kings go forth to war, but David tarried in Jerusalem. He had to lead the armies out to secure the borders each spring; but as king he did not have to go every time. The point of the first verse is that he was where he was not expected to be. In the evening he saw from his rooftop a very beautiful woman washing in her courtyard. We may suspect that it was a warm evening, and with her husband and the army gone with David--so she thought--she could wash in the courtyard. The city of David was the spur of a hill jutting out south of the temple mount. From the top of the steep little hill, where the palace was, David would have a bird's eye view of his city. People had pools and ritual baths in their courtyards, and inside if they were wealthy enough. They were used with modesty: the ritual baths had roofs over them, and the woman would have attendants that kept her covered until she immersed herself in the water. In short, David would not see a naked woman; but he saw a beautiful woman in a private moment and sent for her.

When David sent for her she came to his rooms he lay with her. Critical to the story is the parenthetical clause in verse 4--"she had purified herself from her uncleanness." This is what we call a disjunctive clause, that is, it is not part of the story sequence--this purifying ritual did not take place after the adultery. Rather, the narrative is at that moment telling us what she had been doing when David saw her from the roof. The washing that he saw, we are now told, was a Levitical purification she was taking in order to go to the temple to worship after she had been through her period (the word for washing is no longer the secular *roheset*, but the religious *mithqaddesheth*). In other words, she in her innocence and integrity was complying with the Law of Moses. She had to wash this way to go to the sanctuary, usually at the very moment of going to the sanctuary (and so not right after the period--she would have bathed normally for that, but now in preparation for entering the holy place, because she had had a period since her last visit, she had to wash in the ritual bath). Thus, David did not only take another man's wife, he took another man's wife while she was preparing to worship the LORD.

What part did Bathsheba have in the sin? Could she have refused the king? The Bible says nothing of all this, but does give us some clues. She no doubt was held

culpable for the sin of adultery as David was. She could have refused, perhaps at the risk of her life. But it was not a rape; she did not cry out. Later on we catch a glimpse of her as an ambitious woman, and it may be that at this early point she rationalized that she could rise in the state--and after all it was the king who sent for her. We can only speculate on what went on with her. But we can be sure when the illegitimate child died, she grieved as much as David for the loss. And when Nathan came and named the child Solomon with a personal name "Jedidiah," "truly beloved of Yahweh" (12:25), it was a sign from God that all was well with the sinners, the marriage was blessed, and the child honored as a sign of God's grace and love. This may well imply that Bathsheba as well as David had sought forgiveness and poured out her heart to the LORD. Moreover, her inclusion in the genealogy of Matthew 1 is another word to us that God's grace had prevailed. But in Samuel the focus is on the sin of David.

The sure word of forgiveness came the moment David confessed--Nathan said, "God has put away your sin." There would be fallout from the sin--the sword would not depart from the house of David. He had acted like a pagan king; there would be rape and revenge and murder in his family. But when the second child was born, God sent the same prophet with the new name as a sign that all was well between them and God. The verse (12:25) uses deliberate ambiguity: "the LORD loved him." Who? The child? David? Then the name was given: Jedidiah, in Hebrew *Y'ediyah*, "truly beloved of Yah." What is so significant about this name is that it is etymologically based on the name of David, for *Dawid* means "beloved." The child is named after the father, confirming the meaning of David's name in relation to God. So the marriage was now legitimate, and the child was legitimate.

One thing that we do learn from all this is that even though there was participation in a grave sin, Bathsheba found assurance for forgiveness like David, and did not let that sin ruin her life. Bathsheba afterwards comes across as a powerful and influential woman with David. In 1 Kings 1:17 Bathsheba went to the aging king and got the assurance that Solomon, her son, would reign after him, instead of Adonijah who had made himself king. At her words, with the help of Nathan, David had Zadok anoint Solomon as king.

Bathsheba also tried to have the maidservant Abishag given to Adonijah in marriage (1 Kings 2). But Solomon saw the plan as an attempt by Adonijah to seize the throne and would have no part in it. Nevertheless, the incident shows the access that the Queen Mother had to Solomon.

Folly in David's House

The Rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13). This Tamar was the beautiful daughter of David, and the sister of Absalom. She was also the half-sister of Amnon, one of David's sons by another wife.

When Amnon was engulfed with passion for Tamar, he took the bad advice of Jonadab and seduced the girl. He did this by feigning sickness so that she could take care of him. She tried to resist the incest, but he forced her. But after the rape he turned on her with hatred and drove her away from his rooms. The text captures the cruel treatment of Tamar: it was bad enough that he forced her to have sex with him; but it was worse that he hated her and got rid of her after he had satisfied himself. So much for his "love" for her. The girl was seduced; she would have been willing to be his wife if he had asked David--she believed his words of love. But she had to flee to her brother, Absalom.

The treatment of Tamar and the response to her pain are indicative of the life of a polygamous household and of a royal family that seems to be above the Law. To David's discredit he did nothing; he should have invoked the law against rape and incest. Even brother Absalom seemed to pass over it, telling her to do nothing, not to take it to heart, for he was her brother. But secretly Absalom hated Amnon, and after two years had him killed.

Tamar is another unfortunate victim. It is part of the ruin in the royal family that came from the sin of David. Other sons of the king would die by the sword in the struggles within the court; but Tamar was raped by a half-brother, and her father did nothing about it. Perhaps his conscience wouldn't let him--who was he to demand justice for such a crime? But Absalom, like Simeon and Levi of all the tribes of old, took vengeance. One must assume that Tamar was taken care of, being in a royal household; but what mattered most to her, her ability to have a good marriage, was taken from her by a lecherous and evil man.

The Sin of Absalom (2 Samuel 16:20). Absalom wanted to be king. Of that there can be no doubt. He believed that David had forfeited the right, and had lost control. But he took some very wrong advice and pitched a tent on the roof (does this motif allude to David's sin from the rooftop) and in the plain sight of all the people had sexual intercourse with David's concubines. Ahithophel's advice was intended to

make the break between David and Absalom great in the sight of everyone. It would do that for sure. And while people may not have been able to see the actual acts, they knew what was happening. In the ancient world, to take over the harem (we do not know who these women were) was to attempt to take over the throne. Absalom would either be the new king, or he would have to be put to death. This is the same thing that Reuben had tried (Gen. 35) that cost him the headship of the nation. But God would not tolerate such pagan efforts--Absalom would flee for his life when his insurrection failed, and when he did come back was killed. But again, women were used in a royal power play.

The Glory of the Solomonic Monarchy

Solomon's Wisdom and the Queen of Sheba

Well, we know all about Solomon. The number of his wives has become so well-known that little can be said that has not been said before. But we can learn a little more about women in court from these passages, and from the ancient world. The harem was a powerful statement of the treaties that kings made, guaranteeing peaceful relations all around. But individual women had special status.

According to the Bible, because Solomon did not ask for wealth and power, but for wisdom to rule God's people, God gave him all the wealth and the power along with the wisdom. In 1 Kings 3:16ff. a story is told to illustrate his wisdom. Two prostitutes claimed the same baby when the baby of one of the two died. Solomon's advice was to cut the baby in two so that each could have a share. This, of course, brought compassion from the real mother, and so she was awarded the baby.

Prostitution was not the point at issue here; it was incidental to the story. But prostitution was practiced in Israel, even though it was always considered to be sin. The Book of Proverbs describes it, as well as all such activities, as utter folly that brings ruin to the family, to the reputation, and to health.

The wisdom of Solomon became famous, and people came from far and wide to hear it. One who came was the Queen of Sheba; she came with great ceremony and much material for gifts for this king. But she came to catch him in his wisdom, to test

him. The Bible does not name her; but Arab writers call her Balkis, and Ethiopian writers called her Makeda. They, of course, claim that Solomon and Makeda had sexual intercourse, and that that son was the ancestor of their king (whom they call the “Lion of Judah” up until the 20th century). There is absolutely no proof for that anywhere. The story portrays how the wisdom from above, the wisdom of God, is superior to the wisdom of the world, and wise rulers and kings and queens would seek out this wisdom. When the Queen of Sheba quizzed him and heard his answers, she was amazed--the text says “there was no more spirit in her,” the modern equivalent is flabbergasted.” So she praised the LORD God of Solomon, gave him gifts, and returned to her country. Clearly, the Book of Kings is showing how God was able to give David’s heir not just a kingdom, but an empire unmatched at the time.

But here was a queen who came, not just a king. She ruled in the Arabian peninsula over the people of Sheba, a small but rich kingdom on the trade routes. Their income was from trade and from tariffs, and not simply from plunder in war. Wisdom and wise sayings fascinated her, because in her region priority was given to that. She would become in the Bible a symbol of the wisdom of the world coming to learn from the wisdom from above. Probably more came of this meeting than we know, because Solomon became very rich in trade between horses from Arabia and chariots from the Hittites, as well as all the spices and gold of her area.

Solomon’s Wives and Concubines

The first mention of a wife for Solomon is in 1 Kings 9:16. The Pharaoh of Egypt, who probably still controlled the coastal plain of Israel, gave the city of Gezer in the lowlands as a wedding gift to his daughter, Solomon's wife. Then, in 1 Kings 11:1, the text says that Solomon loved many wives besides the daughter of Pharaoh--there were women of all ethnic origins, 700 wives of royal birth and 300 concubines. If the size of the harem is an indication of the power of a king, then this harem would speak of empire and not merely a kingdom. (Most of these women came with treaties with different countries--another country is less likely to attack Israel if their princess is married to the king.) There is no indication in the text as to which was the principal wife, unless it was the daughter of Pharaoh; and there is no clue as to what relationships Solomon had with all these women, if any. Our knowledge of ancient harems tells us that it was for the women a very boring life, and a form of imprisonment. Very, very few of these women would have experienced any closeness to the king, let alone sex. In fact, if Solomon had sex with all of them, we would

expect some report of many sons. But we do not--just Rehoboam.

The point Scripture makes is that this whole arrangement was a violation of Scripture. We know that the Law (Deut. 17) forbade multiplying wives and horses--both of which Solomon did; and this passage says that Solomon violated the laws of marrying women from other nations with false gods. As a result, they turned Solomon's heart away from the LORD and to idolatry, so that he lost most of the kingdom for the house of David. He built the women temples for their gods, right across the valley from the Temple of the LORD, and participated in their worship, and so became an idolatrous man. No doubt he considered it all part of court life, generosity, magnanimity, and tolerant. But the Book of Kings (probably Jeremiah) judges him for the sin.

Besides his own idolatrous acts, the fruit of these marriages ruined the kingdom for some time. Rehoboam reigned after Solomon in Jerusalem. 1 Kings 14 identifies this Rehoboam as a son of Naamah, an Ammonite (this line goes back to Lot's daughters in the cave). Ammonites and Moabites were to be excluded from the congregation of Israel. But Rehoboam became king (was Naamah the principal wife, or just more assertive?); and he was very evil. He set up high places, sacred stones and pillars to Asherah on every hill and under every spreading tree, allowed male shrine prostitutes to function, and permitted the people to participate in every degrading act.

The same probably would result if a Godly woman married an idolatrous man. But Kings has a definite message to communicate, and it is about the leaders of Israel. The book traces how the kings could rule the nation but could not rule their own passions; they became pagan in their activities, and brought about the ruin of the kingdom. It did not matter if the king married all these women for political reasons, for alliances, or for international diplomacy. If they brought in their gods, it would doom the nation of Israel.

Women in Hebrew Poetry

When we read the vast collection of poetry in the Old Testament we are impressed with the inclusiveness of the subject matter. We have the Psalms which express the universally shared spiritual and emotional prayers and praises; all believers could and did sing these in the Sanctuary, or meditate on them in their private hours ("the LORD gave the word, and great is the company of women who proclaimed it").

We have the Wisdom literature that expresses the common ideas of dealing with the problems of suffering and learning how to live in the world; Israel and her neighbors thought very much alike in these matters. And we have the love Song, celebrating the union of the sexes.

Perhaps it is the nature of poetry, or perhaps these pieces reflect the ideal that God had created, but they certainly cast a different picture than the historical narratives do. There is not one indication of polygamy or concubinage in this material. Rather, the poetry reflects the simplicity of the union in married life. Proverbs speaks to the children to obey the wise instruction of their father and their mother. Psalm 127 ponders the providence of God in all matters, but focuses on the happy home with children as the essence of it. Psalm 128 captures the same kind of picture of a family with all the people in place. Psalm 144:12 reflects on daughters as cornerstones in the family, an image that elsewhere is used of the foundation and mainstay of society. Psalm 45, of course, is a wedding psalm; it is the wedding of a king and so is more elaborate and with a different orientation than the common marriage. But here too the prophet-psalmist instructs the bride to forsake her father and turn to her husband and king in allegiance. While marriage to a king would require other attitudes, this song is entitled a song of loves. So like the Song of Solomon, it is celebrating one of the most joyous times of Israelite life.

Proverbs:

Madam Wisdom and Dame Folly

Proverbs 31 is usually treated as a lesson for women, that is, how the Godly woman should live. Needless to say, it would be very difficult for any one to emulate perfectly the pattern shown here. The “woman” described in the chapter is a wealthy, aristocratic lady who runs a landed estate with servants and who conducts business affairs (real estate, vineyards, and merchandise), domestic activities, and charity. What is missing in the chapter is a discussion of her religious activities--but that may be due to the fact that this is part of wisdom literature that, even though it presupposes the fear of the LORD, focuses more on the practical outworking of wisdom in life.

There are several features about this passage that upon closer reflection add a depth to the interpretation that is usually missing in popular teachings.

1. The passage is arranged in alphabetical order (a pattern known as *acrostic*). This means that the first word of each line begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet in sequence (compare Psalm 119). The Hebrews had many reasons for doing this, including ease in memorization and organization of thoughts in a complete pattern. We can say, then, that Proverbs 31 is an organized arrangement of the virtues of wisdom (“the wise woman”)--the ABCs of wisdom.

2. The passage is written in the form of a hymn. We usually think of hymns being sung to God, and all other hymns in the Bible are. But in those days a hymn could be written for anyone, a champion in game, a military hero, and here apparently “a virtuous woman [better: a woman of valor].” Compare the structure and the contents of this passage with a well-known hymn to the LORD, Psalm 111.

The psalm begins with *hall^elu-yah*, “**praise** Yah”; this is reflected in Proverbs 31:31 which says “her works shall **praise her**” (Hebrew: *hall^elu-ha*).

Psalm 111:2 speaks of God’s **works**; Proverbs 31:13 speaks of her **works** (same Hebrew word).

Psalm 111:2 says the works of the LORD are **searched** (Hebrew: *d^erushim*); Proverbs 31:13 says she **seeks** (*dar^eshah*) wool and flax.

Psalm 111:3 says the LORD’s work is **honorable**; Proverbs 31:25 ascribes strength and **honor** to this woman.

Psalm 111:4 says that the LORD is gracious and full of **compassion**; Proverbs 31:26 ascribes the law of **compassion** to the woman.

Psalm 111:5 says the LORD gives **food** (*tereph*); Proverbs 31:15 says the woman provides **food** (*tereph*).

Psalm 111:10 says the **fear** of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom--a theme in Proverbs--and Proverbs 31:30 describes the woman as **fearing**.

Psalm 111:10 says the LORD’s **praise** will endure; Proverbs 31:31 says the woman will be **praised** for her works.

It is clear that the passage is deliberately patterned after the form of a hymn. It was thereby meant to extol the works of wisdom.

3. The passage is also part of the heroic literature. In other words, the text in the original has the ring of an ode to a champion. The Hebrew vocabulary that is used tips us off to this.

“Woman of valor” (v. 10, *'eshet khayil*) is the same expression used in Judges for men who are “mighty men of valor” (*gibbor khayil*), the warrior aristocrat.

“Strength” (vv. 17 and 25) is used for powerful deeds and heroics in military contexts.

“Gain” (v. 11) in “she shall have no lack of gain” is actually the word “plunder” (*shalal*) in war, used in Isaiah 8 in the name Maher **shalal** hash baz.

“Food” (v. 15) is actually the Hebrew word for “prey” (*tereph*).

“Stretch out” (v. 19) is an expression used in military settings (compare Judges 5:26 for Jael’s smiting Sisera).

“Surpasses them all” (v. 29) is an expression that often means “to prevail over” in a fight or battle. She is like a valiant conqueror.

Putting these observations together I would conclude that Proverbs 31:10-31 is a hymn to the “Wisdom,” written in the heroic tradition. But why has the writer chosen a woman for this study? One might argue, on the surface, that wisdom is best evidenced in the home by women, but that is not a sufficient reason in Wisdom literature. Or, one might note that the Hebrew word for “wisdom” is a feminine noun, *khokmah*, and so it was natural to use a woman to personify wisdom. This is part of the reason, to be sure; but one must not forget that abstract nouns in Hebrew are usually feminine; *n'balah*, “foolishness,” is also a feminine noun.

Wisdom literature throughout the ancient world loved to personify wisdom in a feminine form. In Egypt, for example, there was a goddess of wisdom, *MAAT*, who exemplified all these virtues. Wisdom is never deified in Israel--that would violate the Law instantly. Nevertheless, in the tradition of ancient wisdom literature, wisdom is

personified as a woman, and so Hebrew literature does the same--as it also personifies folly with the picture of the woman in the streets (Prov. 5-7).

What purpose did this serve in Israel? Several answers come to mind.

1) A personification of wisdom allows the writer to make all the lessons of the book concrete and not abstract (we can see them in action in real life). Everything the book has been teaching about wisdom are placed in this portrait of the woman.

2) It provides the writer with a polemic against (a rebuke and criticism of) the prevailing ancient Near Eastern literature that usually portrayed women as merely decorative--charm and beauty without substance, or as trophies as in the story of Samson.

3) It also represented a new direction in the idea of heroism. The greater heroism was moral and domestic, not in exploits on the battlefield. Wisdom would be demonstrated best in the day-to-day running of the home, the estate, the business, and charity.

This passage certainly is an instruction for women who want to cultivate a lifestyle of wisdom. But it is actually more interested in portraying what wisdom is like rather than giving a check-list for women to follow. The writer is laying out the qualities of wisdom that all should follow: integrity, industry, productivity, charity, spirituality, virtue, responsibility, and balance -- all the themes that were taught in the book. Anyone, male or female, who wishes to follow wisdom must cultivate these kinds of patterns.

Nevertheless, the choice of “woman” as the capstone of the Book of Proverbs certainly reflects a positive attitude toward woman as an ideal. And, the poem forms a nice contrast to the depiction of Dame Folly in the book.

“Dame Folly” is introduced in the earlier sections of the book--in the warnings given to the naive youth to avoid the “strange woman” in Proverbs 5, 6, and 7. In Proverbs 5:3 the “adulterous” woman is introduced. The Hebrew word is *zarah*, not the word for adultery, but **strange woman**, or **foreigner**. If you study these passages you will discover a great deal of debate on her status. I would conclude from the evidence and the discussions that if she is not a foreign woman, she is at

least outside of the covenant community and so called foreign or strange, married, and very seductive (see my discussion in “Proverbs,” in the Expositors Bible Commentary). Words form the initial temptation she offers, flattery and promises, but in the end there is ruin for consorting with her. The discussion in Proverbs 6:25-35 focuses on the danger--it is like scooping coals into the lap. Whoever engages in this will destroy himself. This could mean a death penalty for adultery (Deut. 22:22); but he apparently is expected to live on in ignominy, destroyed spiritually and socially (see 2:18). Kidner observes that in a morally healthy society such a person would be a social outcast (*Proverbs*, p. 75). Proverbs 7 then offers the full picture of the seduction, capitulation, and catastrophic end for the naive person. The picture drawn in this chapter is rather vivid. It would take a wise person to restrain from such seduction. Proverbs gives the warning because even wise men have their moments of weakness when they can be seduced (e.g., Solomon). Joseph, who is called a wise man, knows how to resist the seduction of a foreign woman (Gen. 39).

But again we must ask the question of the interpretation of these passages. They all come in the section of the book that is admonishing the youth to learn wisdom and discipline to be able to avoid folly. While the warnings can certainly be read on the literal level, they go far beyond that in their intent. “Folly” is not just having sex with a strange woman; it is also being personified here. The “strange woman” in these passages represents all temptation to evil--including adultery and harlotry to be sure--that will bring ruin and disgrace. These passages led the Rabbis to teach that one should always do a little profit-loss ledger on any decision, especially when considering sin: what will you gain, but what will it cost you, now, in the long run? Folly is a poor investment.

The Book of Proverbs is written to cultivate in us patterns of wisdom. If it speaks of a man so lazy he cannot even lift his hand out of the dish, that could be a man or a woman; if it speaks of a chattering wife,² that could be husband or wife; if it speaks of folly in the form of a strange woman, that can be anyone seducing or tempting another to immediate pleasure; and if it portrays wisdom as a woman, that is laying out the ideal pattern for all to follow. Wisdom transcends gender, for all must cultivate it; folly shows no preference for male or female, for all fall into it.

² Many houses had small apartments on the flatroofs (as when the prophet stayed in town); so to speak of dwelling on a roof top is to speak of going to the spare room.

The Song of Songs which is Solomon's

The "Song of Solomon," or "Canticles" as it is also called, has received much attention over the years, not just over its interpretation, but whether or not it belongs in the canon of Holy Scripture. The Rabbis debated it (after it was solidly fixed as part of the canon), and of course concluded it is rightly included in the collection of inspired writings: "The whole world is not worth the day on which the Song was written." But, nevertheless, they and others were not quite sure what to do with it. They preferred to give it an allegorical interpretation; in fact, if you read the Aramaic Targum on the Song you will see that they essentially wrote the history of Israel and then regularly worked lines from the Song into that treatise. Christians also have followed an allegorical approach for ages, but instead of leaving it with Yahweh and his wife, took it to mean Christ and his bride.

For a detailed study of the various approaches, as well as comparisons with love songs from the ancient world, see M. H. Pope, *Song of Songs*, Anchor Bible (Doubleday, 1977). Pope takes the view that this song is dependent on ancient fertility cults, but that is not very likely--even though it may on occasion use expressions and descriptions of love that the cults would also use (after all it is about love and sex). If one is aware of the presuppositions of authors one can work around the more extreme interpretations and still glean a great deal from the material.

The Song of Songs is a crucial part of Sacred Scripture because it displays **the beauty of human sexual love** in freedom and spontaneity. The speakers in this lyrical song demonstrate drama and unity throughout. The highly figurative phrases of the work have caused disagreement over the meaning, but it seems best to understand the song as a dialogue between lovers with all their expressions and comparisons (from the perspective of ancient Israelite culture), tracing a general story line from early meetings through to marriage. Modern readers may not think much of comparing hair to a flock of goats; but if they took the viewpoint of a shepherd in Israel who saw in the distance a flock of goats coming down the side of the hill, it would suggest the locks of hair cascading and curling as they lay on the shoulders. To understand figures in the Bible, we have to live in its culture.

Because of the frequent comparison in Scripture of the marriage relationship and

the spiritual covenant, many have taken this book to be at least an illustration of the covenant, and lines from it have been woven into music about Christ and his people. Regardless of the implications of the book for the mystery of redemption and the union of love in Christ, the primary focus seems not to be on a theological treatise. The impact of the work in ancient Israel no doubt would have contrasted sharply with prevailing pagan views about intimacy--that is, sexuality had been so corrupted by pagan cults on one hand, and so safeguarded from the Hebrew Sanctuary on the other, that people might have wondered about the legitimate enjoyment of sexual union. This book, among other things, taught Israel that God had created male and female and given them the privilege and delight of sexual union in their marriage. It is refreshing, then, to find such a song in the Bible that explores the union of the sexes in all its beauty, excitement, and fulfillment.

I shall take some time with this poem now because it is very much a part of this course, but also because it is seldom given enough attention in surveys. Using the language and names of the book, the following outline traces the dramatic movement of the poems:

I. The Shulamite and her beloved express their mutual adoration of each other in their anticipation of their union (1:2--2:7).

A. The Shulamite expresses her adoration of her beloved in comparison to her unworthiness, longing for his presence (1:2-8).

The name in Israel is equal to the character, and so to the woman her beloved's name is perfume. And all the women of court know that his character is very pleasing. The women of court, then, rightly appreciate him too. She is not the only one who recognizes that he is worth loving--no one will try to convince her he is not worth it. She can say, "Rightly do I love you."

In verse 5 she describes herself as darkened, probably in contrast to the delicate women of the court. Her half brothers have made her work in the vineyards, and she has neglected her own vineyard, her body. The similes and implied comparisons present the idea of strikingly dark appearances (tents and curtains usually made out of goat hair).

She speaks of her lover as a shepherd, and he may well be that in part. But the image may be coming from her own world, and so she sees in him the shepherd-like qualities she admires. He cares for people and provides for them; he is strong and dependable; and he

gently leads those who are young and weak.

She does not want to go looking for him in the streets as a veiled woman would wander about, for that would make her look like a loose woman. But she longs to be with him.

B. The beloved praises her loveliness and promises to adorn her (1:9-11).

He compares her to a mare in Pharaoh's chariotry. The idea is of the greatest prized horse, noble, stately, well-groomed, and standing out from all the rest. He then adds that she will be even more beautiful when adorned with the jewelry she will have, jewelry that the women of court are eager to make for her.

C. The Shulamite relates the value of her love as she is enraptured in his presence (1:12-14).

Nard is a kind of myrrh. She compares him to a sachet of perfume she would have worn around her neck and between her breasts. This represents him to her; her thoughts of him are as fragrant as the perfume, and she carries those thoughts close to her heart throughout the night.

En Gedi is the lovely oasis on the western side of the Dead Sea. In a dry and hot desert land, this is the most delightful and refreshing spot. The henna blossoms are the loveliest desert flowers. He was that special and that refreshing to her.

D. The beloved breaks into a rhapsody of praise for his bride who is fair and innocent (1:15).

As lovers do, he looks into her eyes and compares them to doves, soft, gentle, tender, harmless.

E. The Shulamite expresses her adoration of her beloved and expresses her pleasure and satisfaction in their woodland setting (1:16--2:1).

Their "couch" is the green grass; their "roof" is the cedars over them. The setting is the country, which she compares to their house. She is at home in this woodland palace. And in it she compares herself to a tender flower, a rose of Sharon and a lily of the valley. Sharon was the lowland coastal region that in antiquity was forested; and in it the wild

flowers grew. She describes herself as such a flower, just one among many. She is now seeing herself as he sees her, not dark and plain.

F. The beloved corrects her opinion of herself, and she in turn praises him (2:2, 3).

The king clarifies her assessment--she is not one among many, she is a lily among thorns. The rest cannot compare. She is as distinct as that.

She then describes him as an apple tree, a figure of beauty, strength and fertility in antiquity--strong, fruitful, delicious. She now finds rest with him, as if under the shade of an apple tree. She has in him a sense of place, and it is a place of rest, rather than long hours of labor in the sun. And so she finds him sweet as well as refreshing.

G. The Shulamite recalls her trip to the banqueting hall and expresses her deep longing for her beloved (2:4-7).

His banner of love is over her. The image is one of a huge banner that expresses to all his love for her. Whether real or implied as a figure, it means that he is not ashamed to tell the world of his love for her--he wants everyone to know. There is nothing secretive or private about his intentions.

She is faint with love; and so using romantic images from the culture (raisin cakes were erotically shaped to represent the woman, and apples represented the man), she expresses her longing for the consummation of their marriage. She wants to be embraced by him; the description of one hand under her head and the other embracing her must reflect their lying down together. This is her longing; and it is a normal desire in the situation.

But she will be patient; and so to the women of the court she advises (for her own benefit) that love not be roused up until love is ready.

II. The Shulamite relates how her beloved came calling her away from her solitude, and then in the night she longed for him and looked for him (2:8-3:5).

A. The Shulamite relates how her beloved came to call her out of her solitude (2:8-15).

The excitement she feels is expressed in her words that he was coming to meet her. The

similes describe the eager young man moving swiftly over the hills, peering in through the lattice. He invites her to come out with him. All the language for the background of the scene is springtime, the fragrance of spring, the beauty of flowers, the freshness of love. Everything speaks of life and fertility.

She tells how he wanted to see her and to hear her voice. He called her his dove, an interesting comparison because doves often hide in the rocks and are hard to see at first. He simply longs to know her better.

But they must catch the little foxes. Foxes were pests to the vineyards. And since their bodies, their love, is represented by the image of the vineyard, and the time of the blossom is the period of their budding romance, the foxes would signify anything that would ruin it. His call is to remove anything that would ruin their love or spoil their relationship.

B. The Shulamite claims union with the king and longs for his presence with her (2:16, 17).

She says that they belong to each other; she is not simply his chattel. They are counterparts, and will become one together. And so she longs for the day, inviting him to the mountains of separation, meaning her breasts. She longs for him to lie in her embrace til dawn, meaning she wants to consummate the marriage throughout the night. But she has to wait.

C. The Shulamite recalls how in the night she longed for him and went to look for him (3:1-5).

This section may be a dream, or it may be an adventure in the night. She suddenly feels alone and insecure, or unsure of her future, and so she had to get up and search for him. Love brings great joy; but it also brings anxieties, such as in separation. With the help of the watchmen she finds him and takes him to the place where she feels secure, her mother's tent. Holding him close to her she feels secure again. But she must be patient and wait (3:5).

III. The Shulamite describes the magnificent coming of the king to the wedding feast, and finding herself the object of praise and adoration, invites complete union with her beloved, an invitation he eagerly accepts (3:6--5:1).

A. The Shulamite describes the coming of the king to the wedding

feast and urges the women of the court to marvel at his grandeur (3:6-11).

This is the wedding procession, and all eyes are on the king (as would be expected--see Ps. 45). A cloud of dust is really the fragrances that attend his person. He arrives on his chariot-chair with sixty groomsmen beside. This is a royal, full-dress military wedding. The song even describes the chair which is the finest quality for this occasion, even inlaid with love. The women of the court have lovingly contributed to this day. Everyone shared the joy.

B. The king praises the bride's beauty on this their wedding (4:1-15).

The king adorns her with praise of her beauty, preparing her physically and emotionally for their union. She is so beautiful to him. He compares her eyes to doves again, and her hair to a flock of goats on Gilead. The picture is that of a distant view of the flock cascading down the side of the slopes of the hills. The description of her teeth as shorn sheep indicates they are bright and clean and matched, so that when she smiles she is lovely. Her lips are outlined as a scarlet thread and her mouth is lovely. Her temples, which would have referred to her cheeks as well, are healthy and reddish. Pomegranates were also associated with romantic imagery in the ancient world. But the image of the tower of David focuses more on her demeanor than on her appearance. She is elegant of stature, secure and strong, not bent over and cowering. The way she carries herself is stately. And then he describes her breasts as fawns; the idea is that they are delicate, soft and tender, and the impulse is to touch and caress them. In all, he admired seven things about her; that is to say she was perfect to him. He will indeed spend the night in the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense.

The king wants to take her away from fearful places (4:8). She did not actually live in a den of lions. He wants her to come completely to him, leaving thoughts of home and any fears and anxieties behind her. He wants her full attention without distractions.

He then expresses adoration for her (4:9-15). She is not passive, but caresses and kisses him. Her kisses are deep kisses because her tongue is sweeter than honey, and her garments are fragrant.

Their love is consummated at the end of this chapter, beginning in 4:12 where he compares her to a garden that he will enter, describing her as a spring or fountain that is locked simply refers to her virginity--it is a secret garden. But all her charms and attributes are then compared to the plants and herbs of the garden. He wants to enter the garden and enjoy the delights.

C. The Shulamite invites her beloved into her garden and their union is complete (4:16--5:1).

Verse 16 is the invitation of the bride to her husband, to excite her and to enter her and to taste of her excellent fruit. All the senses of seeing, tasting, touching, feeling will be participants in this night of marital love. To him she is delightful and refreshing as streams in the mountains. And at this moment a voice tells them to eat and enjoy. In the final analysis this must be the voice of the Creator, whispering in their hearts that this was what he had intended for them to enjoy. He gives them his hearty approval for this and other nights. They have experienced all the love and beauty and excitement he intended them to have. They were prepared for this night by their love, and they enjoyed its fulfillment because of their mutual adoration. And it was perfect, because they waited.

IV. The Shulamite relates the case and circumstances in which her beloved withdraws from her indifference. Causing much anxiety until she finds him again (5:2--6:3).

A. The Shulamite relates (by dream or reality) the case and circumstance in which her beloved withdrew himself from her indifference (5:2-6).

She was in bed, and he apparently was outside the door (dew was in his hair). And when he came to her ("open to me" could refer to the door to her room, or to her), she was apathetic. He used many terms of endearment: sister, darling, dove, perfect one.

But she had put off her tunic and did not want to put it on again (apparently to get up to go to the door). The contrast is significant--before she could not rest if he was not there, now she is a little indifferent to his call. She momentarily forgot that it is for him she lived. So he withdrew, rather than forcing his way. But he left the sachet of myrrh there to indicate he had come to her.

B. The Shulamite relates her efforts to search the town for her beloved (5:7--6:3).

Now her feelings were aroused again and she went to look for her beloved. But unlike before, now she was treated roughly by the men in the town who did not know who she was.

So she called for help, so that if they found him they could tell him she was looking for him.

In 5:9 the women want to know why he is so special; and so in 5:10-16 she tells them. He is ruddy, suggesting healthy, well-tanned (golden-red) with striking black hair like ravens. His eyes are gentle, soft and tender, like doves. His cheeks are a bed of balsam, a bed of spices, suggesting they have a scent like herbs. The lips are compared to lilies, sweet, as if dripping myrrh. His hands are precious, as if encased in gold and set with jewels; they are gentle and yet firm. In v. 15 she describes further his stature and character. His abdomen is like a plate of iron covered with sapphires, probably indicating firmness and beauty--muscular. With legs like alabaster he is firm, and cannot be shaken. Overall, he is impressive and dignified and strong (like a warrior king should be), like the choice cedars. His mouth is sweet; he is not crude or crass. Everything about him is wonderful to her. He is her friend and her companion for life--the kind of relation that God intended.

This is what she thought of him, even though a little problem had crept in with her indifference and his withdrawing. But because she truly adored him and loved him, she sought him.

The women ask where they should look for him, and her answer is revealing. She knows where he went, to his favorite garden; she knows they are still one; and she knows his attitude is gentle and patient. He would be there waiting for her. Patient silence waits for the reunion.

V. The king, re-united with his bride, lavishes praise on her as they take their fill of love (6:4--8:7).

A. The king lavishes praise on his bride (6:4-10).

When she finds him she receives compliments from him. He repeats the images he used to show that nothing has changed. But he leaves out the erotic descriptions, because he first wants to affirm he loves and adores her and not just desires her. He adds other images, such as Jerusalem, to say that she is noble, dignified, and striking. In verse 10 the idea is that she is distant and dim, like the moon, but when she draws close she is bright like the sun.

B. The bride finds herself with her husband once again (6:11--7:1).

Now the king will lavish praise on his wife without restraint; he will use erotic descriptions that he did not use before, because now they know each other and enjoy love for the sake of fulfillment, not for the sake of consummating a marriage as before.

He describes her from head to foot. The feet are delicate in her sandals. The curves of

her thighs up to her hips are like ornaments, precisely carved by the creator and very beautiful. The navel (perhaps a euphemism) is like a goblet with a drop or two of mixed wine. The abdomen is described most vividly, with a stack of wheat and enclosed lilies, perhaps using the imagery of a smooth field bordered with wheat and soft petals. He then repeats the description of her breasts as before. The neck now is described as a tower, dignified and stately. The eyes like the pools of Heshbon (in Jordan) are refreshing and relaxing from the rush of society. The nose gives her a stately look, indicating a strong character. The head is the crowning point, like Mount Carmel, the vineyard of God. She is beautiful and impressive atop the rich land (=figure) below the crown. The tresses are described as royal, the flowing hair of a queen. The overall appearance is like a palm tree with the clusters as the breasts. He will climb the tree and enjoy the fruit.

The poet arranges the lovemaking scene to reflect the wedding night in chapter 4. But the praise is now more sensual, and the list is longer, ten things now, the number of completion. There is time, and there is growth in perfection.

Her kisses bring the sweet scent of apples and the best wine. But now the woman interrupts his praise to finish the sentence, “going down smoothly, through the lips of the sleeping ones.” The scene ends with them falling asleep, fulfilled.

C. The bride invites her husband to the country where they can enjoy each others embraces as before (7:12--8:7).

She wants to return to the vineyards in the countryside to see if things are in bloom, suggesting that a year has past since they enjoyed their spring together. But there is also a double meaning here, because in the vineyard they will have their caresses. The introduction of mandrakes enforces this, since they were considered to be an aphrodisiac.

She desires that he be like a brother to her. It was not proper to show affection in public, unless people were in the immediate family. She wants to display her affection for him everywhere, so she would playfully assume the role of an older sister. But he also will teach her of his love. Beginning in 8:5 we have as summary of the description of their love. The bride (vv. 6-7) speaks of the apple tree, but it is not literally an apple tree, but her husband; now he can be awakened, whereas before love was not to be aroused. Now is the time to initiate love, because she is a wife. But she wants the seal of his love on her because there is so much that could intrude and destroy their affections. There is a concern for destructive jealousy. So anything of great value is sealed.

VI. Flashback: The Shulamite recalls how her family cared for her until her beloved found her (6:8-14).

This section is her recollection when she was back in the country--it brought back memories. She grew up cared for by her brothers. And since she guarded herself like a plank, they safeguarded her as well. If she had been like a door, they would have had to have closed it to the advances of men. But she was a wall, men looked, but had respect. They were caring for Solomon's vineyards, where they put her to rough and hard work. Ironically, that occasioned her meeting with the king, so that in a way while they meant it for evil, God meant it for good. She found the love of her life there, so there were no more bitter memories.

The Song of Solomon celebrates the divinely ordained sexual union of a man and a woman. In spite of the Fall and the presence of sin in the world that has driven a barrier between men and women, necessitating laws and rulings with punishments and correctives, it is refreshing to see that it is possible for a man and a woman to transcend all that through deep and fulfilling love. The Song reminds us that God had designed that "they two shall become one flesh."

And Paul in his writing to the Corinthians builds on the theme that the man is taken from a woman in birth and unites with his wife in marriage, so that there is unity and union between a woman and her husband.

There are a number of very practical lessons that can be derived from this book that will enable a couple to find and maintain that perfect union. Here are twenty of them, in the order of the book.

1. Husbands and wives need to continue to lavish praise on each other to show their love for and enjoyment and appreciation of each other.
2. The reassuring words of praise will offset natural feelings of insecurity and inadequacy.
3. Such praise is naturally accompanied by romantic gifts, perhaps impractical, but lovingly given to the partner.
4. Women and (especially) men need to develop the appropriate language of love for their situations, because words and images are powerful and memorable.

5. The focus of the lovers must always be exclusively on each other, and in their eyes no others are to be considered as equals to their spouse, let alone options or alternatives.
6. This kind of love provides a sense of place where the lovers have their identity, security, and fulfillment.
7. Truly devoted lovers will not be afraid to declare their love for and loyalty to each other openly and publically, so that everyone who hears will know that the choice was final.
8. True lovers should be eager to go to each other and be with each other and please each other; they should study each other to know how to act and react.
9. The couple must be vigilant to protect what they have from any outside threat (the little foxes).
10. In a loving relationship, holding and being held give the greatest sense of security and love.
11. Even though the bride might already be all-glorious, as in this case, the bridegroom must tirelessly praise her with images she loves and treasures, and with all the valuable things of her world.
12. In a loving relationship there is no need to be crude or crass; beautiful, poetic, romantic expressions elevate sensual love to its highest and most effective level.
13. Once the man and the woman are united in marriage they belong to each other and must not think independently of this relationship.
14. The sexual union of the man and the woman are genuinely fulfilling when the couple prepare for it with the bonding of their hearts through their communication.
15. At times there will be misunderstandings (here his insistence, and her indifference) when each thinks only of oneself; these need to be forestalled, and

if they occur, remedied quickly.

16. The lovers must always be able to easily and eagerly tell others of the love they have for one another; trouble comes when they give the impression it is not true.
17. Whenever there have been misunderstandings, the lovers have to reassure each other that nothing has changed (they have to set aside their erotic language and re-establish the love they have).
18. In the fulfillment of the union in marriage, the man and the woman can be completely comfortable with each other (as demonstrated in their trust of each other in their routines and their pleasures, such as with dance and humor).
19. Once the man and the woman are married, they can be aggressive with each in the expression and fulfillment of their desires. If this aggressiveness is not under the seal of the marriage covenant, it will lead to pain and guilt.
20. The joy that the man and the woman have together will overshadow any earlier bad and bitter treatment. The memory of the pain may never completely leaves, but the couple can return to those places and draw upon their shared joys to heal the memory, enhance their relationship, and bring about the triumph of love.

Proud Wickedness and Humble Virtue

The Books of Kings and Chronicles bear witness to the fact that the fallen human race has the “knowledge of good and evil.” And although these writings trace the deterioration in the male leadership of the monarchy, with only a few exceptions

of righteousness, they also recount the stories of several women as well who equaled the men in wickedness and in virtue. We shall survey some of the more notable examples.

Proud Wickedness

When we think of wickedness in high places, certain individuals come naturally to mind. One of them has become proverbial--Jezebel. This woman came on the scene in Israel and almost destroyed Yahwism. She thus became the symbol of false religion in the Bible (see Revelation 2). One can certainly understand her zeal for her religion--but she tried to make it the religion of the state of Israel, and that brought the response of the prophets and kings of Israel. They did not go into Phoenicia to kill the prophets of Baal, but when the prophets of Baal tried to change their historic faith it was a matter of the survival of the true faith.

Jezebel. Jezebel is introduced in 1 Kings 16:31, and then narrated in 18:4-19; 19:1, 2; 21:5-25; and 2 Kings 9. She was the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, and both king and priest of Baal worshipers. The Phoenicians were an enthusiastic lot of idolaters--they thought of Yahweh as a local and inferior deity, and no match for Baal. As a trading nation they traveled along the Mediterranean sea coast spreading their ideas. The name "Jezebel" was probably not the actual name of the woman. The word in Hebrew is *'i-zebel*, which means "no prince," hardly the name a king would give his daughter. It is likely that her name was originally *'abi-zebel*, "my father is prince"; but the Hebrews (who loved to play with names) dropped out the syllable *ab* ("father") and retained *'i-zebel*, "no prince at all."

Jezebel married Ahab, king of Israel. Ahab was at best a weak and easily manipulated king, a buffoon of sorts; at worst he was an evil and a malicious little man. He apparently was stronger on the battle field, for he is mentioned in ancient texts at battles where he had a sizeable chariotry. But there is no question but that Jezebel ran this marriage. She was an extraordinarily strong woman in character, even to the extent of frightening Elijah into running all the way to Horeb (Mount Sinai far to the south). When Ahab married her, "he went and served Baal and worshiped him." (When would the Israelites ever learn that inter marriage with Canaanite tribes would only come to this?) Jezebel's gods were Baal and Ashtaroath and Astarte, with their innumerable number of priests, 450 of whom Ahab installed in the magnificent temple

to the Sun-god he built in Samaria. Another 400 priests were housed and supported in a sanctuary that Jezebel had erected for them. For some reason Ahab did not see the folly of loving a foreign woman who was an idolatrous woman; the prophets would not only purge Baalism from the land at his expense, but announce doom on him and his line because of this. Both Ahab and Jezebel would die horrible and shameful deaths.

Jezebel was also a ruthless schemer. The incident of Naboth's vineyard portrays the nature of this couple very well. Ahab coveted it, but Naboth would not sell. So Ahab went and curled up in his bed and refused to take food. Jezebel, however, had Naboth falsely accused and stoned to death so that Ahab could take the land. Enter Elijah the prophet, and his announcement of doom for Jezebel--she would die an ignominious death and dogs would lick her blood. No court flattery here. But Jezebel was as incapable of fear as of remorse. Even when Jehu came against her she primped herself and watched from the walls. But the two eunuchs beside her threw her over the wall to the soldiers with spears; the horses trampled her and the dogs devoured her, leaving only the skull, the feet, and the palms of her hands.

Jezebel goes down in history as the symbol of false worship with all its corruptions and influences. Her offspring continued the wickedness they grew up with--her daughter was Athaliah, her eldest son was Ahaziah, a devout worshiper of Baal, and her other son Jehoram was also corrupt. One can see how influential a wife and mother can be in this story, unfortunately for evil. Had Jezebel's strong character been on the side of righteousness, things would have been different.

Maacah. She (there are several with this name) was the daughter or granddaughter of Absalom (2 Chronicles 13:2). She became the favorite wife of Rehoboam and the mother of King Abijah of Judah (1 Kings 15:1,2). Although Maacah was a woman of strong influence, she was on the side of idolatry once too often. She maintained her position in the palace as the Queen Mother until the reign of her grandson, Asa. But because she erected an Asherah pole, Asa removed her from office and deposed her (1 Kings 15:13).

Athaliah. Israel's only Queen, Athaliah was a notorious murderer who came to a violent end like her mother Jezebel. Her story is in 2 Kings 8:26; 11; and 2 Chronicles 22; 23:13-21; and 24:7.

Athaliah was the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, so she was half Israelite and half Phoenician. She continued the evil of her mother and transferred the poison of Baalism into the southern kingdom of Judah, for she married Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat (what was this good king thinking?). Jehoram murdered his brothers, who were loyal to the worship of Yahweh. Out of this marriage was born the wicked king Ahaziah (2 Chronicles 22:3).

After reigning for eight years Jehoram died, unmourned. While he reigned he was dominated by Athaliah, who through her fanatical support of Baal made Judah idolatrous. Ahaziah came to the throne, but he reigned only one year. He was wounded in battle by Jehu and fled to Megiddo where he died. Athaliah wanted the throne, but her grandsons stood in the way--so she murdered them all, so she thought. The youngest son had been hidden by Jehosheba, the wife of the priest.

Athaliah managed to reign for six years, a testimony to her power in the land. She had been the daughter of a king, the wife of a king, and the mother of a king, but now she ruled in her own right. A despotic ruler, her every wish had to be obeyed. During her reign part of the temple of Yahweh had to be torn down and the material used for building a house for Baal.

When Joash, the youngest grandson who had been protected from her, was seven years old, Jehoiada the priest planned to anoint him and place him on the throne. During the coronation Athaliah came into the temple, saw the young king, and cried, "Treason, treason." But it was to no avail. As she fled from the place the palace guards slew her just outside the door. Like her mother, she died a horrible death; she died as a queen, but without a hand to help her.

To Athaliah life was cheap if it stood in her way to power. But she learned what the Bible affirms again and again, that whatever one sows shall be reaped, and that God's program of righteousness cannot be thwarted by anyone, especially one in the tradition of Jezebel. Behind her dastardly crimes we can detect the evil one who was trying to destroy the promised seed of the woman predestined to bruise the head of the Serpent. But the Word of the Lord will prevail against all idolatry and infidelity.

Humble Virtue

The Widow of Zarepath. Here is the woman who shared her last morsel with the prophet of God; her story is in 1 Kings 17:8-24, and her memory is recalled by Jesus in Luke 4:25,26.

This woman is an example of sympathetic, kind and self-sacrificial service to others; and although she remains nameless, she was rewarded by God through the prophet. She lived in Sarepta, half-way between Tyre and Sidon up the coast from Mount Carmel. This was the native land of the deadliest enemy of Israel--Jezebel. The woman lived there in poverty with her son; they had enough meal and oil for one last dinner, and then had resigned to the fact that they would die. She knew about the faith of the Hebrews, but never expected to be drawn into it, and into the Holy Scriptures for her faith.

The times were bad; drought killed her modest plantings, and famine finished her hope. And then came Elijah, on the run from Jezebel and Ahab. It was he who declared that it would not rain; and it was he who could make it rain. But he came to stay with the widow for two years. When he met the woman he asked her for a drink of water and morsel of bread--first, before they ate their share. She complied with this, serving the stranger first as hospitality dictated, even though it would finish the supply. But when Elijah told her to prepare for herself and her son, there was an unending supply of meal and oil. She had indeed entertained an angel unawares, and she was beginning to see how Yahweh could supply.

She came to know that her guest was a prophet, and that God was blessing her for generously providing for him. But on a day the widow's son was struck with an illness and died. She rebuked the prophet, saying, "Have you come to me to call my sin to remembrance and to kill my son?" Her awareness of his role as a prophet probably made her increasingly aware of her faults, and this seemed to be a stroke from God. But Elijah simply said, "Give me your son." He took the lifeless boy into the chamber and stretched out over him three times, praying to God that he might live again. After an agonizing and painful wait, the mother received her son alive again: "See, your son lives." Now, with her sorrow turned to song, she exclaimed, "Now by this I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of Yahweh in your mouth is true." Here we have the final victory of faith in the woman brought out by the resurrection of her child. Her initial trusting of the prophet led to her provision of food; but this sign from God led to her complete surrender to the faith.

To Jesus, this woman was an early sign that God's redemption would go to the Gentiles who believed His word and received Him.

The Great Woman of Shunem. In 2 Kings 4:8-37 and 8:1-6 we have the story of another nameless woman in the accounts, a great woman of Shunem. She was of a high rank in the community and very rich, and of social distinction sufficient to warrant an entrance to the palace. She and her husband were devout worshippers of the LORD; and, they were one in all their ways, as their conversations demonstrate. She was much younger than her husband, for we are told that she was barren and her husband was old.

She and her husband had an estate on the road from Carmel to the city of Shunem; they used it to care for travelers to rest or lodge for the night. Perhaps she had seen the prophet going back and forth on the road; at any rate, she went out and invited Elisha into their place to rest his weary bones. In fact, she prepared a little chamber upstairs for the prophet, so that whenever he was passing by he could stay there. The poor widow of Zarepath had nothing to lose and nothing to gain, but was hospitable to Elijah; this wealthy woman lived in a time of great affluence and certainly could have turned in on herself, but she sought to help the pilgrims and the prophets.

After a while Elisha sought to do something for her. No gift and no honor would be acceptable. So Elisha promised her a son. What greater reward could God have given her in that culture than a son they never could have?

But one day after a while this son was stricken and died. The woman laid the corpse in the chamber upstairs and went looking for the prophet. She would not be deterred by Elisha's servant, Gehezi, but brought the prophet back to the house--not his staff alone which Gehezi tried to lay on the lad. So Elisha prayed earnestly and attended the child until God restored him to life. Agony gave way to joy, and the funeral turned into a feast.

This, and the preceding miraculous signs of God's power over death were important proofs of the sovereignty of Yahweh in a land in which false prophets claimed that Baal was the giver of life. Faithfulness by these women was rewarded with a miracle.

But then another tragedy hit this woman's life. Elisha had predicted that a seven

year famine would hit the land, and it did, driving the woman and her son to sojourn in the land of the Philistines. At the end of the famine she appealed to the king for the restoration of her land. King Joram asked Gehezi for a recital of the works of Elisha; when he came to the raising of the Shunamite's son, the woman and her son appeared in court and verified the story with a conviction that impressed the king. All her lands were restored to her, and the word of the power of Yahweh was spread through her to the king.

The Maid of Naaman. The story is found in 2 Kings 5:1-19; but the life of this maiden would cover only twenty words. We know that the young girl was a devout believer in the LORD God of Israel, and in the power of the prophet of the LORD. But she had been carried off from Israel as a slave by the invading Syrians, whom God was using at this time to discipline Israel. She was brought to live in an idolatrous place. But her plight could have been worse; she was taken into the house of General Naaman to assist his wife. There she grew to respect Naaman as a great man.

When this maid heard that Naaman had leprosy, and that his wife sought some kind of help, she said, "Would to God that my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria, for then he would recover from his leprosy." Naaman believed what this Hebrew slave girl said, and went to Samaria where he was eventually healed by Elisha in the Jordan, healed in body, and converted in soul--he was now a believer in the LORD.

We can be fairly sure that Naaman rewarded this maid in some grand way, for he was the type to do it. He wanted to reward Elisha in some way, but the prophet refused. Gehezi, unfortunately, saw the opportunity and wrongfully went after the reward. It was generous. But we do not know if Naaman rewarded the girl with freedom or if life was more enjoyable there in the home of a kind and generous master who served Yahweh than back in Samaria. But the girl stands out as a sample of living and speaking one's faith at just the right moment--even in such conditions as war and captivity.

Jehosheba. We read about her in 2 Kings 11:2. She was the daughter of King Jehoram, half-sister of King Ahaziah. She became wife of the priest Jehoiada--the only instance of a princess marrying a High Priest. She was the courageous and pious woman who stole Joash from the murderous Queen Athaliah and kept him safe for six

years. Thus, to her goes the credit of preserving the Royal Seed, for had Joash died the line of Judah would have ended.

Women in Prophetic Literature

Here we may only survey some of the significant passages that give us a sense of the difficulty of the times when the prophets declared judgment on Israel and Judah for their sins. Further study could be done on the feminine images in their oracles, but that would take more time than we have at this point.

Gomer

Hosea was commanded to take a wife from the daughters of whoredom and establish an Israelite marriage with her. The times were troubling in Israel, for their idolatry and fornication in the name of religion had doomed this northern kingdom. Hosea's marriage to Gomer--difficult for him and scandalous to the nation--would be an object lesson from God, portraying his relationship with an "unfaithful wife"--Israel.

Gomer was a prostitute when Hosea was instructed to marry her. (It was not a sin to marry a woman who had a past like this; after all, Rahab married into the line of Judah). Some have suggested that "daughter of whoredoms" refers to the Canaanite fertility cult that was rampant in the land, and for which the northern kingdom was to be destroyed. But the language used does not support that view very well. The prophet used the births of their children as an occasion to tell of the doom that was coming to the nation: "*Jezreel*" (judgment in the valley of Jezreel), "*Lo' Ruhamah*" (no pity from the LORD), and "*Lo' Ammi*," "not my people," for they had broken the covenant and were unbelievers.

After she had these three children, Gomer went back to her lovers and abandoned the prophet, thus portraying again the unfaithfulness of Israel in abandoning the LORD who had made a covenant with them. Hosea was commanded to go and buy her back from the slave market, portraying God's love and mercy in calling Israel back to himself. The book is about the loving compassion of God for an unfaithful people. How difficult it must have been for the prophet to comply with the word of

the LORD; but how marvelous it was for Gomer to be given this love and compassion by her husband. Here there would be no water tests for adultery, no accusations and death penalties--God's mercy would overrule. We are reminded by the apostle that even though we are unfaithful, he remains faithful. And people are supposed to be loving and compassionate as well, no matter how difficult it may be to do.

Isaiah's Wife

We know from Isaiah 8 that the prophet's wife was a prophetess, and that there were two sons who were given as signs: *She'ar-yashub* and *Maher-shalal-hash-baz*. Once again we see how the prophet at this time used the names of his sons to summarize the message. When Isaiah met the wicked Ahaz checking the water supply for the siege he had his son with him: "A remnant will return." That was good-news and bad-news, for there would be a war, destruction, and captivity, but some would come back--but not Ahaz. The second name was a war cry: "swift is the plunder, speedy is the prey."

Some scholars have suggested that Isaiah's wife is the *'almah* ("virgin") of Isaiah 7:14, but such a view is too problematic for the meaning of that word ("virgin" or "young woman ripe for marriage," whichever one chose, would still not work, for she had already had at least one son).

As a prophetess Isaiah's wife possessed some of the gifts and the insights of the role that would be used in the service of the LORD. She and her husband had a united life that was different from the celibate life of Jeremiah, or the tragic marriage of Hosea, or the sad lot of Ezekiel. How grateful Isaiah must have been for a wife who shared in the prophetic work, and could see the signs that they all were to the nation of Israel.

Ezekiel's Wife

Here we find the antithesis of Isaiah's happy marriage, for God took Ezekiel's wife from him early in their marriage. Ezekiel was then commanded by God not to weep for the woman he loved, not engage in the customary period of mourning, but to go on as if nothing happened. The reason for this horrible instruction was that Ezekiel in his loss would be a sign of how God would strip his people of their lives

because of their departure from him. Die as a sign she did, and the next morning the prophet with grief buried in his heart sternly fulfilled the divine command.

Belshazzar's Mother

Another interesting woman is the foreign Queen Mother, the wife of Nabonidus (or even possibly of Nebuchadnezzar) and mother of Belshazzar. Herodotus names her as Nitocris. Although she was an idolater, when the hand writing on the wall appeared during her son's drunken feast, she had the intuition of Daniel's superiority to all the wise men of Babylon. At her command her son called Daniel to interpret. One can only wonder what thoughts she had when she listened to this man once again predict the future, only now a future that would end their corrupt reign. She produced the prophet who could tell the meaning; it was her honor to introduce the Hebrew prophet who would ultimately predict the kingdom of Messiah. We can only wonder about her understanding and beliefs.

Noadiah

Noadiah is only mentioned in Nehemiah 6:14 as a prophetess; unfortunately, she was a prophetess who would put Nehemiah in fear. It appears she was an exceptional woman but dangerous in her influence. While we might not call her a false prophet, she did throw in with Sanballat and Tobiah in their opposition to Nehemiah. Nehemiah simply prayed that their opposition would be thwarted.

Esther the Queen

This survey of outstanding women in the period of the Israelite state would not be complete without a word about Esther. We have seen simple women with great faith in the LORD who made significant contributions to the work of the LORD-- Esther is certainly one with them. We have seen women in places of power who also influenced the work of God--she should be numbered also with them. But she stands out among them all as the epitome of humility and wisdom, and one whose character is untarnished by the power and wealth she enjoyed. She is the woman who saved her nation from genocide.

“Esther” is the Persian name of this descendant from the tribe of Benjamin; it means “star” and implies good fortune. Her Hebrew name was *Hadassah*, signifying

“myrtle.” She was born to a family that preferred to stay in the land of the east rather than return to the land of Israel. When her parents died she became the ward of her mother’s relative Mordecai (related by marriage; probably a name given in captivity that was connected to the god). He stood by and watched the girl lifted up from her poverty and anonymity and made queen of the greatest empire in the world.

The girl was chosen by Ahasuerus to replace Queen Vashti who had disobeyed the king. The king had just been defeated by the Greeks; he lost his army at the Battle of Marathon; and he lost his fleet in the Battle of Salamis. It may be that Vashti thought he was weakened and so she could assert some independence. But the great losses simply meant he was not going to be opposed at home too. Vashti was out. We do not know anything about her; there is no evidence she was evil, only that her calculation was bad. But God used it as the way to bring Esther to the throne.

The Book of Esther is an interesting work that depicts the providence of God that brought Esther to a place of influence with the king so that she could save her nation from the evil Haman. The book has as its message that God will honor his word to spare his people, even though they were in a foreign land and not back in the land of Israel where they were to go. God is never mentioned in the book; but Esther knew her heritage and keep her pledge to preserve her people. The familiar story is used every year at the feast of Purim.

Esther is exemplary in many ways. From her character we can see the importance of

- *seeking divine guidance in time of crises (4:15-17),
- *learning about human nature to be able to discern what avenues can be taken when opportunities arise,
- *readying oneself to renounce self for the good of others, and
- *seeking help and advice from fellow believers.

From her contribution to the history of Israel we can gain confidence in the providence of God and not undervalue small things, but rather acknowledge God in all the mysterious ways that he works.

From Esther, and scores of other women in the historical writings of Israel, we can appreciate how faith in the LORD and a willingness to do whatever can be done in the circumstances that providence supplies can make a lasting change in life and a significant contribution to God’s program.

The Divorced Wives

Malachi 2:10-17 forms one of the strongest passages on divorce in the entire Bible. Israelite men after the exilic period had apparently been putting away their wives and marrying foreign women--“daughters of foreign/strange gods.” To the prophet, this was a desecration of the holy covenant that God had made, for they were to be maintaining holy marriages to produce a holy seed. To do this there had to be one man and one woman united in the faith. So God was angry at these men both for divorcing their wives and for marrying pagans. When these hypocrites, the husbands, came to worship, they “covered the altar with tears,” which does not mean they were filled with remorse, but that they had caused the pain for their wives, and while they put animals on the altar, all God could hear was the crying of the women. So he would pay no attention to their worship, prayers or their offerings (see 1 Pet. 3:7, “your prayers will not be heard”). Their divorces and remarriages had made their worship activities null and void.

Malachi (and Ezra earlier) forced them to get rid of the second wives and go back to the true wives. This seems to violate Deuteronomy 24, unless the foreign wives were not considered true wives. This same idea seems to appear in Paul’s “if the unbelieving partner departs, let him depart--they have never been bound” (1 Cor. 7:15 [the tense is perfect]). The point of the passage in Malachi shows how God cared for the unfortunate women who were being dumped by disobedient husbands, and how God was unimpressed with the worship activities of these hypocritical men. The warning of the prophet, then, for everyone is “Take heed that you do not deal so treacherously” against your spouse.