

EVERY WOMAN IN THE BIBLE

FAMILY LIFE IN ANCIENT ISRAEL.

(JUDGES; & RUTH).

For most of the OT era the majority of people lived a rural life. This was certainly the case in the time of the judges, which extended roughly from the 1370's, until after the death of Joshua and the elders who ruled with him, to David's organization of a united monarchy around 1000 B.C. Even after Israel became a united nation, daily life changed little for most men and women. The majority lived in small village settlements, not in cities. Most people grew their own food and met other needs within the household. A few developed household industries such as making pottery or catching and drying fish. In this part we will look briefly at the daily life of women in this kind of society.

Political And Social Conditions In The Age Of The Judges:

Life in the age of the judges was difficult in Israel. Hebrew armies under Joshua had put down organized resistance in Canaan and divided the land among the twelve Hebrew tribes, but pagan strongholds still existed. God ordered the tribes to drive out the remaining Canaanite peoples as their own population grew and they needed additional land. However Judges 1:19 sums up in a single verse the reality of the situation:

So the LORD was with Judah. And they drove out the mountaineers, but they could not drive out the inhabitants of the lowland, because they had chariots of iron.

Archeology has confirmed the significance of this verse. During the age of the judges, the Israelites were largely confined to the rocky highlands while the Canaanites occupied the fertile valleys. During the age of the judges Israel's primary enemy, the Philistines, held prime land along the Mediterranean and knew the secret of working iron. This knowledge provided both an economic and military advantage. Not until David's day did the Israelites gain access to iron-working technology.

The restriction of the Israelites to the highlands and their lack of access to iron largely defined economic condition during the time of the judges. These two factors kept God's people in relative poverty.

However, the presence of Canaanites in the land was even more significant. Again and again God's people abandoned the Lord to adopt idolatry and the immoral practices of the nations God had commanded them to drive out. Time and again God's response to Israel's unfaithfulness was to permit foreign enemies to oppress His people. When life became unbearable, God's people turned back to Him and prayed for relief. God responded by raising up a judge – a military, political, and spiritual leader – who repelled the enemy and led the tribe or group into a period of peace. However, after a short time, the people once again turned from God to idolatry.

These repeated cycles of crushing defeats and temporary recoveries kept the people divided and impoverished. Not until the time of David and Solomon, when Israel became the dominant power in the Middle East, did the Israelites enjoy general prosperity.

Life during the time of the judges was hard for men and for women. Yet daily life was hard for most men and

women throughout the world in OT times. In most families, men and woman simply had to work as a team if the family was to survive.

Mr. Outside, Mrs. Inside:

In general, this describes the way tasks were divided in the typical Israelite household. The husband was responsible for tasks outside the house, the wife for tasks inside. This meant that the woman prepared the food, made the family clothing, cared for young children, and trained their daughters in the skills needed to run a household. The husband worked the fields, planted and cared for crops, maintained stone fences and grape or olive presses, and trained the boys for their future role as husband and provider.

The house itself. *The typical Israelite house was built of stone or mud or brick on a four-room plan. A room ran across the back with three open rooms running perpendicular to it. Inside walls were coated with plaster, while the floors were clay. The roof was typically about six feet from the floor. It was made with wooden beams layered with branches and packed mud. The rooftop was flat and could be reached by an outside staircase. The roof provided extra space where the family could work or sleep in the summer, and where flax could be laid out to dry. Doorways in the four-room house were low, a few windows were placed high in the wall.*

Household furnishings. *The Israelite home had few furnishings – a few cooking utensils, a raised platform for sleeping, food storage jars or sunken storage pits, and perhaps a brazier for heating. Most cooking was done outside the home, in a small beehive-shaped oven. Each day the women ground grain to make bread which was formed into flat cakes and slapped against the outside of the oven to cook, or it was formed into loaves the size of our dinner rolls to be cooked inside the oven after the fire's ashes had been swept out.*

Family meals. *Meals were simple – a bit of bread and some fruit was eaten in the middle of the morning, and a larger meal in the evening. The evening meal was generally eaten with the family seated on the floor, with one or more common dishes laced on a circular leather or skin mat. Family members ate with their hands, soaking up any juices with bits of bread. Meat was a rarity in the Israelite daily diet; protein came from milk or cheese, and occasionally from dried fish.*

Indoor cisterns. *About the time the Israelites invaded Canaan a means of storing water in porous soil was invented. Bell-shaped hollows were dug in loose rock and sealed with a waterproof plaster. Rainfall was sparse in the hills where the Israelites settled, so this invention was essential to the people's survival. A complicated system of channels collected rainwater and fed it into an indoor reservoir. The channels were filled with traps designed to filter out impurities.*

Most household cisterns of this period held twenty to thirty cubic yards of water, enough to provide a year's drinking water for six to twelve people. Because children were so highly valued, large families were the norm, and the four-room house was normally crowded.

Making clothing. *A major task of women in OT times was clothing the family. Most wore woolen garments. The women and girls carded the wool to strip fibers from it. They then spun the fibers together to create threads. Then they wove the threads together on a loom to create cloth. Women frequently wove cloth on a ground loom. Parallel rows of pegs were driven into the ground. Threads were tied between the pegs to form the warp of the cloth, and other threads were then interwoven. Upright looms also were used. To create an upright loom poles were driven into the ground and a crossbeam was set between them. Threads weighted with stones were hung from the crossbeam to create the warp of the cloth. Other threads were interwoven and tied to the vertical poles.*

Linen clothing was made from flax. The plant was dried, beaten to extract fibers, and the same process used in weaving woolens was then followed.

It is no wonder, given the work involved in making cloth, that most Israelites used the heavier outer robe they wore on colder days as a blanket at night.

Helping outdoors at harvest time. *While these in-house tasks kept women and girls busy, when harvest time came they worked beside their men in the fields. While the men cut grain with hand sickles, the women followed closely behind to tie the stalks into bundles that were then tented upright for drying. When grapes or olives were harvested, the women also worked beside the men. Harvest time involved hard outdoor work, but it provided a break from normal routine and a time for feasting and celebration.*

Today we would hardly call the lifestyle I've just described as fulfilling. It was a hard life, with none of the stimulating advantages we appreciate so much today. Yet there was no question about the significance of women in this society. Women and men were truly interdependent. The contribution of each to the family was understood and appreciated. Men and women faced life's challenges together as partners.

While there were undoubtedly both happy and unhappy marriages, few marriages existed in which people were uncertain about their roles or in doubt about the importance of their contribution to spouse and family.

In praise of wives:

If we were to ask whether women were valued as persons in OT times, we could hardly do better than to turn to Proverbs 31. While the description was written after the age of judges, it does provide unique insight into how the women who filled the traditional roles were viewed in that society and into the abilities needed if women were to be successful. While the prescription portrays a woman in a family who is far wealthier than most of her contemporaries, the advantages she enjoys enrich rather than diminish the OT's window into the lives of ordinary women.

What does Proverbs 31:10-30 reveal: Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies. The heart of her husband safely trusts her; so he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life. She is virtuous, trustworthy, and committed to doing good.

She seeks wool and flax, and willingly works with her hands. She is like the merchant ships, she brings food from afar. She also raises wheat while it is still night, and provides food for her household, and a portion for her maidservants. She fulfills all the traditional household roles performed by women, working hard to care for her family.

She had deep concern for the needy as well as for the welfare of her family. She extends her hand to the poor, yes, she reaches out her hand to the needy.

She is not afraid of snow/or cold because her household is clothed warmly.

She thinks enough of herself to enjoy the luxuries her hard work makes possible for her. She considers a field and buys it; from her profits she plants a vineyard. She takes steps to sell any excess produced in her household.

She girds herself with strength, and strengthens her arms. She perceives that her merchandise is good and her lamp does not go out by night.

She is not simply known as her husband's wife; he is also respected as her husband! The good wife is valued for her wisdom as well as for her work. She is sensitive to what is happening in her household and offers

good counsel in a loving way. Her reward is the love and praise of her children and the knowledge that what she values is pleasing to the Lord.

One of the most important contributions of Proverbs 31 to a biblical view of women is found in an analysis of the traits required to function as a women in OT society.

In our day we're familiar with stereotypes that too often are used to determine appropriate male and female roles. We assume a man is more aggressive and better equipped to earn a living in a competitive world. We assume a woman is more nurturing and is the appropriate person to care for children. So men should work outside the home, and women should work at home. We assume a man has a mathematical mind, so men should be engineers and scientists. Women are more verbal, so they make good teachers and social workers. Men see the big picture, so they should be bosses. Women are better at details, so they should be secretaries.

While such stereotypes are debunked today, most in our society still assume that basic differences do exist between men and women, and that these differences mean that men are better suited for certain jobs and women are better suited for other jobs. The disparity in pay between men and women in the workplace also reflects the persistent notion that somehow men bring more to any job than a woman does. For many Christians, these notions are justified by what they *suppose the Bible teaches, even though proof texts are hard to find. So it is beneficial to examine Proverbs 31 and see what contribution it may make to a truly biblical understanding of the issue.*

The Women Mentioned In Judges:

Successful women in OT times needed similar gifts and abilities to carry out their responsibilities that successful men of the same period used. That woman's tasks were focused inside the household and man's tasks were focused on the fields does not change the fact that there was no essential difference in the personal qualities needed to fulfill their social roles. We can hardly support modern stereotypes of supposed men's and women's roles from data in the OT. Women were no less equipped for success by nature than were men.

At the same time, we must remember that ancient Israel was a patriarchal society. The priesthood passed from father to son and no woman served the Lord as a priest. The Levites who served the Tabernacle and later in the Temple were also men, although later there were women singers in choirs that led the people in worship. Throughout the period, male elders led local communities. Ultimate responsibility for the well-being of the family did rest on the men, who retained veto power over certain of the choices which might be made by their wives or daughters. It is not surprising that we do not find women filling such roles. In a strongly patriarchal society we would not expect women however gifted, to be accepted in social roles that violate the social expectations.

This, of course, makes the emergence of Deborah as a judge even more remarkable. Israel's judges were the recognized leaders of the tribes they served. A judge in those days combined in one person all branches of government: executive, legislative, and judicial. The fact that the Bible describes Deborah as a prophetess in one way explains the nations acceptance of her as a judge. While later rulers assembled prophets to advise them, possession of the gift of prophecy was never viewed as a qualification for any governmental office. Religious positions were inherited: only a male descendant of Levi could serve in the worship center; only a male descendant of Aaron could serve as a priest.

But even in this patriarchal society, where men held every significant leadership role, Deborah emerged as a judge. All of the people in the tribes she served submitted to her leadership.

Without the example of Deborah we might perhaps conclude that gender somehow was disqualifying in itself, and that women may have been viewed as inferior in OT times. But Deborah's judgeship prevents us from jumping to this kind of conclusion. In a strongly patriarchal society, we **expect** men to function as leaders. But Deborah reminds us that what restrained more women from serving as leaders was not inherent in a woman's nature, but rather was inherent in those expectations that were deeply imbedded in society.

Far more significant for our understanding of women as persons is the descriptions of the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31. That passage clearly testifies to the fact that to successfully fulfill a woman's role in OT times required an exercise of the very same abilities required to become a successful man in that day. In this respect women were understood to be equals of men, and their contributions to the family were as necessary and as important as that of their husbands.

Anymouse