

Christian Use of Torah to Justify Female Subjugation

Breshith

Since the beginning of the Christian Church the Hebrew Torah has been used as a Law by which it can be ‘proven’ that women are subject to men. The Epistles of Paul form much of the foundation of the Christian faith, being even more contemporary to the life of Christ than the Gospels. Writing only fifty years or so after the death of Jesus, Paul claimed to speak for the Law to both Jew and Gentile. This is telling because it is part of Catholic Doctrine that the Epistles are the true inspired words of God; that Paul’s letters of instruction are infallible.

But Paul was of dual citizenship, his mother being a Jew and his father a Roman (Acts 21:26-28; Phil. 3:4-5). We know that he spoke a dialect of Hebrew (Acts 21:40), even though his letters are written in a strange dialect of Greek (*Catholic Encyclopedia* 05692b “Scriptural Languages”). As an individual who has been examining the various versions of the Bible including their correlation and differences it is very obvious to this author that many Hebrew terms and concepts do not lend themselves easily to the Greek language. This is especially true of the words which define Deity. The Hebraic significance which is found in the mosaic of names and titles given to God is lost in Greek and Latin, the two major Gentile languages of the period. It has also been postulated that Paul’s references to the Torah were not to the Hebrew text at all but to a Greek (and thus more accessible) translation called the *Septuagint*.¹

¹ *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* “Septuagint Version” states that “The Apostles and Evangelists utilised it also and borrowed Old Testament citations from it, especially in regard to the prophecies.” This leads me to believe that errors of translation which exist in the *Septuagint* became part of Paul’s later education and, thus, heavily influenced his writing.

The *Torah* itself is only a small part of the Hebraic teachings and theological structure. Just as the *New Testament* is supplemented by the writings of the Church Fathers, so too does a huge body of knowledge exist which extends from the foundation of the *Torah*. Any detailed study of the Qabalah will make it readily apparent that there is much more to the Hebrew Law than can be expressed in a mere five books. The sixty plus volume *Talmud*, an examination and intellectual development of *Torah* took over three hundred years to compile. It is said that a person can spend their entire lives studying only a small portion of the Torah and never exhaust its riches or uncover all of its secrets. This is one of the problems that we have with interpreted translation, a problem systemic to the Christian, and subsequently Catholic, faith.

When examining the roles of men and women in the world we find that most people turn to the first three chapters of the Torah. Almost all Christians, without exception, will argue that these texts prove, without question, that women were made by God to be subservient to men. These chapters have been held over the heads of women to justify their most unholy treatment by men claiming that it is their divine right to rule over the imperfect woman. We will look at some of these arguments and question their validity in light of the problems which have been discussed above and the inner traditions associated with Hebraic Theology.

Gender Genesis

In the Genesis story Elohim² creates the universe in chapter one. The creation of Humanity is of a single act which is broken down into greater detail in chapter two. In chapter three everything falls apart and the woman is blamed for The Fall. These three chapters form the basic justification for Man's rightful and divine power over Woman, a concept quite contested in our modern society. Still, these

² In Hebrew there are several names for the Divine. Elohim (אֱלֹהִים) is one such name. This is the Creator God of Genesis 1. On the Otz Chiim (Tree of Life) it is associated with the sphere of Binah, the Supernal Mother.

problems, as they were formed in the Christian Church, did not exist in the same way within Jewish society. Although supposedly based on the same evidence, Jewish culture adheres more to the “Two Human Natures” theory³ of the universe rather than the Christian’s view of household hierarchy.⁴ The Jewish man and the Jewish woman are both expected to study *Torah* as well as attend synagogue and perform religious duties, duties which are also different for a man than a woman.⁵

Our initial point of ‘proof’ that the female is subordinate to the male is the idea that Man was created first and in the Image of God. Although the Hebrew reads ha-adam, THE adam, most translators have interpreted this as being a man named ‘Adam’ a word meaning ‘of the red earth’. In Genesis 1:26 Elohim creates ha-adam “both male and female” simultaneously. In Genesis 2 we are introduced to the idea that there is a single human being for which there is no equal. HaShem Elohim must then create another human. This deliberation is important because humanity is not brought forth from the Earth like other creatures but rather each must be specifically fashioned by the hand of God and placed in the Garden.⁶

The Catholic argument states that, because the woman, Ishsha, is created second to the man, Ish, that she is subordinate to him. Yet before this point in the story there is no Man or Woman, just Human, adam, sexless in a universe without separation. If she is created as a suitable helper to him then

³ This theory of Gender relations essentially states that men and women are not the same creature at all. Instead it sees them as different, albeit complementary, beings. In *Torah* this manifests in different sets of Mitzvot for each sex as well as different types of work and purpose. This theory works very well in an agricultural or nomadic society. Many of these distinctions have become less clear in our postmodern age.

⁴ The Jewish Woman is not subservient to the Jewish Man in any way, rather they approach the world from different perspectives. Although the man rules the household’s external life (work, commerce, travel, etc..) the woman is the ultimate authority of its internal life. Both different but considered of equal value and necessity.

⁵ For example, the woman is the one to light the Shabbat candles. Because of this Law, a bachelor living on his own must sit in darkness from sunset on Friday to sunrise on Saturday until such time as he finds a wife. Some people point out that women do not study as much or perform the same rituals as men, but there are many reasons for which the Jewish tradition sees women as more holy than men and so men must work harder to achieve spiritual perfection.

⁶ For a more detailed examination of this argument please refer to the writings of Phyllis Trible.

it is obvious that she must be his to command and control. Yet that meaning is lost when one considers a very important aspect of Jewish spirituality, the Qabalah.

On the Tree of Life there are a series of spheres or Emanations, ‘Sephiroth’ in Hebrew, which define the universe through specific aspects of God and Life. One of the methods of creation upon the tree is the eternal creation and reconciliation of opposites as the creative force flows down into and through various forms of manifestation. In every level of the tree we find triangles representing opposites on either side and their sublimation in balance. In the ‘Supernal Triad’ we have the top three Sephiroth representing the Crown (Kether), Wisdom (Chockmah) and Understanding (Binah). Chockmah and Binah represent the supernal Male and supernal Female in the universe.

The Supernal Triad can be seen as a retelling of this story in a slightly different way, rather than telling a story of people, it tells the story of sheer energy. At the point of initial manifestation in Kether, there is no such thing as Male or Female, it is a perfect representation of Deity (at least as perfect as can be accomplished this side of the Veil of AIN) and is given the God Name Eheyeh (I AM or I LIVE). This can be thought of as the adam, the first manifestation of God through which He could encounter creation. Yet to be alone is insufficient for there is only so much universe that a single set of senses can experience, therefore the cascade begins and Chockmah is created. At the very instant Chockmah comes into being the energy flows *out of its side* and creates Binah, the supernal Mother. On the tree they stand equally at the head of their own pillars, neither one higher or lower than the other.

This is a very familiar story: “So Hashem God cast a deep sleep upon the man and he slept; and He took one of his sides and He filled in flesh in its place: Then Hashem God fashioned the side that He had taken from the man into a woman, and He brought her to the man:” (Gen. 2:21-22 *Stone Chumash*). Rabbi Hirsch says that this irrefutably proves the equality of Man and Woman, both

fashioned by God, both perfect in form. And God sets them side by side, not top to bottom, He places them together.

Perhaps the most oft cited ‘proof’ that the Torah supports the subjugation of women to men is the story of the Fall in Genesis 3. Here it is the woman who sins and causes her husband to sin and for this they are all punished. In that punishment are various charges that the woman be subject to her husband and that he shall rule over her (Gen. 3:16). Commentary on this verse states that the reason for this is not that the woman is inferior but rather that she influenced her husband to sin and so he shall have equal influence over her. What the Christians don’t realize is that there is another tradition that is relevant to this verse. Between 2:22 and 3:16 we can infer that a wife is a great gift from God, not a slave to be done with as one wills. They miss the fact that to have influence over someone is also to take on a great responsibility for that person’s wellbeing including health and safety. As such, any ill treatment of the wife is a sin against God. One needs only see the conversation between God and Hagar in Gen. 21 to realise the truth of this interpretation.

And yet there may be even more to this story. Although we generally think of the charge “to rule over you” as being that of a Master and Slave we miss one of the important concepts of the time period, the nature of life. Man is, generally, physically stronger than woman, especially in societies where there are no vitamin supplements or high nutritional standards (such as the agricultural and nomadic societies which were the birthplace of Judaism). This verse may also be interpreted as being a charge to the Man that he must protect and watch over the Woman. In the garden the worst thing that could happen to her was that the snake lied to her and tricked her into eating from the tree. Now, outside of Eden, a plethora of dangers await that her smaller stature would be entirely unable to defend against.

Certainly this idea of protection, which is often associated with rulership (consider the Feudal and Monarchical relationships where it is the King's duty to protect the populous) is obsolete in modern society. Yet to Paul, writing in the First Century e.v. there is no question that this must be absolute rulership. He interprets it not from the perspective of the Jewish Mystical tradition but from the Greek Philosophical tradition. He uses this passage and this particular translation in order to support a Grecian idea, which is that Men are in every way superior to Women and, to the budding Christian Churches, his word is equal to that of God and the Saviour.

Conclusions

It should be clear by now, through these brief examples, why there is a problem with the way the Church uses the Torah to validate its horrific treatment of women. Rather than looking at the Torah as a place to begin asking questions and exploring the Word of God or the Nature of the Universe, he is looking to it to justify what he has already decided to be truth through the previous work of his Roman countrymen. The Christian treatment of women owes far more to Plato and Aristotle than to Moses and Abraham.

There is no way to say that the Jewish tradition was perfectly supportive of woman's rights throughout its history, but they certainly were better off than the Christian interpretation of the same texts. For the Jew a wife is a great gift from God, for the Christian she is a slave whose only purpose is to give him sons. But Paul was an angry man who's misogyny came through very clearly in his instructions to his flock; instructions which became the infallible Word of God to the vast number of people which composed the Catholic Church, and through them all Christians across the globe.

Resources

- The American Standard Bible (1901) (electronic edition).
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- The Latin Vulgate (electronic edition).
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- The Septuagint (LXX manuscript) (electronic edition).
- Tribble, Phyllis. (1999). Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Re-read. In Kristen E. Kvam, Linda S. Schearing & Verlies H. Ziegler, *Adam and Eve: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.