

Understanding of Marriage and Family In the Old Testament--- *Rev. Fr. K. V. ALIAS*



Introduction

A definition to marriage given by R.K.Bower and G.L.Knapp reads, “A lifelong and exclusive state in which a man and a woman are wholly committed to live with each other in sexual relationship under conditions normally approved and witnessed to by their social group or society”. It is a covenantal relationship between two families, thus producing a larger kins group (Gen. 34:8-22).

In Hebrew culture, society was built on the family and family in turn on the institution of marriage. So, when think of family in the OT, we must begin with an understanding of marriage in the Old Testament.

Marriage in the Old Testament

The opening chapters of the book of the OT start with the narration of creation of the first husband and wife, viz. Adam and Eve. This story undoubtedly mentions that the practice was monogamy. Patriarchs in the line of Seth followed this practice (Gen.7:7-Noah and family). But the line of Cain was polygamous (Gen.4:19-Lamek). When it is with Abraham, he had Sarah as his wife. Sarah being barren, she readily gave her maid Hagar to Abraham to have a progeny. Finally we read that when Issac was born to Sarah, Hagar with Ishmael was deserted by Abraham as per the directive of Sarah.i.e. the children of the maid or concubine do not have the right of the children of a wife. Later, Abraham took Kethura as his wife, but only after the death of Sarah.

We have an Ancient West Asian document from 1700 BCE, the code of Hammurabi, which states that the husband may not take a second wife unless the first is barren; he can take concubine, but she has no right of a wife. This code also mentions that if the wife is barren, it is her responsibility to give her husband with a concubine so as to continue the family.

In the creation of the first family, what was the nature of the wife of Adam? Gen.2:18 reads, ‘...I will make him a helper as his partner’(Oxford Annotated NRSV). Adam created out of the mud was in the image of God and Eve made out of the rib of Adam was also in the image of God. The purpose of this creation is given as ‘a helper as partner’. The Hebrew phrase used here means ‘the one corresponding to’ or ‘fit for’ or ‘complimentary to’. Here the mutuality of the partners is emphasized. None is superior or inferior to the other.

Thus, equality of the sexes is implicit from the beginning. Eve, ‘the mother of all living’(Gen.3:20) is portrayed as distinctly as Adam in the picture of the

first couple. She is feminine representative of the race as Adam is the masculine representative (Gen.2:23). Her personality is as complete as Adam's; she is as rational and accountable as he is.

But after the fall, the position of the wife and the mother became less than equal. And the history of marriage and family takes a turn. The monogamous practice fell into disuse in Israel. We read that Gideon had 'many wives' (Jud.8:29-31). Bigamy is recognized as legal fact in Deut.21:15- 17. Limitless concubines in the upper social level kings and rulers have become a practice. At a later stage the Talmud restricted it to five. But the most common practice was monogamy. "The image of a monogamous marriage is before the eyes of those prophets who represent Israel as the one wife chosen by the one and only one God" (Hos.2:4f; Jer.2:2; Is.50:1; 54:6-7; 62:4-5). Wisdom literature also supports the view of monogamy.

An unmarried woman is under the authority of her father, where as a married woman under her husband. The Decalogue presents wife among the possession of man (Exo.20:17). But they were not slaves. She had power and authority over her husband's possessions though he was her master (Abraham obeys Sarah in sending away Hagar with her child. Gen.21:10-12). The child born in marriage belongs to father's family. By marriage a woman left her parents, went to live with her husband and joined his clan, to which her children would belong.

The practice of polygamy on the other hand created problem in families. To sort out such situations, regulations were made (Deut.21:15-17). This practice created families within the families. Thus, we could read about a mother centred community in Jud.9:1-2

We have no clear evidence about the age of marriage. In the book of Kings the age of accession of a king, length of his reign and the age of his son's succession are given. By calculation, then, we may come to a certain age; 15-18 as the age of marriage. But later the Rabbis fixed the minimum age as 12 for girls and 13 for boys.

Practice of Marriage

The father takes the decisions about his children's marriage. There is no consultation about this with the children. It was customary to take a wife from among one's own kith and kin (Gen.24:2- 4; Neh.13:25).

Engagement/betrothal is a promise of marriage made some time before the celebration of the wedding (Deut.20:7). It is a commitment almost as binding as marriage. Betrothed persons are referred to as husband and wife (Gen.29:21). Violation of betrothed state is adultery (Deut.22:23-25). The engaged man is excused from going to war. Mohar (bride money) agreement is reached on the day of betrothal. Romanticism and love marriages are not alien to the patriarchal world (Gen.29:20; 34:3; I Sam.18:20).

Marriage was purely a civil contract and was not sanctioned by any religious rite. A written marriage contract is mentioned in Tob.7:13. Code of Hammurabi declares that a marriage concluded without a formal contract is invalid. In Israel, acts of divorce were drawn up before exile (Deut.24:1-

3;Jer.3:8) and it would be surprising if contracts of marriage did not exist at that time, exclaims de Vaux.

The Elephantine contract formula (5th century BCE) goes like this. Husband, "She is my wife and I am her husband from this day for ever". The woman made no declaration (cf.Tob.7:11).

The marriage ceremony has three parts: entry of bride into bridegroom's house, wedding feast and the consummation. The chief ceremony is entrance. Bridegroom wearing a crown (Song.3:11;Is.61:10) is accompanied by his friends with tambourines and a band (I Mac.9:39). The bride is richly dressed and adorned with jewels (Ps.44:14-15), but wearing a veil (Song.4:1,3;6:7) escorted by her companions (Ps.45:15) was conducted to the bridegroom's house (Ps.45:16; cf.Gen.24:67). She takes off this veil only in the bridal chamber. Love songs were sung in praise of the new couple.

Next is the feast (Gen.29:22; Jud.14:10; Tob.7:14) which normally lasts for seven days (Gen.29:27; Jud.14:12) but could be prolonged to two weeks (Tob.8:20;10:7). The marriage was consummated in the first night itself (Gen.29:23;Tob.8:1). The blood stained linen of this nuptial night was preserved. It proved the virginity of the bride and would be an evidence if, she were slandered by her husband (Deut.22:13-21).

Divorce

A husband could divorce his wife; but a wife could not. Deut.24:1 speaks of divorce, but the reason is not very clear. Two rabbinic interpretations are available, viz.the Hillel and the Shammai. Adultery and misconduct are the only reasons for divorce as per the school of Shammai. But for the Hillel, any reason-cooked a dish badly or that the husband prefers another woman etc. could be reasons for divorce. Sirach 25:26 reads, "If she does not go as you direct separate her from yourself".

The form of divorce is very simple. The husband makes a declaration, 'She is no longer my wife and I am no longer her husband'. In Israel, Mesopotamia and Elephantine the husband should give a writ divorce (Deut.24:1,3;Is.50:1; Jer.3:8). This allows re-marriage of the woman (Deut.24:2). Wisdom literature praises conjugal fidelity (Pro.5:15-19;Eccl.9:9). Malachi teaches that marriage makes two partners one person (2:14-16). Jesus also re-iterates this (Mtt.19:1-9;5:31-32).

Family

Evidence of three kinds of family systems prevailed in AWA are available to us: fratriarchal, matriarchal and patriarchal. The Hebrew system was patriarchal and it still continues to be so. Genealogies are in father's line. The two Hebrew words used to denote family are 'bayit' and 'mishpahah'. Bayit is both place of dwelling (house) and the members living in there. Then, a family includes the 'father', his wife, his own and adopted children, his dependant relatives, his clients and his male servants and maid servants. Thus, the Hebrew family is large and extensive. Here father had absolute authority in the family over all the other members. He had even the right to

offer his children as sacrifice (Gen.22:9-10). He could destroy a member of the family (Deut.13:6-10). He also has the responsibility to teach them (Pro.1:8).

Mishpahah is a little more wider term. It is rendered into English as clan (Jos.7:14-18) and is an entity between the tribe and the family (I Sam.9:21). A 'feeling of solidarity' or 'sense of unity' that comes from a shared ancestry is the

sense of the term. In this sense we understand that the family in Israel is not merely a social system rather a religious community (totemic). All members are, therefore, obliged to protect the entire family through the correctness of their behaviour (Neh.4:14) and should fight for their defense.

'Go'el' (to protect or redeem) is a concept well known in Israel, an obligation of each member of the family property from being alienated (Lev.25:25; Rut.3:9,12). Right of go'el follows a certain order of kinship (Lev.25:49).

Conclusion

We were discussing the institutions of marriage and family as it is evident from the biblical narratives of the OT and from a few documents of the neighbouring people of ancient Israel. Comparing this with our practices today, we would be astonished to see that most of the ideologies and practices are the continuation or influences of that old customs and rites and practices. Oh! Sure, we are the traditionals.