

# Problem Passages – 3 – Treatment of Women

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*Adapted from "Is God a Moral Monster?" by Paul Copan*

## I. **The Problem Stated: Why does the Law of Moses seemingly treat women as second-class citizens?**

### A. **Examples**

1. A woman is unclean for 40 days after bearing a son, but 80 days after bearing a girl (Lev 12:2-5)
2. Women cannot be priests.
3. A man must marry his brother's widow.
4. A bride-price seems to suggest women can be traded.
5. What about concubines and bride-price?

### B. **God's Ideal**

1. Who is created in God's image in Genesis 1:26-27?
2. The creation of Eve, and the description of marriage emphasise oneness, equality and mutual love (Genesis 2:24). Eve is called a helper, a word used of God Himself in Ps 10:14.
3. Exodus 20:12, Proverbs 6:20 – who is to be revered?
4. What is the Bible's view of a wife? Proverbs 18:22
5. Many women are held in honour in Scripture, or were very influential: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, Tamar, The Hebrew midwives Shiprah and Puah, Miriam, Jethro's daughter (including Zipporah), Deborah, Ruth, Naomi, Rahab, Bathsheba and the Proverbs 31 woman.

### C. **The Law's Context**

1. The Law was given to an Ancient Near Eastern society.
2. The protection of women is built into the Law.
3. Women were equal before the Law, and received no more severe, or more lenient treatment than men.

### D. **Commands and Explanations**

#### 1. **The Trial of Jealousy – Numbers 5**

There is every indication that this law applied to men and women, Num 5:11-29. In fact, this practice protected a spouse – particularly a woman in a patriarchal society from the unreasonable jealousy of her husband. The supernatural test was to end the suspicion.

#### 2. **Impurity at Childbirth – Leviticus 12:1-8**

It is possible that this command was meant to separate Israel from the Canaanite emphasis on goddess worship, fertility cults and so on. However, even more likely is something in the text – verse 5. Newborn girls sometimes bleed because of the withdrawal of the mother's estrogen

when the infant exists the womb. This would be two sources of bleeding, over against one with the birth of a boy.

### **3. Levirate Marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5-10)**

As strange as this practice might seem to us, it was a form of protection. It kept a widow's belongings and inheritance in the family, whereas she could risk losing it if she married outside the family.

Compare this to Deut 21:17, where the daughters of Zelophehad appealed to Moses for their inheritance, since their father had died and there was no firstborn son. Moses met their request.

### **4. Your Neighbour's Wife (Ex 20:17)**

Are women equated with animals in the Ten Commandments? First, notice the equal honour that is to be given to father and mother. Second, nowhere in the Law could a wife be traded. She was not an object. Nor was she, as in other Near Eastern cultures, under the control of her son.

### **5. No Female Priests**

First, all of Israel was to be a kingdom of priest (Ex 19:6). Second, all the Canaanite religions involved various forms of sexual perversion in their temples and worship rituals. God made the Israelite priesthood monastic (not celibate!) Third, the principle of male headship in worship is repeated in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 11).

### **6. Polygamy**

1. It was a common Near-Eastern practice for men to take a female slave or concubine to bear children if their first wife was childless. Polygamy was given legal sanction in many other documents.
2. The attitude toward childbearing is behind the actions of Abraham and Jacob, though Scriptures seems to be showing the trouble, and not blessing that the bigamy or polygamy brought.
3. Kings were specifically told not to multiply wives for themselves (Deut 17:17). David and Solomon's actions were simply disobedient in this respect.
4. Leviticus 18:18 seems to explicitly forbid polygamy.

Do these texts support polygamy?

#### **David 2 Sam 12:8**

Did God give multiple wives to David? The word for gave is used again in verse 11 which shows that this does not always mean God's personal directive, as much as His sovereign oversight. The master of verse 8 is Saul, and David certainly did not marry Saul's wives, since this would have included incest, since he had already married Saul's daughter. The idea is simply a transfer of Saul's monarchy to David.

#### **The Unloved Wife Deut 21:15-17**

First, this is a case law again. “If a man steals an ox” - does not endorse stealing! It protects against favouritism. This is a situation which existed in the Near-East, and it regulates the practice. No doubt, many Israelites married more than one wife while in Egypt.

In the end, polygamy violated the Genesis 2 standard. Wherever it is recorded, it brings strife and disharmony. Lev 18:18 seems to outlaw it. The King was warned off it. In the end Proverbs 5:18-19 is the standard.

## **7. The Bride Price**

Our African context enables us to see this one without too much trouble. In many cultures, the bride-price, dowry, or lebola, rightly used, is a form of honour between families. The groom displays gratitude to the father-in-law. It serves as compensation for what she would have brought back to the family, And it even served as a kind of life insurance, should the husband die or divorce her.

## **8. Endorsed Rape? (Ex 22:16-17, Deut 22:23-29)**

There are three scenarios in the Deuteronomy passage:

- a) Consenting adultery v23
- b) The rape of an engaged woman whose innocence is presumed (v 25)
- c) The seduction of an unengaged woman v27, an expansion on the Exodus passage.

Critics tend to focus on verses 27 and 28. But these seem to follow the same scenario as the Exodus passage. The word for seize is different from the word for force in verse 25. Notice ‘they are discovered’, not ‘he’. The girl would have more trouble getting married, now and so the man must take responsibility. If the father wishes, the man must marry her and take care of her the rest of his life. If the father does not agree, he must still pay the equivalent of a bride-price.

## **9. Women POWs as War Booty? Deut 21:10-14, Deut 20:13-14**

The woman POW was protected by this law. She was not raped, and the Israelite could not marry her immediately. A period of reflection and mourning followed, where the Israelite soldier could change his mind before marrying her. If so, she was to be set free. However, if he married her, he had to take up his lifelong obligations to her.

It was understandable that women and children could be more easily integrated to Israeli society than men. Again, rape was not allowed.

## **10. A Women’s Hand Cut Off? (Deut 25:11-12)**

If this law does prescribe mutilation, it is the *only* instance of it. However, there is an alternative possibility. The word translated hand, *kaph*, refers to the palm-shaped hand, or a rounded, concave object. The usual word for hand, *yad*, is not used. The word *kaph* is sometimes used for the groin area (Gen 32:26). The Hebrew verb is not the strong form, but the weaker form, and when it is in this form, it is almost always translated ‘shave’ (Jer 9:26, 25:23, 49:32). It seems the idea here is that for the woman’s act of deliberately humiliating a man in this way, she would

receive a like humiliation. Shaving was always a sign of humiliation, and the shaving of her groin area would be an 'eye for an eye'.

This stands in contrast to other laws of the time, where a woman would have her eyes gouged out. Not ideal, but far more humane than anything around at the time.