Sexuality in Ancient Israel: Two Contrasting Models

1. Introduction

Sexuality is certainly at the core of the HIV and AIDS threat and needs to be dealt from a biblical perspective. The word "sexuality" is used mainly in two ways: The first signifies sexual orientation or preferences. A second prominent use of this word is to mean the sexual acts. It is in the latter sense the word is used in this paper. In this paper, I would like to describe and contrast two socio-economic realities in ancient Israel in order to explore the social and economic implications of sexuality.

2. Case Study 1: Ancient Israelite Tribal Society

Ancient Israel was a tribal society, which later evolved into a monarchic state and continued to be so until the fall of Jerusalem and exile in the sixth century BC. The tribal society and monarchy are two entirely different entities: socially, economically, politically and religiously. These two realities of ancient Israel present us with the possibility of studying the implications of the various aspects of these two entities for the sexuality of its people. We may start with the tribal Israel and try to find out how the sexuality of this period is explained by its particular structure and values.

2.1 Near Absence of Prostitution

Textual and archaeological evidences show that in tribal Israel, incidents where women were forced into selling their bodies for livelihood was very less or not attested. First of all, many scholars think that the legal sanctions against harlotry and improper social behaviour reflect conditions of the monarchic period: for example, the sanction, "Do not profane your daughter by making her a prostitute" (Lev 19:29).

Secondly, some evident cases of harlotry that is reported neither are not genuine incidents of harlotry nor are incidents were Israelites were involved. For example, according to Judges 11:1, Jephthah is the son of a harlot but it is not clear if she was an Israelite woman. Another case of harlotry is that of Tamar (Gen 38) but however she was not a professional harlot. She pretended to be a harlot to become pregnant with her father-in-law who has denied her a husband. Moreover the narrator of this section does not condemn her for her act but rather justifies her (Gen 38:26). Her intention was not mere sensual pleasure nor economic. It is also not established the village of Enaim where she waited for her father-in-law to look for a harlot was in Israelite territory.

2.2 Absence of Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Studies on sickness and diseases, especially paleopathological studies have confirmed this observation. Paleopathological studies haven't proved the existence of sexually transmitted diseases in the biblical period. Joseph Zias has pointed out that the only evidence for Syphilis in ancient Palestine is that of nonvenereal Syphilis (which is not transmitted through sexual contact), and is attested only in the records of the Turkish period among Bedouin and Arab population in Palestine. The suggestion that the account of the death of 24,000 Israelites who came in contact with Moabites could be a case sexually transmitted disease (Num 25:9) is not supported by paleopathology. Though the passage very clearly states that the Israelite men had sexual union with Moabite women, Max Sussman proposes that it could be some infectious diseases of which the Moabites were immune and thus carriers but the Israelites were susceptible and not a case of sexually transmitted disease.

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1 Paleopathology: A branch of science that deals with pathological conditions found in ancient human and animal remains. This branch is helpful in our understanding of the history and prevalence of various diseases.
A Canaanite prostitute called Rahab and her family were integrated into Israel after the fall of Jericho, partly as reward for conspiring with the Moses Group to conquer her city, Jericho. Probably there were many such prostitutes who were similarly integrated. There is no evidence that she continued her occupation after joining Israel. Moreover, evidence shows that she or any woman like her did not resort to just means of livelihood. Norman Gottwald has pointed out that Rahab probably ran an inn in Jericho and lived with her family (“House of father” which was the basic social and economic unit). The presence of flax in her house (Josh 2:6) indicate that her family engaged in agriculture (probably as tenant farmers) but economic hardships forced her to engage in selling her body for her customers in order to support her family. The fact that she helped the Israelite spies and thus taking a high risk was her attempt to get out of the exploitative situation that she was in.  

The socio-economic structure of the Israelite tribal society was such that she nor any women like her did not engage in offering their bodies to customers in order to support themselves. The nature of their faith and the nature of their society: its shared valued and goals are the main reason for this unique situation in Israel which we may explore briefly.

2.3 Nature of Ancient Israelite Society

There are at least three models to explain how Israel came to control the land of Canaan. The first namely, the Conquest Model suggests that Israel conquered the Canaanites by a sweeping and concerted action of all the tribes of Israel. Though this is the conventional position, which comes from a peripheral reading of the book of Joshua fails to explain the text itself and also the archaeological evidence. The second model namely, the immigration model suggests that the elements who formed early Israelite tribal confederation immigrated to the land in different waves over long period and lived among the Canaanites for a long time until a polarization occurred. However, this contradicts the evidence of the Biblical text, which indicate there were bloody battles and also the archaeological evidence of destruction of Canaanite cities and the new settlements in the central highlands. The third model known as the peasant revolt model believes that the tribal society of Israel emerged as the result of a revolt against the Canaanite feudalism. This model was first proposed by George Mendenhall and later modified and elaborated by Norman Gottwald. Without going for an evaluation of these three models, which is beyond the scope of our present concern, I would like to say that the third model is adequately supported by the biblical witness and archaeological discoveries. Insights from this model are used in this paper for our study.

During the Amarna period, the underclass of the Canaanite society had fled from the plains where they worked as farmers and herders for the Canaanite feudal lords to the central highlands and set up an El-Federation. This was a new society based on equality and mutual support. The name of this group –Israel- means either “God Rules” or “May God show himself as ruler” is an indication of their denial of any human overlordship over them. This group was joined by another group of former slaves who came via the desert claiming to have a similar experience under another God called Yahweh, who liberated them from the bondage of Imperial Egypt. This group, which can be called the Exodus Group or the Moses Group catalyzed a revolt against the Canaanite city-states and overthrew many of them. According to this model ancient Israelite society emerged as a result of a revolt of the peasants against their feudal lords in Canaan. The faith and experience of the group that came from the wilderness (the exodus group/Moses group) became the normative for the new society. Their God became the God of the new society, and the covenant that he had made with the Moses group the covenant that regulated the life of the new society.

This new society was in contradistinction to the Canaanite city-states in every aspect. Their religious beliefs and practices, their social structure, their political structure and their economics were innovative and in reaction to that of the Canaanites of their time. Gottwald describes this society as,

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"a synthetic egalitarian, intertribal counter-society, originating within and breaking off from hierarchic, stratified Canaanite society."\(^6\)

It was dialectically opposite to the Canaanite feudal system. Instead of a feudal system where economy was in the control of a few landed aristocrats, they had a new economic system defined by their faith in Yahweh God. God Yahweh who made a covenant with them owned the land (Lev 25:23) and his laws governed the land and their lives. The building blocks of this society were self-sufficient economic units in the form of immediate families and extended families. It developed its ethos to handle threats that could have annihilated the society from within and without.

Gottwald further describes this society as,

Israel thought it was different because it was different: it constituted an egalitarian social system in the midst of stratified societies, a system which congealed diverse peoples and functioned viably in the Canaanite highlands for at least two centuries.\(^7\)

2.4 Economy

The members of the El-Federation and the Yahwistic group who joined them in overthrowing the Canaanite city-states established a new economic structure also. While the Canaanites maintained a tributary model (where the ruling elite tapped a significant portion of agricultural produce by way of tributes) the new society had a "communitarian economy", which allowed them to dispose of all their resources as they willed without the ruling class having any claim on their production.

In addition to this communitarian economy they had a system of mutual aid. The “house of father” or simply “house” was the basic economic unit. They were self-sufficient and many of these related units formed a clan. Each clan had their own festival where the clan members met in order to reinforce their identity and bonding. This clan system provided a network of mutual aid and defense.

They had built in leveling mechanisms in order to discourage accumulation of wealth at the expense of others, for example the observance of the Sabbath year and the Jubilee. They were committed to each other through covenant relationship where the covenant laws were intended to protect the egalitarian, communitarian economy of the tribal league. For example, the commandment "do not covet your neighbors house" (Exod 20:17) was a strong injunction against even thinking of accumulating the wealth of others. The law prohibiting adultery, coveting neighbors wife protected the family life in the Tribal league. They were not simply rules of the society but formed the inseparable parts of the covenant through which they are committed to the God liberated them and also to the members of the league.

2.5 The Nature of their Religion

Like most religions of the Ancient West Asia, the Canaanite religion(s) were mainly fertility cults, which promoted debasing sexual acts. Male and female prostitution in the context of cult was very common in Canaan until Israel entered the land and continued among the Canaanites even after the occupation of Canaan by the Israelites.

Along with the cult of the dead, sexual fetishism was a tool of exploitation in the hands of the ruling class. Canaanite religion like other fertility cults mythologized sex and sexuality. In the pantheon of the Canaanites, Egyptians, or the Babylonians every divine being was paired with it binary sexual opposite. For example the Canaanite god was paired with his female counterpart Anaath. So also El with Asherah. Thus the epics of the non-Israelite religions of the ancient days were full of stories of the love-hate, and sex, and seduction. Sexual fetishism was an exploitative tool in the hands of the ruling class which pushed considerable number of women to prostitution.

In contrast to the religions of her neighbors, Israelite religion separated sex and sexuality from the realm of the divine. Frymer-Kensky has summarized the Israelite religious situation in the following words:

The God of the Bible is male, which would make it difficult for him to represent the sex drive to a male. Even more, the God of Israel is only male by gender, not by sex. He is not at all phallic, and cannot

\(^6\) Gottwald, Hebrew Bible, p. 692.
\(^7\) Gottwald, Hebrew Bible, p. 693.
represent male virility and sexual potency. Anthropomorphic biblical language uses body imagery of the arm, right hand, back, face and mouth, but God is not imagined below the waist.\(^8\)

These observations should not lead us to believe that Yahweh is against sex and sexuality. This aversion is limited to sexuality in the divine realm but in the human realm it is encouraged and regulated in order to optimize its purpose. Sex was not a taboo in the ancient Israel. However, symbols close to sex and sexuality were in fact used to understand the spiritual realities. For example, prophets and poets of used the metaphor of marriage, husband-wife relationship, womb etc. to portray various aspects of Yahweh's relationship with human beings and especially with the nation. For example the marriage of Hosea depicts Yahweh's relationship with the nation (Hos 1-3). Anderson also points out that the womb is the symbol of Yahweh's mercy and compassion (Jer 31:20 and Hos 11).\(^9\)

However, in the new society of Israel, sex was a reproductive means and was detached from the cult. Their religion was devoid of sex. And by integrating women into self-supporting family units they were able to reduce prostitution to the level of eradication.

2.5.1 Role of Women

The high regard for women in their society is another reason for the promotion of proper sexuality in tribal Israel.

The stories that the tribal Israel preserved indicate the high social standing that women had in this new society. The story of the Hebrew midwives who outwitted the Pharaoh, the story of the another women who saved her son by hiding him among the reeds, a girl who brings back her brother to his mother to be brought up by her; this girl then turns out to be a great leader of their liberation movement. The prophet Micah preserved an ancient memory of these women later when she considered her at par with Moses and Aaron as the leaders of Israel.

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For I brought you up out of the land of Egypt,
And redeemed you out of the house of bondage.
I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam (Micah 6:4).
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Life of the tribal Israel is also dotted with women of high profile who served them as deliverer judges like Deborah. Women played a very important role in this society as leaders, and having crucial role along with men in the production and distribution. In this society women were not objects of sexual exploitation but leaders and had an equal standing with men in every aspect of life.

Anthony Ceresko has finds economic reasons for this higher role of women in the tribal society of Israel.

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... In the context of the frontier conditions of the opening up of the central highlands, women's participation in activities outside the immediate context of household duties was necessary. These activities included clearing the land and raising and harvesting crops. Even more essential in a situation of restricted population was their role as childbearers. Both their necessary involvement in duties outside the household and their crucial contribution to the increase in numbers led to an enhancement of their value and status within the community as a whole.\(^11\)
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Moreover, as long as harlotry was the offshoot of economic necessities, the new egalitarian society with its autonomous productive units, which provided for its members meant that women did not have to sell their bodies to support themselves.

3. Case Study 2: The Period of Monarchy

The tribal society was able to hold on for about 200 years until the emergence of a monarchical state with its own values and ethos. Israelite State is described as a secondary state: Secondary states either emerge from the collapse of other states or due to the influence of or confrontation with

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10 See also Exod 15:20 and Numbers 12.

a neighboring state. The request of the elders of Israel (1 Sam. 8.5) to have a king in the manner of other nations supports this suggestion.12

There are a number of models for the emergence of the states. One factor common to all these models is that states emerge for economic reasons. According to the "urbanization model" of V.G. Childe (1950; 1951:157ff), the surplus in agricultural production leads to urbanization. This leads to concentration of wealth in certain social groups and leads to stratification of society. As agrarians turn to other occupations and trade, a central authority becomes necessary. Thus according to this model, the emergence of a state is an economic necessity resulting from excess wealth.13

According to the "warfare model" of Carneiro and later Webster, warfare is a catalyst for processes, which effect the creation of governmental institutions. However, in this case also, economic factors like surplus agricultural production, specialization of occupations etc leads to conflicts and emergence of military leadership.14 The third model also emphasizes the role of trade necessitated by the demand of goods produced in other areas. This in turn brings out stratification and administration leading to the emergence of states. The fourth model finds the reason for the emergence of state in the relationship between nomads and sedentary population. One group of the raiding nomads become prominent and bring the sedentary population under their control by protecting them from the other nomadic groups and it give raise to the emergence of states.15 Chaney (1986) postulated that two factors led to the rise of the monarchy—a Philistine threat to Israelite economy from the outside and the emergence of an economic elite from the inside. Technological innovations—terracing, plastered water cisterns and especially the use of iron, brought about the intensification of human activity in the hill country and the production of agricultural surpluses. This, in turn, facilitated the regions' economic independence. But the prosperous hill country agriculture attracted Philistine aggression, which, in turn led to the emergence of the monarchy.16

Gottwald has argued in a similar line that the increase in agricultural production lead to administrative structures and organizations beyond the family units.17 After examining various theories on the emergence of states, Finkelstein has suggested that the emergence of monarchy and state in Israel is a combination of factors.

...Geographical and social circumscription; population increase creating pressure for the conquest of new frontiers for cultivation; intensification of agricultural activity which produces surpluses and creates social stratification; inter- and intra-regional trade between specializing groups in different ecological niches which leads to the rise of advanced administration; and external conflict which unites the population under one military leadership.18

The common denominator in all these factors is economic. Increase in population, which put stress on demand for land, surplus agricultural production leading to trade are the main reasons for the emergence of state in Israel.

3.1 Nature of Israelite Society in Monarchic Period

Whatever the reasons for its coming into being, Israelite society under monarchy was very different from that of the tribal period. As we have seen, monarchy itself was necessitated by the social and economic changes that Israel went through. The state incorporated in to itself, the old tribal confederacy of Israel and the Canaanite population who were absorbed through conquests.

One important aspect of this new Israelite monarchic state was social stratification, which replaced the egalitarian, family unit based tribal system governed by village elders and tribal leaders. The ruling elite could now impose their decisions on the majority by force if needed. While, imposing

14 Finkelstein, "Emergence of the Monarchy," p. 50.
18 Finkelstein, "Emergence of the Monarchy," p. 64.
discipline, or protecting the people was the duty of the people selected by the family, tribe or clan from time to time whenever there was a threat, in the monarchy this citizens army was replaced by a standing army which included professional soldiers and foreign mercenaries.

According to the Yahwistic traditions that governed the life of tribal Israel the land belonged to Yahweh who has parceled out to his covenant partners (the tribes) in such a way they can provide for themselves and their families from the produce of the land. Now the model of the Canaanite city-states that the monarchy imposed on them, the excess production from agriculture or livestock went to the ruling elite by way of taxation. Thus, the peasants, and farmers had to support not only themselves but also the ruling elite who lived lavishly on their efforts. The land now belonged to the king who could take the land away, annex to crown property, or distribute as he likes. The extended families’ right to hold their patrimony vanished and the land was now open for sale and purchase. Thus accumulation of wealth and emergence of large estates becomes a reality just like the old Canaanite feudal system. The contributory economy of the tribal confederation slowly gave way to the tributary system against which they rebelled and liberated themselves from 200 years ago. Emergence of large estates (latifundium) was one of the social issues that Isaiah addressed (Isa 5:8) and Micah (2:1-2). This resulted in the raise of countless landless people.

3.1 Religious Changes

If Yahweh was the liberator of the tribes, under monarchy, Yahweh became the patron deity of the state with an elaborate cult. The temple, which was an innovation of the monarchy, was the royal sanctuary. The ark of the covenant, the symbol of the rule of Yahweh for the tribes was relocated to it. An expensive, lavish cult with professional priests, musicians and artisans emerged and replaced or pushed the local shrines of the tribes in to the background. The monarchs were the patrons of Israelites religion and the Royal theology of a permanent dynasty and a Zion theology which legitimized the previously non-Israelite city of Jerusalem, slowly replaced a religion based on the covenant at Sinai.

The incorporation of Canaanites into the Davidic and Solomonic empire had serious religious and social implications. The Temple and its symbolisms had Canaanite influences: The ancient faith in Israel was diluted by the incorporation of Canaanites who brought their beliefs and value systems to the main stream Israel.

3.2 Implications of Monarchy for the Sexuality in Israel

One fallout of the changes that monarchic state ushered in is increase in improper sexual behavior among Israelites. The classical prophets provide us enough clues to the social and moral life of Israel under monarchy. There are ample indications that the socio-economic scenario was such that women were forced to selling their bodies.

In a number of passages in the prophets, harlotry is used figuratively for the spiritual apostasy of the people. For example, the following passages in Jeremiah make figurative use of this practice:

“For of old time I have broken your yoke, and burst your bonds; and you said, I will not serve; for on every high hill and under every green tree you did bow yourself, playing the prostitute” (Jer 2:20).

Or

“Moreover Yahweh said to me in the days of Josiah the king, Have you seen that which backsliding Israel has done? she is gone up on every high mountain and under every green tree, and there has played the prostitute” (Jer 3:6).

However, there are passages were it was also used in its literal sense. These are cases where prophets attacked people’s moral life and the sexual licentiousness. The passage in Jeremiah 5 is clearly on the sexual immorality that was prevalent in Judah the seventh century where brothels flourished and the strictures of the family were broken for the sake of illicit sex.

How can I pardon you? your children have forsaken me, and sworn by them that are no gods: when I had fed them to the full, they committed adultery, and assembled themselves in troops at the prostitutes’ houses. They were as fed horses roaming at large; everyone neighed after his neighbor’s wife (Jer 5:7-8).

19 For example the story of Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21).
The narratives also underpin the moral situation that prevailed in the period of monarchy. At the fountain head of the monarchy is a king (David) who is censured by God for adultery with his own employee’s wife.

Women’s role in monarchical Israel was less significant than that in the tribal period. Their involvement in economic processes was not crucial. Women deprived of access to family’s financial resources being dependent on their fathers or husbands might have resorted to selling their bodies in order to pay their religious vows. Taking the case of Proverbs 7, Karel Van Der Toorn has pointed out that at some stage in Israel’s history, women in Israel were forced to engage in prostitution in order to raise money for their religious vows. In a stratified, patriarchal society women had no recourse to money. Her husband or father had the right to annul a vow made by her since it is the male member who had to pay for the vows made by the female members. Thus women who had no access to the family’s financial resources had to sell their bodies and take to the streets to invite customers.

Micah’s censure against the offering from the wages of harlotry also indicates that women in Israel engaged in selling their bodies.

All her idols will be beaten to pieces,
And all her temple gifts will be burned with fire,
And all her images I will destroy;
For of the hire of a prostitute has she gathered them,
And to the hire of a prostitute shall they return (Micah 1:7).

Toorn comments:

The Temple used the money it thus acquired to pay for the production of divine images, among other things. Therefore, Mie 1:7 can speak of Samaria’s idols that have been gathered “from the hire of a harlot” (cf. also Isa 23:17-18).

4. Conclusion

Observations on the two contrasting socio-political realities in Israel (The tribal league and the monarchical state) leads us to conclude that sexual behavior is not just a question of morality but has religious, economic and social reasons. Israel’s unique faith in a unique God who entered into a relationship with his people (covenant) had adequately dealt with the roots of the problems of their behavior including sexual behavior. On the contrary, the monarchical state that ushered in drastic socio-economic changes along with the political changes and religious syncretism failed in this aspect of sexuality.

However, we should note that the Old Testament also records the prophetic protest against the evils of monarchical state. The prophetic movement in Israel, which has no parallel in ancient religions, stood against the moral, social and economic decay in Israel calling people to return to the covenant with Yahweh their liberator. The prophetic voice against the decadent values of the monarchy is the voice the church must try to recover. That voice is of social justice, economic equality, and faith in a God who makes moral demands in order to adequately deal with the issues of sexuality along with other ills of our generation.

5. Bibliography


21 Toorn, "Female Prostitution," p. 201.