

by Tarcísio Beal



iven the fact that discrimination against and mistreatment of women is carried out mostly by persons who call themselves Christian or religious and who adduce the Bible or their Holy Writ to justify their actions, I believe it is important to take a look at the validity of their claims.

Today millions of Catholics live the expectation that Pope Francis will finally carry on a major structural reform of the Catholic Church. However, if women in the Church are not accorded equal treatment and allowed to participate equally in running the institution and participating in ministry, reform will go nowhere. So far Pope Francis has said no to women in the priesthood. The Church's view on human sexuality needs a major overhaul as well.

Misogynism, or the hatred of and discrimination against women, is as old as humankind. Women have been the victims of the worst forms of discrimination because the male of the species has controlled familial, social, political, and religious systems ever since tribe and society were organized. Here I wish to address the justification of anti-female prejudice in the name of God and the Bible by arguing that it stands in frontal contradiction to the God of Jesus and to the example of Jesus and of the early Church. In this article, I will address the issue of how women are presented in the Old Testament; then I shall deal with it from the perspective of the New Testament.

As Jesuit biblical expert, John L. McKenzie, notes — it is absurd to read Genesis as telling us anything about the structure of the visible universe or displays the faintest notion of the process of its development: “The Bible cannot be defended by denying demonstrable scientific truth” or by reading it in contradiction to the God of Jesus of Nazareth. It was quite embarrassing for the Catholic Church when in 1909 the Vatican's Pontifical Biblical Commission (today's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith), which Pius X in 1907 had invested with “infallibility,” insisted that all Catholics must accept the first 3 chapters of Genesis literally. It fumbled badly again in its condemnation of Galileo in 1633.

Genesis also states what the Hebrew tradition failed to honor, namely, that God created both male and female in his own image, therefore radically equal and “divine” (Gen 1: 37). Genesis 2 does not, as has been interpreted, tell us that all humans originated from a single couple or that God gave Adam, the male dominion over Eve, the female. Genesis 3, the story of the Garden of Eve, has received all kinds of odd

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interpretations but it is actually a myth which deals with the realities of the human condition. To see the story of the apple and the serpent as related to uncontrolled sexual appetite is totally contrary to its meaning. For the Hebrews, the serpent was the symbol of the goddess of fertility, a cult typical of the ancient religions and from which the Israelites were to refrain. To see the apple and the serpent as symbols of sexuality is to miss the whole point of the story.

Reading the Old Testament literally creates all kinds of pitfalls which contradict the God of Jesus and the true God of Israel. It leads to **a god who tolerates slavery** (Gen 20: 17; Ex 21; Deut 16: 2-18; Lev 25: 44-46), **polygamy** (Gen 29: 15-30), **bigamy** (Gen 1: 43; 29: 15-30; Deut 21: 15-17), **incest** (Gen 31: 7-13; 38: 6-30), **rape** (Gen 38: 6-10), **concubinage** (Gen 22: 24; 29: 15-30; 35: 21-26) and **the abuse of people** without legitimate reason (Gen 16: 16). It **discriminates against women** (Num 12: 1-15; ch. 36; Lev 12: 1-5; 18: 20; Deut 20: 15-17; Lev 12: 1-5); **practices war, vengeance, and genocide** (Jos 6: 10, 11; Num 21; Sam 15) **making no distinction between the guilty and the innocent** (Ex., chs. 7-12; 15: 1-21; ch. 16; 23: 27-33; Psalms 2, 18, 20, 58, 68, 109, 135, 137, 149; Ez 21: 13-17; Gen 18: 16-32; Num 31: 1-8; Deut 7: 1-10), and **favors one person while cursing another** (Abel over Cain; Jacob over Esau). It **orders the death penalty against adultery** (Deut 22: 23-37; Judges 30), **blasphemy** (Lev 24: 13-14; 1 Sam 3: 2-15), **rebellious children** (Deut. 21: 18-21; Lev 20: 9), **a woman who marries, then is found not to be a virgin** (Deut 22: 13-21); and it **refuses to pardon certain offenses, no matter how small** (Deut 23: 4-7); 1 Sam 3: 12-15). It **praises the murder of a woman, then rewards the killer** and his descendants (Num 15: 6-15); **condemns witchcraft, then resorts to it** by ordering Moses to make a bronze serpent so that the Israelites who look at it can be spared from the plague (Num 21: 4-9). It **acknowledges the existence of other**





gods, but wants to be the greatest, so orders massacres and more massacres against Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites, and Jebusites, “who I shall exterminate” (Jos 7-12).

Obviously, these are not actions carried out or ordained by the true God of Israel but of a god manufactured to do the bidding of the writers of the Old Testament. Furthermore, fundamentalists read the Bible to suit up what they want to believe and disregard what they find inconvenient.

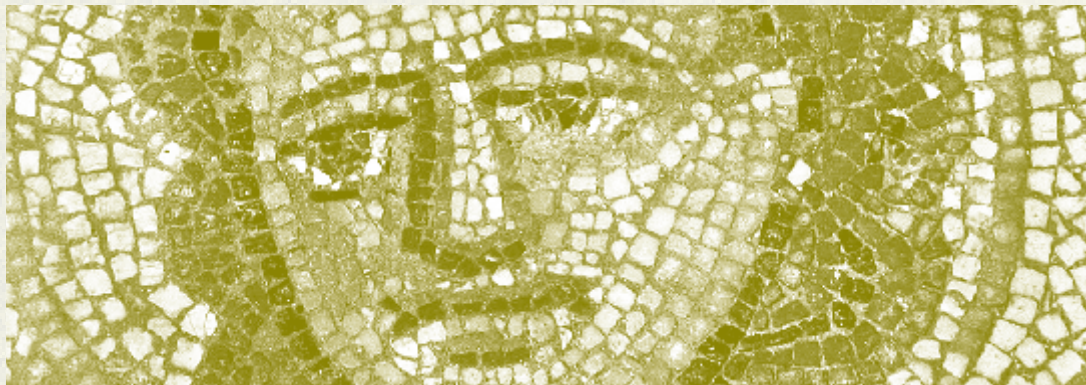
For instance, Deuteronomy 23: 20 prohibits charging interest on money or food or on anything lent to a neighbor, but allows charging interest to a foreigner. Leviticus 19: 27-28 commands that “you must not round off your hair at the edges nor trim your beard; and you are not to tattoo yourselves.”

As Phyllis Bird notes — ancient Israel inherited the taboos of clan and tribe and some filtered into the Bible. Sexuality was looked at from the male viewpoint, that is, as a form of domination. The woman was seen as an abnormality, her vagina as wound and her menstrual bleeding as a form of castration. The world of the Old Testament is a male’s world, it is about the wars of the males, the affairs of the males, their cult worship, government and laws. The latter were largely copied from ancient Mesopotamia and spelled out a system of patriarchy, with patrilineal descent and patrilocal residency, the extended family under one male, and the acceptance of polygamy, polygyny, and concubinage, the practice of slavery and a thorough enshrining of the double standard.

The community of ancient Israel — adds Bernard Prusak — was addressed through its male members in all laws containing specific religious obligations (Ex 20: 19, 22, 22-24, 31; Lev 13” 9, 40; Num 6: 2) and society was defined as a community of adult males (Ex 19: 14-15; Judges 7: 2; 4: 13) The wife’s contribution was through her sexuality, which was seen as the exclusive property of the husband. A woman’s adultery was a crime punishable by death (Lev 20: 10, 14), regardless of the rights of her proprietor, i. e., her husband. In the religious sphere, women were loaded with a number of disabilities. Israel’s oldest law was circumcision, the male initiation rite, a tradition inherited from tribal life, where it had prophylactic purposes. Only males were obliged to attend the main annual feasts, which were the most important acts of Israel as a community under God, and only males were allowed to offer sacrifices. The woman was forbidden to offer sacrifice because her active sexuality made her impure.

It would be no exaggeration to state that in ancient Hebrew society the female was a nonperson, a thing, an object, a piece of property. Most laws do not even acknowledge her existence, much less her rights and dignity. If she could not bear children, she as was seen as disgraced and abandoned by God, her status as a wife in jeopardy and she was denied the honor and authority attached to motherhood (Gen 16: 2ff, 15-20; 30: 1-8, 22-23, 26; 1 Sam1: 3-7, 11; 2 Sam 6: 20-23; 1 Kings 3: 16-27). The males

who abused women did it with impunity. David and Solomon have been glorified as great men while the record of the Books of Samuel and Kings say otherwise. Even the story of David slaying Goliath is contradicted in 2 Samuel 21: 19, 23, 24, where Elhanan, son of Jair of Bethlehem is listed as the slayer of Goliath. David had 16 sons altogether from 7 wives in Hebron, then Solomon and Ammon in Jerusalem from Bathsheba, whom he made one more of his wives by ordering the killing of her husband Uriah; then Yahweh kills the innocent son born out of the adultery, while David is left conveniently off the hook. The royal palace was full of intrigues, with David having ten more concubines. When his son Ammon rapes his sister Tamar, David does nothing but proclaim his love for Ammon. Enraged, his son



Absalom vows to kill his brother and later turns against his own father ( 1 Sam 16: 18; 2 Sam 3: 2-5; 5: 13-16; 21: 1-14; 20: 3; 1 Chron 3: 1-9; 1 Kings 1).

If David’s behavior was bad enough, that of his son Solomon, whom McKenzie calls “a thug like his father,” went beyond bad. It ended in idolatry and treason to Yahweh and slavery for his own people. He also betrayed the Covenant with Yahweh by worshipping Astrate, the goddess of the Sidonians, Milcom, the god of the Amorites, and Chemosh, the god of the Moabites, building shrines in high places for them so that his foreign wives could offer incense and sacrifice to their gods (1 Kings 11: 5-8). He was anything but a wise king. His lust for women surpassed that of any other historical figure: He is said to have had 700 wives of royal rank and 300 concubines (1 Kings 10: 14-29; 11: 3-4; 2 Chron 9: 1-18).

Now, while Genesis and Exodus have little which can be called historical, historical fact is transmitted in abundance in Chronicles, Kings, Samuel, and Judges. Still, the status of women in Israelite society improved only minimally. Only latest law codes grant women indirect and qualified equality (Num 6: 2ff; 30: 3-15). That’s why the behavior of Jesus toward women was so counter-culture and scandalized his contemporaries. I repeat once more: if we do not read the Bible from the perspective of the true God of Israel and of Jesus of Nazareth, it can be used to justify all kinds of behavior and horrors. To use the Bible to condemn, to exclude, to pass judgment right and left, to find what is not there, especially in terms of human sexuality, is to falsify it, and to insult the Holy Spirit. I shall return to this issue at a later date, as we look at women in the New Testament and the early Church. ♦

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