**Condition of the Women in Bible Times**

**The Original Condition**

The Bible record covers 1600 years, a number of countries, and a variety of sub-cultures—from that of a tent-dwelling family to the palace of a king. We are told:

"An understanding of the customs of those who lived in Bible times, of the location and time of events, is practical knowledge; for it aids in making clear the figures of the Bible and in bringing out the force of Christ's lessons."

*Counsels to Parents, Teachers and Students*, p. 518.

Eve, as well as Adam, was created in God’s image: Gen. 1:27

In his commentary on Genesis, Matthew Henry notes:

“If man is the head, she [woman] is the crown, a crown to her husband, the crown of the visible creation. The man was dust refined, but the woman was double-refined, one remove further from the earth…. The woman was *made of a rib out of the side of Adam;* not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.”

Original mandate and roles: Genesis 1:28

Famous rabbinic prayer:

"A man is bound to say the following three blessings daily: '[Blessed art thou...] who hast not made me a heathen,' '...who hast not made me a woman;' and 'who hast not made me a brutish man.'"

Eli Cashdan, *Menahoth* (London: The Soncino Press, 1948).

Another version of this prayer which originated some 2000 years ago goes like this:

"Blessed are you, Hashem, King of the Universe, for not having made me a Gentile."  
"Blessed are you, Hashem, King of the Universe, for not having made me a slave."  
Blessed are you, Hashem, King of the Universe, for not having made me a woman.

"*The Complete Artscroll Sidur*, Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1984.

It was really the life and teaching of Jesus that made a difference. He showed total acceptance and respect for all women, and they were greatly drawn to Him.

**It’s a Girl!**

* Zelophehad’s daughters: Numbers 27, 36, and Joshua 17.
* Women as property/plunder: Judges 5:27-30, Ruth 4:5, Num. 30:3-13
* Few women are named in Scripture compared to men is an indication of their position.
* Royal wives: often political pawns

**Marriage (and Divorce) for Everyone**

* When a girl reached the age of menstruation, preparations began for her marriage
* Until marriage she was expected to keep herself a virgin.
* Marriages were arranged,
* The families would settle on a dowry, which the bride would receive from her parents (Gen. 24:53).
* The dowry would serve as her inheritance; an “insurance policy” for the woman:
* Leah and Rachel (Gen. 31:15).
* Luke 15: may have been part of her dowry, or her life savings.
* A man was free from military service so he could prepare a home for his bride (Deut. 20:7).

Rape was considered to be an offense against the father, for it deprived him of the bride price.

* If a betrothed girl was raped in town (Deut. 22:28, 29)
* If not engaged: (Exodus 22:16, 17)

The wedding itself was primarily a non-religious ceremony of blessing

* the eldest had to be married first
* The bride’s family supplied the wedding clothes and the feast (John 2)
* In the story of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah, there was a “bride’s week.”
* A young bride had to prove her virginity (Deut. 22:13-21)
* Without that the bride could be stoned to death (Deut. 22:20-21)
* Christ and the pure church (2 Cor. 11:2)

The law of Moses allowed for divorce: Deuteronomy 24:1, 3; Isaiah 50:1; Matt\hew. 5:31

God’s attitude toward divorce: Malachi 2:16 and Matthew 19 and Mark 10.

Both the man and woman could be stoned for adultery, so injustice in story in John 8

A man was allowed to marry a captive if he thought she was beautiful: Deuteronomy 21:10-14

**What Bible Women Wanted**

Scriptures that note a woman was beautiful: Gen. 6:2, 12:11, 12:14, 24:16, 26:7, 29:17, Deut. 21:11, 1 Sam. 25:3, 2 Sam. 11:2, 13:1, 14:27, 1 Kings 1:3, Esther 2:3 and 7, Job 42:15

Having children, especially boys, was extremely important. A woman considered herself a failure if she was unable to produce children: Proverbs 30:15-16

Note on Psalm 113:9 Zondervan *NIV Study Bible (1985):*

*“*In that ancient society barrenness was for a woman the greatest disgrace and the deepest tragedy (see Gen. 30:1; 1 Sa 1:6-7, 10). In her old age she would be as desolate as Naomi because she would have no one to sustain her (see Ruth 1:11-13; see also 2 Ki 4:14).”

Rachel became so desperate to have a child that she said, “Give me children, or I’ll die!” (Gen. 30:1)

A woman’s monthly bleeding was considered unclean: Leviticus 15;

Rachel giving her servant Bilhah as a wife or concubine so that “she can bear children for me and through her I too can build a family”: Genesis 30:3 Footnotes: “for me” as being “on my knees.”

Childbirth was dangerous and infant mortality was high.

Simile “pain like that of a woman in labor”

* Jeremiah uses the expression nine times (Jeremiah 6:24 and also 4:31; Isa. 13:8; 21:3 and 26:17).
* Isaiah also speaks of “children come to the moment of birth and there is no strength to deliver them (Isa 37:3; this same phrase is found in 2 Kings 19:3).

It has been estimated that five percent of first-century women died in childbirth.

Isaiah also uses the simile “like a menstrual cloth”: Isaiah 30:

“All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Isa 64:6).

Caring for baby at birth practices: Ezekiel 16:4, Luke 2:7, 14

Following giving birth, regulations were different for a baby boy or girl: Leviticus 12:2-5

Mothers in the Bible were greatly respected: Isaiah 49:15.

**Polygamy, Wives, and Concubines**

The first polygamist: Lamech: Genesis 4:23.

Lyland Ryken in the Literary Study Bible, English Standard Version (2007):

The Bible does not commonly make judgments regarding many actions of the Bible characters, but the results speak for themselves—they and we should learn from that. And that was certainly the situation with polygamy.

God had warned the kings against taking many wives: Deuteronomy 17:17

Safeguards for multiple wives were instituted in the laws of Moses: Exodus 21:10

Polygamy seems to have pretty much disappeared by New Testament times.

**Widows, Orphans, and Slaves**

Widows and slaves were the most unfortunate class of women in the ancient world, and orphans were usually listed with them.

Tamar and Judah: Gen. 38

A widow’s distinctive garb: —Gen. 38:14 and 19

Treatment of widows:

Boaz to Ruth” “I have told the men not to lay a hand on you” Ruth 2:9

Naomi to Ruth: Ruth 2:22.

Widow of Nain: Luke 7:11, 12

“Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan.” Exodus 22:22.

Levirate law: Deuteronomy 25

Some well-known widows in Scripture:

Anna: Luke 2:36

The Widow of Zarephath: 1 Kings 17

The widow of Nain: Luke 7

The persistent widow: Luke 18:1

The prophet’s widow whom Elijah helped: 2 Kings 4:1

Slaves/servants: Rhoda: Acts 12; Naaman’s wife’s servant: 2 Kings 5

Division among the believers in Jerusalem regarding widows: Acts 6.

Paul regarding care of widows if they are unable to care for themselves: 1 Timothy 5:3

**A Woman’s Work Is Never Done**

Tasks/professions/roles

* Shepherdess Rachel, Zipporah
* Manufacture and sale of fabric: Ezekiel 27:7 and 16:
* Preparation of food; this might begin in the harvest field: Ruth 2
* Grinding of the grain: Matthew 24:41
* Drawing water: Genesis 24, John 4, Mark 14:13
* Act as hostess: Mary and Martha: Luke 10
* Political leader: Athaliah, (2 Kings 11); Jezebel (1 Kings 21); Esther; Deborah (Judges 4 and 5).
* Involved in business: Lydia (Acts 16) Priscilla (Acts 18), Sapphira (Acts 5).
* Ministry: Hulda (2 Chron. 34), Junia (Rom. 16:7), Phoebe (Rom. 16:1), Priscilla (Acts 18), the Samaritan woman (John 4), and Tabitha or Dorcas (Acts 9:36-43).
* Prostitute: Leviticus 19:29, Deuteronomy 23:18
* Slaves: Naaman’s wife’s slave girl; the slave girl who followed Paul and Silas (Acts 16:16-21)
* Wail: Jeremiah 9:17

The woman of Proverbs 31:

* wove wool and flax
* involved in international trade
* provided food for her family while directing the servant girls
* bought and sold land
* planted a vineyard,
* a hostess
* philanthropist
* made clothing for sale
* a great wife and mother

**At the Temple**

The Hebrew women did not go to the temple often; the men were required to attend certain temple/tabernacle services each year, but the women were not; they were exempted but not excluded: 1 Samuel 1 and 2

Many women who were known for their spiritual or religious story:

Mary, the mother of Jesus

Hannah, known for her prayer

Mary Magdalene who first proclaimed the risen Savior

The women who traveled and ministered with Jesus and his disciples: Luke 8:1-3

Lydia, who apparently hosted the Philippi church in her home: Acts 16

Priscilla who worked with her husband and Paul in spreading the gospel: Acts 18

The women mentioned in Romans 16.

There were also women prophets:

* Miriam (Exodus 15:20),
* Anna (Luke 2:37, 38),
* Deborah (Judges 4),
* Hulda (2 Chronicles 34),
* Isaiah’s wife (Isa. 8:3),
* Philip’s daughters (Acts 21:9), and others/

1 Corinthians 11:5, 6: “But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head….”

Women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting: Exodus 38:8; Deuteronomy 23:17; 1 Samuel 2:22:

**What to Wear**

Clothing was precious, garments were prized;

* Naaman’s offered gift of clothing in 2 Kings 5
* Outfits stolen by Achan (Judges 7).

Women were forbidden to wear the same form of clothing as men (Deuteronomy 22:5)

Face veil: Rebecca did when she first met Isaac (Genesis. 24:65).

The laws of Moses said they were not to weave wool and linen together (Deuteronomy 22:11)

Cloaks and other garments were fringed—the wealthier the owner, the longer the fringe (Numbers 15:38, 39; Deuteronomy 22:12 KJV).

Ezekiel 16:9-13 gives an insight into a woman’s fashion

Isaiah speaks against haughty women: Isaiah 3:16, 17, 18-23

Criticism for wearing magic charms: Eze 13 and Isa. 3.

New Testament injunctions regarding apparel: 1 Peter 3:3, 4, 1 Timothy 2:9, 10.

Makeup: Jezebel: 2 Kings 9:30

Mirrors were used in the building of the tabernacle: Exodus 38:8

**Those New Testament Women**

Abot de Rabbi Nathan wrote that “a man should not speak with a woman in the market, even if she is his wife, much less another woman, because the public may misinterpret it.”

Many women worked alongside their husbands; Priscilla: Acts 18

Businesswoman: Lydia, Paul’s first convert in Europe: Acts 16

**Conclusion**

To understand the women of the Bible, mark your Bible with all references to women and what directly concerned them.

When reading the stories of women in the Bible, it is important to read what is really there and not believe and share what we have heard or seen in a picture.

**Sources**

Several sources have been used for information in this seminar. Some comes from the original seminar prepared by Jean Sequeira. Much comes from the study notes found in the Zondervan New International Study Bible (1985) and two primary books, both which are recommended: Herbert Lockyer, *All the Women of the Bible*, Zondervan Publishing House, 1967, and especially *Every Woman in the Bible* by Sue and Larry Richards, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999. It gives a great deal of cultural information.