

## Women in Mesopotamia

by Jessica Bieda

The history of women in Mesopotamia is a long and complex one. Part of this is due to the fact that there are many divisions in the history of Mesopotamia itself. History begins in Mesopotamia with civilizations there rising and falling and shifting. Along with these shifting civilizations came shifting views about women, particularly their status and freedoms. This essay will cover the status of women during the different civilizations of Mesopotamia: Sumeria, Babylonia, Assyria, and Judea. . . .

The first ancient Mesopotamian civilization was that of Sumeria (2500 BC.-1750 BC.) During this period, a woman's strongest position was in relation to the temples. Often young girls worked in the temples as housekeepers or as concubines to the earthly representatives of the gods (Stephenson 56). Fathers were proud to have their daughters serving religion in this way. They would mark their daughters' entry into temple life with a ceremonial sacrifice and bestow the girls' marriage dowries to the temple (Stephenson 56). Nin-dingir priestesses annually participated in the Sacred Marriage by impersonating or representing the goddess Inanna (Lerner 239). The Sacred Marriage likely originated in the Sumerian city of Uruk (which was dedicated to the Goddess Inanna) earlier than 3000 B.C. The basis for the ritual of the Sacred Marriage was the belief that fertility of the land and of people depended on the celebration of the sexual power of the fertility goddess (Lerner 239). The Sacred Marriage was between the Goddess Inanna and either the high priest (representing the god), or the king (representing the God Dumuzi), and was performed in the temples of various fertility goddesses for nearly two thousand years. The annual symbolic reenactment of this mythical union was a public celebration essential to the well-being of the community, and since it was the occasion of a joyous celebration, it may have involved sexual activity on the part of the worshipers in and around the temple grounds (Lerner 240). The fact that the king of Sumer ritually married a representative of the goddess Inanna once every year helped sustain the power of the priestesses at least for a time (Stephenson 56). Rites similar to the Sacred Marriage also flourished in classical Greece and pre-Christian Rome (Lerner 240). . . .

There were many laws that regulating so-called "conventional" marriages. A father gave his daughter and her husband a dowry which they owned together, but which she controlled and could bequest (Stephenson 56). Both the husband and wife shared equal rights when it came to exercising rights over their children. An upper-class wife could conduct her own business affairs, and could keep personal slaves or sell them. In Sumerian society, adultery was forgivable for a man, but because a wife must bear only her husband's children, the punishment for a woman was death (Stephenson 56). Additionally, a woman was valued for the number of children she had. If she produced no children, she could be divorced. If she did not want to give birth continuously, her husband then possessed the legal right to drown her. It is of importance to note that as male power and wealth grew and shifted, women's status was reduced. It is believed that women enjoyed a higher status in the earlier Sumerian years than in the civilization's later years.

In about 1750 BC. the Sumerians, who had been the creative force in developing Western civilization, were overcome by neighboring Semitic people, the Babylonians, whose greatest king gave his famous Code of Hammurabi to history (Stephenson 57). Historians have learned much about the Babylonian male/female relationship, and the status of women, from the Code of Hammurabi. Under these laws, a woman could be divorced on virtually any grounds: childlessness, adultery, and even poor household management. For example, one of the rules states, "If she have not been a careful mistress, have gadded about, have neglected her house, and have belittled her husband or children ,

they shall throw that woman into the water." All the husband need do to obtain a divorce was say, "Thou art not my wife," and return her dowry (Walsh 24). However, a wife who used these words against her husband would be drowned. A woman could not divorce her husband, but she could leave him if she could prove that her husband had been cruel and that she had been faithful, and then simply return to her parents' home with her dowry. A wronged husband was free to kill his wife and her lover (Walsh 24).

Under certain limitations women could own, inherit, and bequeath property. Though the Code clearly acknowledged the value of property, and women as property, punishment was much more severe if a poor man damaged a rich man, or his property, or a rich man's wife, than vice versa (Stephenson 63). Essentially, Babylonian females were property. Their fathers determined whom they should marry, and they could sell them to the prospective husbands for an agreed-upon price. Marriage was monogamous for women, but men were free to visit prostitutes, or to take concubines. Upper class women were especially considered as property, and they were therefore confined to quarters. If they went out, they had to be accompanied by eunuchs, who were male slaves who had been castrated and were considered no threat to another man's property (Stephenson 64). Lower class women did have freedom, but if they had no dowry then their status was only slightly above that of a slave. Despite a loss of status in position of women in Babylon compared with their predecessors of Sumer, the women of Babylon still continued to hold certain rights of independence (Stephenson 64). They could be judges, elders, witnesses, and scribes. In many ways their position was even higher than that of women in nineteenth century England or America. It is clear that though they are not recorded in history by name, women as priestesses, business managers, midwives, musicians, scribes, and textile workers actively contributed to the rich commercial civilization of Babylonia (Stephenson 65). . . .

The final civilization in Mesopotamian history that this essay will examine is Judea. June Stephenson summarizes the status of women during this time in her book, *Women's Roots*: "The social and legal position of an Israelite wife was inferior to the position of wife occupied in the great countries round about...all the texts show that Israelites wanted mainly sons, to perpetuate the family line and fortune, and to preserve the ancestral inheritance...A husband could divorce his wife...women on the other hand could not ask for divorce...the wife called her husband Ba'al or master; she also called him adon or lord; she addressed him in fact as a slave addresses his master or a subject, his king. The Decalogue includes a man's wife among his possessions...all her life she remains a minor. The wife does not inherit from her husband, nor daughters from their fathers, except when there is no male heir. A vow made by a girl or married woman needs, to be valid, the consent of the father or husband and if this consent is withheld, the vow is null and void. A man had the right to sell his daughter. Women were excluded from the succession" (Stephenson 70).

In Judea, religion, instead of government, was the law, and Jewish family life reflected the patriarchal structure of the religion (Stephenson 71). Because it was important for the population to increase, there was no room in society for unmarried men or women. When a woman got married, she had to prove her virginity in order to ensure that a man's child was indeed his. Because the woman had been bought by her husband, adultery was a violation of the law of property and usually resulted in death to both parties (Stephenson 72). A woman's first priority, and her greatest value as judged by men, was her ability to reproduce. Therefore, if a woman could not provide children for any reason, she was seen as a disgrace. For women, marriage was monogamous, though polygamous for men (Stephenson 72). It can be seen that women enjoyed very little, if any at all, freedoms during this time. Their lives (both public and private) were strictly controlled by their religion.

Throughout Mesopotamian history, women experienced different liberties and their role changed with

each successive civilization. A patriarchal revolution took place that greatly affected women's status; in general, women had a higher standing in the earlier Mesopotamian periods. The Code of Hammurabi was the beginning of the institutionalization of the patriarchal family as an aspect of state power (Lerner 253). It reflected a class society in which women's status depended on the male family head's social status and property. With the Middle Assyrian Law 40, the state assumed control of female sexuality, which had previously been left to individual heads of families. From the middle of the second millennium BC. on, from the public veiling to the regulation by the state of birth control and abortion, the sexual control of women has been an essential feature of patriarchal power (Lerner 254). Unfortunately, the sexual control of women by outside forces is still a problem that is trying to be overcome today.

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