

Original Article

Politics as Sex: The Old Testament Case

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Abstract: In *The Origin of Species and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Darwin predicted that success in competition would lead to success in reproduction. In the 20th century CE, that relationship was looked for around 700 times, and almost always found. Sometime after the 10th century BCE, it had already been written into the Bible. In the Old Testament, powerful men—patriarchs, judges, and kings—have sex with more wives; they have more sex with other men’s women; they have sex with more concubines, servants and slaves; and they father many children. Bible authors knew that sex and power went together: on his way out of Egypt, Moses warned that a king might ‘multiply wives for himself’ (Deuteronomy 17:17); and when David took Israel over from Saul, he was given his ‘master’s wives’ along with his master’s house (2 Samuel 12:8). Throughout the Old Testament, people act on a mandate to reproduce. From Genesis to the prophets, they do their best to ‘be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it’ (Genesis 1:28).

Keywords: Natural selection, sexual selection, ancient Near Eastern history, family history.

Introduction: Dominance and Reproduction

In the ‘Historical Sketch’ he attached to the 3rd edition of his book *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin quoted Aristotle. He thought that, in a passage from the *Physics*, Aristotle had ‘seen the principle of natural selection shadowed forth’ (Darwin, 1861, p. xiii, quoting *Physics*, ii.8). In the *Origin’s* 1st edition, Darwin had already traced his theory back to an ancient Chinese encyclopedia, to Pliny’s *Natural History*, to ‘savages’ in Africa—and to passages in Genesis (Darwin, 1859, p. 31). As he was at pains to show, it was very far from true that his theory of natural selection was new.

Darwin’s theory predicts that individuals should evolve to compete—for habitats, for food, for mates. In the 1871 sequel to *Origin of Species*, his book *On the*

Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex, he wrote: ‘it is certain that amongst almost all animals there is a struggle between the males for the possession of the females.’ And *H. sapiens* was no exception. ‘With savages, the women are the constant cause of war’—not just between, but within groups, he wrote. So it had been, back to the ancient Greeks at least. ‘*Nam fuit ante Helenam mulier teterrima belli causa:*’ they went to war for a girl in Troy (Darwin, 1871, pp. 571, 871, the last quoting Horace, *Satires*, i.3).

In 1948 an Italian entomologist, Leo Pardi, first carefully described a paper wasp dominance hierarchy, and showed that dominant wasps had higher reproductive success. They ate more, worked less, laid more eggs, and ate the eggs others had laid (Pardi, 1948; Turillazi and West-Eberhard, 1996). In the half century since Pardi, the relationship between success in competition and success in reproduction has been established almost 700 times. For some taxonomic groups, results are almost unanimous. Results are most hotly debated for primates (Cowlshaw and Dunbar, 1991; Ellis, 1995).

Then in 1976 an American anthropologist, Bill Irons, did the first statistical test of the relationship between ‘cultural’ and ‘biological’ success (Irons, 1976, 1979, 1997). He looked at the Yomut Turkmen, nomadic herders living in Iran, and found that rich men had more wives and surviving children than poor men. In dozens of studies since then, men with means (meat, land, cash, kin, or rank) have reportedly outreproduced men without—in both foraging and farming groups (Betzig, 1997; Smith, 2005).

This paper tests Darwin’s theory against the Old Testament evidence. Centuries before Aristotle or Horace, millennia before *The Origin of Species* or *The Descent of Man*, the Hebrew people were blessed by a mandate from god to reproduce. And they did their best to fulfill it. From Lamech the patriarch, to Zedekiah the last king of Judah, they tried to ‘be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it’ (Genesis 1:28). Throughout the Old Testament, more powerful men are more polygynous men. They have sex with more wives and concubines; they have sex with more slaves; they have more sex with other men’s women; and they father many children.

The Bible shares drawbacks with other historical sources. One problem is, the sample isn’t always representative. Like most histories, the Old Testament was written by and about powerful men. The commons are mostly ignored. But aggregate data can help profile the masses—some archaeological, some demographic. It shows that most ancient Near Eastern families lived in small, two-to-four room houses; and that many paid tribute—around a thousand jar handles from 8th-century BCE Judah are labeled *lmlk*, or ‘belonging to the king’ (see Stager, 1985 on houses and Mazar, 1992 on jar handles; see Clement, 1989 and Lemche, 1998 on the Bible as history). Even in the scriptures, thousands of anonymous men work as forced laborers, or are killed as soldiers. And of the 41 polygynists named in the Old Testament, not one is a powerless man (Table 1).

Another problem is, the evidence isn't always reliable. Like most histories, the Old Testament was put together by a handful of authors. They represent few independent points of view. But comparative accounts can help put history in context—some from other times and places, some from contemporary societies nearby. We know that kings from 4th-century BCE India, to 3rd-century BCE China, to 15th-century CE Mexico and Peru collected hundreds or thousands of women; and that kings from Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and Persia did the same in Israel's time (see Betzig 1986, 1993 on other civilizations; *Cambridge Ancient History* and Kuhrt 1995 on the ancient Near East). In many ways, the Bible reads like history's condensed version. Kings (like Solomon) held onto a thousand women; judges (like Gideon) had dozens; patriarchs (like Abraham) kept three or four; and the poor Israelite took whatever was left.

Wives and Concubines

In the beginning, there was Adam—or *adam*, the Hebrew word for 'man.' Then of or for Adam, there was 'the mother of all living,' Eve (Genesis 3:20; all Biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version). Cain, who was their firstborn son, knew his wife (of uncertain origin) and fathered Enoch. Then Enoch became the father of Irad, Irad of Mehujael, Mehujael of Methushael, and Methushael of Lamech. 'And Lamech took two wives' (Genesis 4:17-19). It had taken seven generations.

Patriarchs

Throughout the first five books of the Old Testament, the sons of Adam wander in search of a homeland. And men with bigger herds of sheep and goats tend to have sex with more women, then to father more children (see Table 1).

Terah, who was Abraham's father, was a descendant of Adam and Eve's third son, Seth. He was the next patriarch after Lamech who may have married twice. We know that because, at one point, Abraham admits that his wife Sarah is 'indeed' his sister, 'the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother' (Genesis 20:12).

Like father, like sons. Of Terah's three boys, the first two—Abraham and Nahor—were polygynous men. Haran, the youngest, died young, having fathered two daughters and just one son (Genesis 11:27-29). Nahor lived longer, and fathered at least 12 sons. Eight belonged to his wife Milcah, who was one of Haran's daughters; and four belonged to Reumah, his concubine (Genesis 22:20-24).

Abraham, Terah's eldest, married his half-sister Sarah as a relatively young man. But when he was 86, Sarah was still childless. So she took compassion on her husband, and told him to try his luck with Hagar—her Egyptian maid. 'The Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my maid; it may be that I shall obtain children by her,' she said. He did; and Ishmael, 'a wild ass of a man,' was born (Genesis 16:2, 12). Soon after that, Sarah conceived her son Isaac. Then much later,

having lost Sarah at the advanced age of 137, Abraham married again. Her name was Keturah; and she gave him another six sons. But like good patriarchs ever since, he favored his first wife's firstborn boy. He left 'all he had' to Isaac—Sarah's only son (Deuteronomy 21:17; Genesis 25:5).

Sarah's son Isaac took just one wife. He picked Rebekah, his father's brothers' daughter. And she bore Esau and Jacob, twin sons. Both were polygamous men.

Esau had children by all three of his wives. Adah, Oholibamah and Mahalath gave him five boys (Genesis 36:2-4).

Jacob had children by four women. When his father sent him down to Paddan-aram as a young man, he found 'beautiful and lovely' Rachel herding her father's sheep. He liked what he saw, so he kissed her right way 'and wept aloud' (Genesis 29:11, 17). Then he worked hard for seven years to get her—but ended up with her weak-eyed older sister Leah instead; so he worked hard for another seven years—and won the woman he loved. But Rachel, like Sarah, was infertile at first, and told Jacob to have a go at Bilhah, her maid. 'Go in to her, that she may bear upon my knees, and even I may have children through her,' she said (Genesis 30:3). Leah later made the same arrangement with her servant, Zilpah. So of Israel's ('Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men') 12 sons: six were Leah's (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Zebulun); two were Rachel's (Joseph and Benjamin); two were Bilhah's (Dan and Naphtali); and two (Gad and Asher) were Zilpah's (Genesis 32:28, 35:22-26).

Joseph, the son Jacob loved 'more than any other,' led his family into Egypt, out of a famine in Canaan (Genesis 37:3). They stayed for 430 years, till Moses led them back out (Exodus 12:40). In the meantime, they bred. When they went in, 'all the offspring of Jacob were seventy persons'—sons and daughters, granddaughters and grandsons (Exodus 1:5, Genesis 46:27). When they left, god ordered a census, and they counted 603,550 men (Numbers 1:2, 46). In short, 'the descendants of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong; so that the land was filled with them' (Exodus 1:7).

Judges

After they got back to Canaan, 'then the Lord raised up Judges' (Judges 2:16). They were more powerful, and more polygynous, than the patriarchs had been. Most patriarchs counted their sons in single digits; most judges counted an order of magnitude more. Gideon—who led an army of 32,000—had 'seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives,' plus at least one son by a concubine (Judges 8:30-31). He was followed by Jair, whose 30 sons 'rode on thirty asses;' then by Ibzan, who fathered 30 sons and 30 daughters; then by Abdon, who had 40 sons and 30 grandsons (Judges 10:4, 12: 9, 14). Samson came next, 'and the Lord blessed him' (Judges 13:24)—but we don't know how much.

Under the patriarchs, and under the judges, 'every man did what was right in

his own eyes' (Judges 21:25). That was about to change. Even in the desert, Moses warned his followers about kings. When they got back to Canaan, he knew they'd want one of their own, since 'all the other nations' around the Mediterranean had them. But they should watch what they wished for. A good ruler 'must not multiply horses for himself,' or 'greatly multiply for himself silver and gold.' Most of all, 'he shall not multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away' (Deuteronomy 17: 14, 17).

Gideon's son Abimelech didn't mind calling himself 'son of a king.' But his brother, Jotham, thought they'd be better off without one. So he came up with a parable about how 'the trees once went forth to anoint a king over them,' but the good ones—fruit-bearing figs, spirit-uplifting grapevines, and honorable olives—declined. Only the thorny, prolific bramble was willing (Judges 9:8). That didn't stop people from clamoring.

Roughly 10 judges after Gideon, people asked Samuel—who'd 'judged Israel all the days of his life'—again for a king (1 Samuel 7:15). But Samuel was a son of a polygamist himself, the half-brother of boys who 'lay with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting' (1 Samuel 1:1-2, 2:22). So he knew what they'd be up against. He warned them, even more ominously than Moses or Jotham had. 'These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you,' he said.

He will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your menservants and maidservants, and the best of your cattle and your asses, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day (1 Samuel 8: 10-18; compare Judges 9:7-15).

But Samuel did as he was told. He picked the son of a rich Benjaminite, a good-looking man and a good fighter, Saul. 'Behold, I have hearkened to your voice in all that you have said to me, and have made a king over you,' he said. And the people answered, 'Pray for your servants to the Lord your God, that we may not die; for we have added to our sins this evil, to ask for ourselves a king' (1 Samuel 12:1, 19).

Kings

Saul had an armor bearer, a beautiful lyre player, the youngest son of Jesse the Judean, who ‘found favor’ in his sight (1 Samuel 16:22). David leveled the Philistine Goliath, ‘whose height was six cubits and a span,’ with a stone (1 Samuel 17:4). Then as the army was coming home, women came out of the cities and sang, ‘Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands.’ That was the kiss of death: Saul ‘eyed David from that day on’ (1 Samuel 18:6-9). Worse, he hunted him. So David raised a protection racket in the wilderness with a few hundred other men ‘in distress’ (1 Samuel 22: 2); then he made himself a mercenary in the Philistines’ pay. They made David king of Judah, and a long war followed. In time, ‘David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul became weaker and weaker’ (2 Samuel 3:1). In the end, Saul’s house was pretty much wiped out (2 Samuel 21:7-9).

But David’s proliferated. Even before he became king, David took a few wives. There were Ahinoam, Abigail, and Michal—a daughter of Saul; there were Maacah (the king of Geshur’s daughter), Haggith, Abital and Eglah (1 Samuel 25:42-43; 2 Samuel 3:2-5). Then after he became king, David took a few more. He assembled ‘more concubines and wives from Jerusalem, after he came from Hebron’ (2 Samuel 5:13). Just one (Bathsheba, the mother of Solomon) is named; and nobody bothered to count the rest. But when Maacah’s son Absalom made a bid for the throne, David went away and left ‘ten concubines’ behind (2 Samuel 15:16).

David fathered at least 20 children (2 Samuel 5:13-16, 1 Chronicles 3:5-9, 14:3-7). The Bible names Amnon, Chileab (or Daniel), Absalom, Adonijah, Shephatiah, Ithream, Shammua (or Shimea), Shobab, Nathan, Solomon, Ibhar, Elishua (or Elishama), Eliphelet (or Elpelet), Nogah, Nepheg, Japhia, Elishama, Eliada (or Beeliada), another Eliphelet, and Tamar—his ‘virgin’ daughter, who gets mentioned because she’s molested by one of her half-brothers (2 Samuel 13). But there were probably others. David lived in an ivory palace, wrapped in aloe and cassia scented robes, entertained by stringed instruments, surrounded by ‘ladies of honor’ and ‘virgin companions’ (Psalms 45:9, 14). He didn’t mind uncovering himself in front of those women, ‘as one of the vulgar fellows shamelessly uncovers himself!’ (2 Samuel 6:20). And he was provided with girls till the day he died. When David was 70 years old, his servants searched for a beautiful virgin to be his nurse, and told him, ‘Let her lie in your bosom, that my lord the king may be warm.’ They delivered Abishag, but ‘the king knew her not’ (1 Kings 1:1-4).

David worked hard all his life to extend his kingdom—from Egypt’s wadi El Arish in the west, to the Euphrates in the east (Genesis 15:18, 2 Samuel 8, 1 Kings 4:21, 2 Chronicles 9:26). His son Solomon lived off the fruits of that work. He put up a Hall of Pillars, a Hall of the Throne, a House of the Forest of Lebanon, and a house of his own—on hewn stone foundations, supported by cedar pillars and beams, with capitals of cast bronze. It took 70,000 burden bearers, 80,000 stone hewers, 3,300 officers, and a forced levy of 30,000 subjects 13 years to finish (1 Kings 5-7). Then he filled his palace with women. Solomon took one wife—a daughter of

Pharaoh's, who got her own house—from Egypt; and he took 699 more from other parts of his empire. There were Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites, 'seven hundred wives, princesses' in all, 'far more precious than jewels.' Then he added 300 concubines, 'man's delight' (1 Kings 11:1-3, Proverbs 31:10, Ecclesiastes 2:8).

Soon after that, the united kingdom fell apart. Solomon's labor officer, Jeroboam, ruled northern Israel from a new capital at Shechem—moved later to Tirzah, then Penuel, then eventually to Samaria. And Solomon's son, Rehoboam, ruled Judah in the south from Jerusalem. 'And there was war between Rehoboam and Jeroboam continually' (1 Kings 14:30). Dynasties in Judah were relatively stable: most kings left their thrones to a son. Israel's dynasties turned over faster: all but two ended after the reigns of just one or two kings (Baron, 1952). But both kingdoms were left with fewer subjects; and royal households shrank. In Judah, Rehoboam had 18 wives and 60 concubines, 60 daughters and 28 sons—who all got 'abundant provisions' and wives of their own; his son Abijah had 14 wives, 16 daughters and 22 sons (2 Chronicles 11:21-23, 13:21). Israel's king Joash got 2 wives from his priest, Jehoiada, who bore 'sons and daughters;' but half a century earlier Ahab, who made Jezebel his queen, had 'seventy sons in Samaria' alone (2 Kings 10:1, 7; 2 Chronicles 24:3).

Having a harem was what being a king was about. God made that perfectly clear to David, when he put these words in his prophet's mouth: '*I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul; and I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom.*' They amounted to the same thing. If David wasn't obedient, his lord would undo all that. 'I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun' (2 Samuel 12:7-8, 11; emphasis added).

Soon after Solomon became king, his older brother, Adonijah, asked Solomon's mother Bathsheba for a favor. He wanted to marry Abishag, David's Shunammite nurse. 'You know that the kingdom was mine, and that all Israel fully expected me to reign; however the kingdom has turned about and become my brother's, for it was his from the Lord,' he said. Bathsheba thought that wasn't too much to ask; but Solomon swore the request would 'cost Adonijah his life!' (1 Kings 2:15-23).

His brother Absalom had already met that fate. He was a beautiful boy ('in all Israel there was no one so much praised for his beauty as Absalom'), and people were fond of him ('Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel'). So he raised an insurrection against David, and 'went in to his father's concubines.' That got him hung in an oak, with three darts in his chest (2 Samuel 14-18). The concubines in question were put under house arrest, and 'shut up until the day of their death' (2 Samuel 20:3).

The tradition was older than that. Shortly before David became king in Judah, Saul's son Ishbosheth became Israel's king. And Abner, his general, took liberties with Rizpah, one of Saul's concubines. Abner thought he was owed that much: 'Am

I a dog's head?' he asked. 'I keep showing loyalty to the house of Saul your father, to his brothers, and to his friends, and have not given you into the house of David; and yet you charge me today with a fault concerning a woman.' But Ishbosheth said no; so Abner switched his allegiance to Judah (2 Samuel 3:6-8).

Even Israel's sons coveted their father's women. Reuben—Jacob and Leah's firstborn—is supposed to have lost his inheritance 'because he polluted his father's couch' (1 Chronicles 5:1). One day while Jacob was away, Reuben 'went and lay with' Bilhah, who was Jacob's concubine, and Rachel's maid (Genesis 35:22). After that, Reuben's place in the genealogy was reassigned: 'his birthright belonged to Joseph' from then on (1 Chronicles 5:2).

Other Men's Women

When Israel and Judah were weak, foreign kings stole Hebrew women. But when Israel and Judah were strong, Hebrew kings took wives from their subjects.

Hebrew Women and Hebrew Kings

Even in the early days, while he was still running from Saul, David's band of 600 discontented debtors tried to extort cattle from Nabal, a rich shepherder in Carmel. Nabal was 'churlish and ill-behaved' about that; but his wife Abigail, a woman 'of good understanding and beautiful,' showed up with armloads of bread, wine, mutton and dried fruit. When she told her husband about it the next morning, 'his heart died within him;' so David wooed Abigail, and made her his own wife. She came 'mounted on an ass, and her five maidens attended her' (1 Samuel 25:3-39, 42).

Then late one afternoon after he became king, David was out walking on the roof of his house when he caught a glimpse of Uriah the Hittite's 'very beautiful' wife. He sent messengers, who brought her to the palace; then he took her to bed, 'and the woman conceived.' David sent Uriah off to die on the front, and married the widow—Bathsheba—himself (2 Samuel 11:2-17).

Hebrew Women and Foreign Kings

Before David, Hebrew women were preyed on by foreign kings. One day when Abraham was 65, and Sarah was 10 years younger, they went out of Canaan to avoid a famine. But her husband warned, 'I know that you are a woman beautiful to behold; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, "This is his wife;" then they will kill me, but they will let you live.' He was partly right. When Egypt's princes saw Sarah, they let pharaoh know she looked good, and she was 'taken into Pharaoh's house.' But Abraham got away with his life. He said Sarah was his sister, so pharaoh 'dealt well' with him: sheep, oxen, camels, he-asses, she-asses, menservants and maidservants were delivered to Abraham (Genesis 12:10-16).

Then it was the Philistines' turn. When Abraham was 99, and Sarah was still 10 years younger, they 'sojourned' in Gerar—where the king 'sent and took her.' But by the Philistines, as by the Egyptians, Abraham was enriched—with a thousand pieces of silver, sheep, oxen, male and female chattels. Then he got his wife back. For which Abraham's god did the king of Gerar a favor. He 'healed his wife and female slaves,' whose wombs he'd shut up on Sarah's account (Genesis 20:2-18). A little later, Abraham's son Isaac took his own wife Rebekah to Gerar. Like his father, he told the locals 'she is my sister'—being afraid to call her his wife, thinking they'd kill him 'because she was fair to look upon.' But the Philistine king found out the truth, and told his subjects, 'whoever touches this man or his wife shall be put to death' (Genesis 26:6-11).

After David's kingdom was divided, the same things happened. In the 9th century, Benhadad of Damascus tried, but failed, to take Ahab of Israel's 'fairest wives and children' away (1 Kings 20:3-7). Arabs invaded Judah soon after, and brought Jehoram's 'sons and his wives' out of Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 21:17).

The Assyrian king Sennacherib laid siege to 46 cities in Judah in 701, and locked up Hezekiah 'like a bird in a cage' in (*Ursalimmu*) Jerusalem. So Hezekiah stripped metals off temple doorposts, sent 300 (or 800) talents of silver plus 30 talents of gold, and threw in 'his daughters, his harem, his male and female musicians' (2 Kings 18:14-16; Sennacherib, *Annals*, Third Campaign). Not for the last time.

In 597, when Nebuchadnezzar II deported Judah's Jehoiachin, 'the king's mother, the king's wives, his officials, and the chief men of the land, he took into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon'—where he fed his sons on oil rations (2 Kings 24:15; Nebuchadnezzar II, *Administrative Documents*).

Slaves

Wives made a man's heirs; other women made bastards (e.g., Westermarck, 1921). Sarah and Isaac got singled out for special treatment by Abraham; Bathsheba was favored by David, pharaoh's daughter by Solomon, Jezebel by Ahab. Rehoboam loved Maccah, the daughter of Absalom, 'above all his wives and concubines;' and he made Maacah's son Abijah 'chief prince among his brothers, for he intended to make him king' (2 Chronicles 11:21-22). A *shegal*, or 'royal consort,' stood at the king's 'right hand' in the Psalms (Psalms 45:9). Her sons and the rest of the 'king's sons,' or *ben hammelek*, were set apart (2 Kings 10:13).

But powerful men collected other women, and fathered their children. They collected concubines; they collected servants; and they collected slaves.

In the Old Testament, as all over the ancient Near East, there were at least six ways to get slaves: by capture, as tribute, by purchase, by marriage, to fill a legal obligation, and by reproduction (see Mendelsson, 1949). In some cases, slave men were the fathers of *y^ēlîdê bayth*—the homeborn slaves brought up in their master's houses. In other cases, masters fathered *y^ēlîdê bayth* themselves, and so did their sons.

By Purchase

Slaves could be bought and sold—even Hebrew slaves. Foreign slaves didn't have to be freed. In Moses' words, 'You may bequeath them to your sons after you, to inherit as a possession for ever' (Leviticus 25:46). But his lord told Moses, 'When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing' (Exodus 21:2). Hebrew women, like Hebrew men, were to be offered their freedom after six years; and they were not to be sent home empty handed. They should be liberally furnished 'out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your wine press' (Deuteronomy 15:12-17). Though it didn't always work out that way. When Zedekiah ruled Judah, the prophet Jeremiah knew Hebrew slaves who'd served their six years, but hadn't been freed. He said to let them go—or 'behold, I proclaim to you liberty by the sword' (Jeremiah 34:17).

By Capture

Other slaves were spoils of war. On their way out of Egypt, when they fought against the Midianites east of the Sinai, the people of Israel 'slew every male' but 'took captive the women of Midian and their little ones.' Then they brought the captives to Moses.¹ He said it would be better to kill the grown women, and save just 'the young girls who have not known man by lying with him.' So 32,000 Midian virgins got Hebrew husbands (Numbers 31: 15-35). Even before they left Canaan, Jacob's daughter Dinah got raped by a Hivite prince, and her brothers obliterated the Hivite males, but saved 'all their little ones, and their wives' (Genesis 34:29). Then after they'd resettled in Canaan, Jacob's son Benjamin's descendants went looking for girls in Jabeshgilead, and destroyed every man and every woman who'd 'lain with a male,' but brought 400 virgins back to Shiloh (Judges 21:11).

God handed Moses two different laws about spoils. One was for wars with close neighbors; the other was for more remote wars. When their enemies lived far away, he said, 'you shall put all the males to the sword, but the women and the little ones, the cattle, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as booty for yourselves.' But when their enemies lived nearby, 'you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall utterly destroy them.' Land was the limiting factor (Deuteronomy 20:13-17).

So after Joshua crossed the Jordan and set siege to Jericho, he had everybody killed—'both men and women, young and old' (Joshua 6:21). Then at Ai, Makkedah, Libnah, Lachish, Eglon, Hebron, Debir and Hazor, everybody was 'exterminated, as the Lord commanded Moses;' they 'utterly destroyed all that breathed' (Joshua 9:2, 10:28-40, 11:20). Saul did the same thing at Amalek: 'Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling.' And when David raided the Amalekites, Geshurites and Girzites, 'inhabitants of the land from old,' he left 'neither man nor woman alive' (1 Samuel 15:3, 25:22, 34, 27:8-9).

Sometimes, Hebrew women were taken captive. Even before the exodus,

Egypt's Thutmose III raided Canaan and took '340 living prisoners.' Then on their way back to Canaan, Hebrew men were afraid that 'our wives and our little ones will become a prey' (Thutmose III, *Annals in Karnak*, Year 23; Numbers 14:3).

That happened even under the kings. Before he ruled Judah, David's wives Abigail and Ahinoam were abducted in an Amalekite raid—along with everybody else's 'wives and sons and daughters' (1 Samuel 30:1-5, cf. 30:16-20). Then in the middle of the 8th century BCE, the Assyrian Tiglath-Pileser III led 'all its inhabitants and their possessions' out of Israel, or *Bît Humria*, or 'Omri-Land.' Syrian raiders took a 'little maid from the land of Israel' under Ahab, Omri's son; and Shalmaneser V, Tiglath-Pileser III's son, 'carried the Israelites away' in 721 (Tiglath-Pileser III, *Annals*, Fragment from Year Unknown; 2 Kings 5:2, 17:6). When Nebuchadnezzar II invaded in 597, he 'carried away all Jerusalem, and all the princes, and all the mighty men of valor, ten thousand captives.' Then 11 years later, he came again and 'took into exile in Babylon all who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons' (2 Kings 24:14; 2 Chronicles 36:20). Nebuchadnezzar's chief eunuch, Ashpenaz, picked out 'youths without blemish,' like Daniel, and made them his captives (Daniel 1:3-4).

Prophets like Jeremiah knew that would happen. 'Virgins are ravished in Zion, virgins in the towns of Judah,' he'd imagined; 'all your wives and your sons shall be led out to the Chaldeans' (Lamentations 5:11, Jeremiah 38:23). Later, Isaiah prayed for revenge. Someday, they'd 'take captive those who were their captors;' their enemies' 'infants will be dashed in pieces before their eyes; their houses will be plundered and their wives ravished' (Isaiah 13:16, 14:2). Or in the words of a Psalm: 'Despoiled daughter of Babylon, happy is he who pays you back! Happy is he who takes hold and smashes your suckling babies against a rock' (Psalm 137:8-9).

By Tribute

After a battle was over, slaves could be drawn from the conquered. When David defeated Moab, 'the Moabites became servants to David;' then after he'd killed 22,000 Syrians on the battlefield, 'the Syrians became servants to David;' then after he'd put garrisons in Edom, where he'd slain 'every male,' the Edomites 'became David's servants;' then after he'd ravaged the Ammonites, 'he brought forth the people who were in it, and set them to labor' (2 Samuel 8:2-16, 11:1; 1 Kings 11:15; 1 Chronicles 18:2, 6, 12, 20:3). When Solomon subdued the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebites, 'whom the people of Israel were unable to destroy utterly,' he 'made a forced levy of slaves, and so they are to this day' (1 Kings 9:21).

Later the tables were turned. After Assyria's conquest in 721, Sargon II took away 27,290 Samaritans; and Sennacherib, Sargon II's son, took another 200,150 young and old, males and females he 'counted as booty' in 701 (Sargon II, *Annals of Khorsabad*, Year 1; Sennacherib, *Annals*, Third Campaign). In the first 23 the years after Judah fell, Babylonian kings took away 3023, then 832, then 745 people, 'four thousand and six hundred' in all (Jeremiah 52:28-30).

Some were probably girls. Even before Jacob's descendants were out of Egypt, New Kingdom pharaohs sent letters to the Canaanite prince of Gezer, asking for shipments of 'beautiful women, in whom there is no defect' (*Amarna Letters*, EA 69). Six centuries later, the Assyrian kings Tiglath-Pileser III and Sargon II, his son, had wives—and probably other women—with Hebrew names (see Dalley, 2004). Then in the 5th century BCE, the Persian ruler *Ahasuerus* (probably Xerxes I) issued an order to 'let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king.' So Esther the Jewess, among others, got basted for six months with myrrh and another six months with spices, then herded into the palace. 'In the evening she went, and in the morning she came back to the second harem in custody of Sha-ash'gaz the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines.' She wasn't asked to go back to the king again, unless 'he delighted in her and she was summoned by name' (Esther 2:2, 12-14).

By Legal Obligation

People could be enslaved for theft. Joseph 'yearned' for his brother Benjamin, his mother Rachel's son; so he kept him in Egypt by hiding a cup in his sack, then accusing him of stealing it. Joseph had his steward chase Benjamin down and say, 'he with whom it is found shall be my slave' (Genesis 43:30, 44:9).

Others were enslaved for debt. When Ahab's son Jehoram ruled Israel, a woman complained 'the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves;' and when Nehemiah returned from Babylon, people were upset that their 'Jewish brethren' were exacting interest at high rates, and 'forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves' (2 Kings 4:1; Nehemiah 5:1, 5). That wasn't supposed to happen. His lord said to Moses on Mt Sinai, 'If your brother becomes poor beside you, and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave: he shall be with you as a hired servant and as a sojourner.' A Hebrew was to serve till the jubilee, every 'seven times seven years,' then be set free with his family (Leviticus 25:8, 39-40).

By Marriage

Some brides came with entourages. When Rebekah married Isaac, her maids came along: they 'rode upon the camels, and followed the man' (Genesis 24:61). Sarah, Rachel and Leah all came with one or more servants; and when David married Abigail, she came with five. In the Psalms—73 of which are attributed to David—a wife is delivered to the king, along with 'her virgin companions, her escort, in her train' (Psalms 45:14). And in Solomon's Song, 'maidens without number' come along with a new bride—whose 'hair is like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead' (Song of Solomon 6:5-8).

By Reproduction

When Abraham was 99 years old, his god appeared and said, 'This is my

covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.’ All boys over eight days old were to have their foreskins removed: ‘every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house, or bought with your money from any foreigners who is not of your offspring.’ So Abraham had them all operated on. They were a big crowd. It isn’t clear how many slaves Abraham had bought, but at least 318 male slaves had been ‘born in the house’ (Genesis 14:14, 17:10-12, 27).

Any great patriarch kept a large household. Job had 7000 sheep, 3000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 she-asses, and ‘very many slaves’ (Job 1:3). Jacob, having tended Laban’s herds for 14 years, ‘grew exceedingly rich, and had large flocks, maidservants and menservants, and camels and asses’ (Genesis 30:43).

If patriarchs like Abraham numbered their *y^ēlîdê bayth* in the hundreds, judges and kings must have numbered more. Solomon said he’d ‘bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house’ (Ecclesiastes 2:7). Otherwise, we know only that households were large. Gideon took along ‘ten men of his servants’ to help wreck a rival god’s altar; and Ziba, a servant of Saul’s, had 15 sons ‘and twenty servants’ of his own (Judges 6:27; 2 Samuel 19:17). Solomon’s ‘chief officers’ numbered 250; and Ahab’s son Ahaziah numbered his ‘servants’ in companies of 50. Nehemiah, who brought 7,337 ‘menservants and maidservants’ back from Babylon, fed 150 ‘Jews and officials’ at his table (2 Chronicles 8:10; 2 Kings 1:9-14; Ezra 2:64; Nehemiah 5:17, 7:67).

It was taken for granted that ‘a man lies carnally with a woman who is a slave.’ Moses said that a slave girl who didn’t ‘delight’ her master could be designated for his son—or had to be set free. If she was kept, she had to be taken care of. Even if her master took a wife, ‘he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her material rights’ (Exodus 21:7-10; Deuteronomy 21:14).

Her children were looked after, too. Slaves ‘born in the house’ shared a family’s food, even its Passover foods (Leviticus 22:10-12). They shared the ‘everlasting covenant’ with god, by having their foreskins removed (Genesis 17:7-27). And some *y^ēlîdê bayth* became their masters’ heirs. As Abraham complained to his god before Sarah conceived, ‘Behold, thou hast given me no offspring; and a slave born in my house will be my heir’ (Genesis 15:3). Some must have been natural daughters and sons.

Conclusion: God’s Covenant with Abraham

God’s mandate is laid down in Genesis 1. He tells Adam and Eve to ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’ (Genesis 1:28).

Nine generations after Adam, just after the flood, god tells Noah to ‘be fruitful and multiply’—three times (Genesis 8:17, 9:1, 7).

Eleven generations after Noah, 10 generations after Noah’s son Shem, he says

it again to Abraham—10 times (see Table 2). Abraham's seed will be like the dust of the earth, the sands of the sea, the stars of heaven: 'I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you' (Genesis 17:2-3). God says the same thing to Abraham's sons. 'I will multiply your descendants,' he tells Isaac; and Isaac's son, Jacob, 'shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south;' he'll become 'a great nation;' and 'kings shall spring' from him (Genesis 26:3-4, 28:13-14, 35:11, 46:3).

Moses passes that on—seven times. He tells the Israelites their god 'will love you, bless you, and multiply you;' that 'there shall not be male or female barren among you, or among your cattle' (Deuteronomy 7:13-14).

Then after Moses' five books, the mandate stops. The patriarchs are followed by judges, and the judges by kings. Neither needed be told to breed. But fertility remained a reward for keeping faith.

Patriarchs who lost faith were infertile. God told Moses what would happen if his commandments were disobeyed: 'You shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it' (Leviticus 26:16, 29). Covenant breakers would be punished—with confusion, frustration, heat, drought, inflammation, consumption, fever, plague, madness, blindness, terror, wild beasts, war and pestilence. Their cities would be laid waste, their lands desolate. In short, 'as the Lord took delight in doing you good and multiplying you, so the Lord will take delight in bringing ruin upon you and destroying you' (Deuteronomy 28:63).

Judges who lost faith lost their independence. After Joshua died, people worshiped other gods; 'so the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers' (Judges 2:14). Wars were lost to Mesopotamians, Moabites, Canaanites and Midianites: 'Go and cry to the gods whom you have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your distress,' god said (Judges 10:14). For 18 years, Israel was 'crushed and oppressed' by the Ammonites; for another 40 years, they laid under the Philistines' hand (Judges 10:8; 13:1). Then a good judge like Samuel came along, and the countryside was 'restored to Israel' (1 Samuel 7:14).

Kings who lost faith lost their kingdoms. David—who had 'the Spirit of the Lord' with him—was spared the afflictions of 'violent men.' He remembered god's promise to make the people of Israel 'as many as the stars of heaven' (1 Samuel 16:13, 2 Samuel 7:10, 1 Chronicles 27:23). Solomon—who was called Jedidiah, or 'beloved of the lord'—knew 'the fruit of the womb' was a reward, and that a man was glad when his wife was 'a fruitful vine,' and he had a 'quiver full' of sons. But the foreign women he loved 'turned away his heart;' so the lord raised up adversaries against Solomon's kingdom (2 Samuel 12:25; 1 Kings 11:3, 14, 23, 26; Psalms 127:3-5, 128:3-4). Later Hoshea of Israel went after false idols, and the Assyrians 'bound him in prison' (2 Kings 17:4). Then Zedekiah of Judah displeased his god, so they 'slew his sons before his eyes,' then 'bound him in fetters, and took him to Babylon' (2 Kings 25:6-7).

After the land was lost, there was remorse. The prophets understood the cost of losing faith. When the Assyrians took Israel, Hosea warned, 'No birth, no

pregnancy, no conception! Even if they bring up children, I will bereave them' (Hosea 9:11-12). Then after the Babylonians took Judah, Nehemiah remembered, 'Thou didst multiply their descendants as the stars of heaven, and thou didst bring them into the land which thou hadst told their fathers to enter and possess' (Nehemiah 9:23). Then they stiffened their necks.

But they never lost hope. Prophets like Ezekiel, in the Babylonian exile, believed god when he said that 'the cities shall be inhabited and the waste places rebuilt; and I will multiply upon you man and beast' (Ezekiel 36:10-11). So did Jeremiah, who'd seen Jerusalem destroyed, but heard 'I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply' (Jeremiah 23:3). Isaiah had survived Samaria's demise, but believed. 'In days to come Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots, and fill the whole world with fruit' (Isaiah 27:6).

Received 24 February, 2005, Revision received 16 July, 2005, Accepted 17 July, 2005.

Acknowledgements: I thank Niels Peter Lemche, Bill Irons, John Hartung, Walter Scheidel, Robert Biggs, and members of the 2004 Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) Workshop, 'Sexuality and Status Among Males in Human and Animal Societies,' for comments on this paper.

Table 1. Polygynous Patriarchs, Judges and Kings

Name	Period	Wives	Other Women	Known Children	Source
Lamech	Patriarchs	2		3S, 1D	Genesis 4:19-22
Terah Seth's descendant	Patriarchs	1?	1?	3S, 1D	Genesis 11:26-29, 12:13 20:12, 22:20-24
Abraham Terah's son	Patriarchs	2	1+	8S + up to 318 home- born slaves?	Genesis 14:14, 16:4-15, 21:2-3 25:1-2
Nahor Abraham's brother	Patriarchs	1	1	12S?	Genesis 22:20-24 29:5, 28:5
Ishmael Abraham's son	Patriarchs	?	?	12S	Genesis 25:13-15
Lot Abraham's nephew	Patriarchs	1	2	2D, 2S	Genesis 19:8, 36-38
Esau Abraham's grandson	Patriarchs	4?		5S, ?D	Genesis 26:34, 28:9, 36:2-14
Jacob Abraham's grandson	Patriarchs	2	2	12S, 1D	Genesis 35:22-26, 46:8-27
Eliphaz Esau's son	Patriarchs	1	1	7S	Genesis 36:11-15

Simeon Jacob's son	Patriarchs	2		6-8S	Genesis 46:10; Ex 6:15, 1 Chron 4:24
Judah Jacob's son	Patriarchs	1	1	5S	Genesis 38:2-5, 24-30 1 Chron 2:3-4
Moses Jacob's great-great-grandson	Patriarchs	2		2S?	Exodus 18:1-4; Numbers 12:1
Hezron Judah's grandson	Patriarchs	2?		4S?	Genesis 46:12 1 Chron 2:9-21
Caleb Hezron's son	Patriarchs	3?	3?	12S?, 1D	1 Chron 2:18-24, 46-50
Jerahmeel Hezron's son	Patriarchs	2		6S	1 Chron 2:25-26, 42
Asshur Hezron's son? ²	Patriarchs	2?		8S	1 Chron 2:24, 4:5-7
Manasseh Joseph's son	Patriarchs	1?	1	7S	Genesis 46:20, Joshua 17:1-6, 1 Chron 7:14
Machir Manasseh's son	Patriarchs	2?		2S?, 2D?	1 Chron 7:14-19
Mered A Judahite	Patriarchs	2		6S	1 Chron 4:17-18
Shimei A Simeonite	Patriarchs			16S, 6D	1 Chron 4:27
Shaharaim A Benjaminite	Patriarchs	3		9S	1 Chron 8:8-9
Gideon Manasseh's descendant	Judges	'many'	1	72S	Judges 6:35, 8:30-31
Jair Manasseh's son	Judges			30S	Numbers 32:41, Judges 10:4
Gilead Machir's son	Judges	1	1	6S	Numbers 26:30-32, Judges 11:1-2
Ibzan A Judahite? ³	Judges			30S, 30D	Judges 12:8-9
Abdon A Benjaminite	Judges			40S	Judges 12:13-14 1 Chron 8:23
Samson A Danite	Judges	1-2?	2	?	Judges 14:2, 15:2, 16:1, 4
Elkanah Samuel's father	Judges	2		5S?, 2D	1 Sam 1:1-2, 2:12-21
Saul King of Israel	Kings	'wives'	1	7S?, 2D	1 Sam 14:49; 2 Sam 3:7, 21:8 1 Chron 8:33, 9:39
Ziba Saul's servant	Kings			15S	2 Sam 19:17
David King of Israel	Kings	8+	'more'	19S, 1D	1 Sam 8:27; 2 Sam 3:2-5, 5:13-16 1 Chron 3:1-9, 14:4-7
Heman David's seer	Kings			14S, 3D	1 Chron 25:4-5
Solomon King of Israel	Kings	700	300	1S, 2D	1 Kings 4:11-14, 11:3 1 Chron 3:10-24

Ahab King of Israel	Kings	‘wives’		70S	1 Kings 20:3 2 Kings 10:1
Joash King of Israel	Kings	2			2 Chron 24:3
Rehoboam King of Judah	Kings	18	60	28S, 60D	2 Chron 11:21
Abijah King of Judah	Kings	14		22S, 16D	2 Chron 13:21
Jehoram King of Judah	Kings	‘wives’			2 Chron 21:14, 17
Josiah King of Judah	Kings	2		2S	2 Kings 23:30-36
Jehoiachin King of Judah	Kings	‘wives’		7S	2 Kings 24:15 1 Chron 3:17-18
Zedekiah King of Judah	Kings	‘wives’		‘sons’	Jeremiah 38:23

Table 2. God’s Mandate to Breed in the Torah

Quotation	Spoken by	Spoken to	Source
‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it’	God	Adam/Eve	Genesis 1:28
‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth’	God	Noah/Sons	Genesis 9:1
‘Be fruitful and multiply, bring forth abundantly on the earth and multiply in it’	God	Noah/Sons	Genesis 9:7
‘And I will make of you a great nation’	God	Abraham	Genesis 12:2
‘I will make your descendants as the dust of this earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your descendants also can be counted’	God	Abraham	Genesis 13:16
‘Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.... So shall your descendants be’	God	Abraham	Genesis 15:5
‘I will so greatly multiply your descendants that they cannot be numbered for multitude’	God	Hagar	Genesis 16:10
‘I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.... And you shall be the father of a multitude of nations’	God	Abraham	Genesis 17:2-3
‘I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you’	God	Abraham	Genesis 17:5-6
‘And she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall come from her’	God	Abraham/ Sarah	Genesis 17:16
‘Behold, I will bless him and make him fruitful and multiply him exceedingly; he shall be the father of twelve nations, and I will make him a great nation.’	God	Abraham/ Ishmael	Genesis 17:20
‘Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by him’	God	3 men at Abraham’s tent	Genesis 18:18
‘And I will make a nation of the slave woman also,	God	Abraham/	Genesis 21:13

because he is your offspring’		Ishmael	
‘Hold him fast with your hand; for I will make him a great nation’	God	Hagar/ Ishmael	Genesis 21:18
‘I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and as the sand which is on the seashore’	God	Abraham	Genesis 22:17
‘I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven’	God	Isaac	Genesis 26:4
‘Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply your descendants’	God	Isaac	Genesis 26:24
‘God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples’	Isaac	Jacob	Genesis 28:3
‘And your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south’	God	Jacob	Genesis 28:14
‘I am God almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall spring from you’	God	Jacob	Genesis 35:11
‘Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt; for I will there make of you a great nation’	God	Jacob	Genesis 46:3
‘Let my name be perpetuated, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth’	Israel	Joseph	Genesis 48:16
‘Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou dist swear by thine own self, and didst say to them, “I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven”’	Moses	God	Exodus 32:13
‘And I will have regard for you and make you fruitful and multiply you, and will confirm my covenant with you’	God	Moses	Leviticus 26:9
‘The Lord your God has multiplied you, and behold, you are this day as the stars of heaven for multitude. May the Lord, the God of your fathers, make you a thousand times as many as you are’	Moses	Hebrews	Deuteronomy 1:10-11
‘Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do [God’s commandments]; that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly...in a land flowing with milk and honey’	Moses	Hebrews	Deuteronomy 6:3
‘He will love you, and bless you, and multiply you....There shall not be a male or female barren among you’	Moses	Hebrews	Deuteronomy 7:13-14
‘The commandments which I command you this day you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply’	Moses	Hebrews	Deuteronomy 8:1
‘Now the Lord your God has made you as the stars of heaven for multitude’	Moses	Hebrews	Deuteronomy 10:22
‘And the Lord will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your body’	Moses	Hebrews	Deuteronomy 28:11
‘By loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes	Moses	Hebrews	Deuteronomy 30:16

and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply,
and the Lord your God will bless you in the land
which you are entering to take possession of

Notes

1. Women full many are in thy huts, chosen spoils that we Achaeans give thee first of all, whenever we take a citadel,' his contemporaries in Troy complained to Agamemnon (*Iliad*, ii.227-29).
2. On Hezron's genealogy, see Williamson, 1979.
3. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, v.7.13.

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