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Sexual Hospitality in the Hebrew Bible (Gender, Theology and Spirituality)

Thalia Gur Klein

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Marriage of atavist times could divert according to two main constructions; whether the woman follows her husband to his abode and joins his kin and tribe; or conversely whether the man joins his wife in her abode and attaches himself to her kin and tribe. In the first system the woman loses her assets rights over her natal land and cannot inherit her husbands land on widowhood; her husband claims exclusive rights unto her sexuality and attributes her offspring unto his line and kin; rights of divorce are entitled unto the husband; and eventually a woman is expected to adopt the gods and spirits of her husbands household. This system of marriage is epitomised as baal marriage and is identified with marriage of patronymic dominion. Conversely, we find atavist cultures practising conjugal systems which allow woman to remain in her abode, while her male consort commutes or joins the woman and her kin. These forms of marriage carry metronymic characteristics. On remaining on her natal land, woman may enjoy assets rights and inherit; her tent and abode are her conjugal territory to receive or dismiss her consorts at will; eventually a husband may not always claim exclusive conjugal rights; right of divorce is the mutual prerogative of both woman and man; a woman and her kin retain claims over offspring, which also endows the woman the right to naming them. On the background of such bi-polar tension between patronymic and metronymic forms of marriage, the ancient world shows evidences of alternative customs like sexual hospitality and jus primae noctis where daughters and wives are offered unto strangers, guests or kings. Do such customs evoke fecund cultures of fertility or serve male dominion? Does it serve a patriarchal host to offer his daughter or a husband his wife to outsiders like Lot (Gen. 19) or Abraham (Gen. 12 & 20); or perhaps such customs overlay and negate traces of ancient systems of metronymic freedom where women govern their sexual life, claim autonomy of their abode, help themselves to their own guests, which will eventually attribute their offspring to their maternal genealogy. The last section of Sexual Hospitality in the Hebrew Bible concerns the Book of Ruth where socio-materialistic conditions of biblical time are interlined to kinship, land and marriage of sonless widow or fatherless daughter. What socio-economic systems were such women up against? How did they re-establish their position within the contemporary systems? Through Marxist binoculars, Gur-Klein analyses the status of such women in a society that simulates superstructure with male kinship; where patriarchy represents the family, clan, tribe and nation and vice versa; family, clan, tribe and nation materialise the legitimate embodiment of male kinship as superstructure. She asks how and why Ruth and Naomi find themselves at the outskirts of society; how two women without natal male members climb their way up the social ladder; what kind of laws and customs enhance or hinder their ascend; and in what way and why the two women eventually turn to alternative modes of behaviour and build a feminine bond that counterbalances male kinship yoking its construction to their welfare.

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