

Stephanie Coen

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Intro.

Largely without exception, the representation of women in ancient texts is manifest through two outwardly variant thematic forms. In one, the woman is portrayed as a key symbol of holiness and strength; inherent in her role as mother, for instance, are qualities embodying her province as nurturer, protector, and literal progenitor of the people. In the other representation, however, the image is dichotomous. The woman is presented more as an object than as an individual with a specific-and functional-identity. Even more strikingly, the woman is no longer seen as a symbol of purity, but stigmatically as a symbol of uncleanness.

The importance of women in such ancient texts may be found through the reconciliation of these extremist, and again apparently opposite, points of view. The qualifying adjectives-outwardly, apparently-are crucial to the discussion of women, for the two representations are in fact closely linked, and only together do they accurately portray the role and image of the woman in ancient Judaism.

The first representation of woman is evident in a deeply symbolic framework of manifold importance-the personification of Zion as a woman delineated throughout Lamentations. That she is in mourning is certainly reflective of Israelite thought and behavior; nevertheless, the negative aspects of this structure cannot entirely dismiss the overriding positive image. That is, by presenting Zion as a woman, the classification-in broad terms-is not of a warrior but a soother. Therefore, no matter how terrible or terrifying the peoples' conflicts with enemy nations, circumstances of destruction, their own internal weaknesses, or God himself, the land, in itself a symbol of regeneration, is meant to embrace them.\*

\*but Zion here is more the city of Jerusalem than the land of Israel

The woman as a figure of strength is evident primarily in individual portraits painted by the ancient authors. There are among these the stories

of the women martyrs; in these cases, however, the martyr herself is generally less important than the act, although it is significant that the women most often sacrifice their children, their greatest possession and, especially in ancient texts, greatest contribution to society, rather than themselves. Other women have achieved a certain status through circumstances that cannot be removed from their own function. Among the most notable of these is Rachel's cry to God in the Midrash on Lamentations. It is not arbitrarily that Rachel's success in 'stirring' God's memory, and heart, is even implicitly contrasted with Moses' failure to do so. The woman, the bearer of children, is inexorably tied to elements of birth and rebirth.

lots of exp of self-sacrifice

The second representation of woman further embodies these characteristics; this time, however, in a negative sense. Procreation is a commandment of Judaism, but the necessary physical aspects, from the woman's menstrual period to sexual intercourse, are viewed in these texts as anything from unclean to degenerate. The woman's function and identity, thus, is that they "are formed by nature for *coition refuse*." (My italics.) The disparaging reference to what is otherwise considered a positive act indicates how closely women are identified with sexuality.

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As just indicated, however, sexuality is generally considered positive; its negative attributes are only one part of the whole image. Similarly, the woman herself is consistently caught in a framework that synthesizes her strengths and her weaknesses through contrasting interpretations of one quality or function. The barometer by which a woman is judged is consistently purity, either in her actions (also implying beliefs) or in her (often predetermined) function, and for this reason she is privileged.

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