

Where did woman stand in the beginning of civilization: as an equal of man or his property? Did an age ever exist in which woman was foremost? Was God originally a woman? Many ask such questions and many theories appear in print, but for facts we must turn to the historical record—the written document (unfortunately the earliest history of woman must remain speculative). Those who assume that total male dominance was the rule in antiquity—doubtless due to Biblical accounts—say that existence of Patriarchy in the Hebrew Bible negates all our questions. The Biblical texts however, date to the first millennium B.C., and civilizations flourished long before that in the Near East. We shall examine these early societies to reconstruct the social status of their women and to determine what legal and marriage rights and opportunities women possessed. We shall attempt to discover the truth about the existence of patriarchy: the system under which men ruled in the family as well as in the larger social unit; only male children inherited from the paternal estate; and women were not legal adults. This is the system under which, when a young woman married, she entered her husband's family home where she might become a secondary wife, due to the practice of polygyny.

The first written records that tell us about the status of women in antiquity date back nearly five thousand years and are from Egypt, which flourished in the valley of the Nile in North Africa, and from Sumer, in the fertile basin between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in what is now southern Iraq. Of these two civilizations, Egypt's lasted by far the longest (3000 years), but Sumer passed on aspects of her culture, such as the writing system (cuneiform) and artistic and literary themes and some religious beliefs, to the Semitic peoples who gradually replaced the Sumerians on their own soil and whose city-states grew into empires further to the north in Mesopotamia. Other records come from these later states of Babylonia and Assyria, which flourished in the second and third millennia, and from early Israel, probably the most familiar to us of all the ancient Near Eastern nations.

Despite the distance in time from us, there is a wealth of written documents of all sorts surviving from the ruins of the towns, cities and cemeteries of these lands. Fortunately, the Sumerians wrote on clay tablets that when fired like pottery became almost indestructible. Many documents of daily life in ancient Egypt survive on potsherds, flakes of limestone or broken pottery pieces, which served wider use than more expensive and more fragile papyrus paper. Advances in decipherment and translations of thousands of ancient documents bring these peoples back to life and reveal surprising facts at odds with long-held theories.

For instance, women in Egypt (and apparently Sumer as well) enjoyed legal rights equal to men. Considered as fully adult and responsible for their own acts, they inherited and disposed of property as free agents, just as they gave testimony in court or entered into business contracts on their own with

no male cosignatory needed. Not all walks of life were open to the Egyptian woman, however, and in Western Asia the freedoms enjoyed by Sumerian women gradually diminished for their Babylonian heiresses and became totally lost to the Assyrian and Israelite women, who truly dwelt under patriarchal tyranny.

Why did this sad turn of events occur? We can make some suggestions based on evidence. The growth of private wealth and the rise in importance of commerce seems to have affected women's freedom, particularly their sexual freedom, as women became, in time at least in western Asia, a commodity of exchange through marriages arranged by male heads of families. The continual warfare which raged in Mesopotamia for centuries led to the rise of standing armies and professional militarism, which also deleteriously affected women's status. The insecurity bred from the threat of continual invasion and the rise in importance of the armed defenders of the State (surpassing the food producers' importance) denied women a useful role and equal status in society.¹ Furthermore, it seems logical, judging from the contemporary scene, that insecure and impoverished men are most likely to vent frustrations upon the women in their lives and most likely to try to control them, and that the same should be true collectively for groups of men who feel threatened and insecure.

Although some roles in the clergy and state bureaucracy were increasingly closed to women in ancient Egypt, particularly during the second millennium, women's social and legal status were not significantly affected. Egypt fought most of her battles outside of the country's boundaries and only sporadically had need of a standing army. Furthermore, the state had a virtual monopoly on commerce, with private wealth consisting mainly of land and foreign slaves. The social and political convulsions of the ancient Near East touched Egypt only lightly, and her people were far enough removed and for the most part well enough looked after by what they saw as their divine ruler to feel optimistic and secure through most of their history.²

As will be seen, speculation about women's status in ancient Sumer relies mainly on anachronistic texts that suggest an early period of peace and prosperity followed by population growth and more frequent disputes between expanding city-states that gradually called for permanent strongman leadership and professional armies and led to a weakening of status and freedoms for the female population.

Because there appear to have been similarities in the status and roles of women in ancient Egypt and earliest Sumer, we shall first examine those ancient cultures to discover what else they shared in common that would have influenced social developments and then move on, through time, to subsequent cultures in western Asia to demonstrate the downward trend in women's rights and responsibilities.

Several problems, however, confront the student of the ancient history