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The HB or, rather, its authors and editors, were not much interested in relationships between females unless those advanced a plot in which males played the central roles. This is a truism and a cliché but nevertheless apparently so, hence the ideological framework at the background of the survey and the preliminary reflections that I shall present to you today.

Let's begin this survey with linguistic factors. *'ach*, אח, 'brother' is developed in the HB beyond its basic (kin) blood signification. It may signify 'blood relation' [m.] in general; member of the same tribe or people; in short, it is developed into a term of communal solidarity (BDB for instance; Accordance, 251; TWOT, Accordance). In the Priestly literature and beyond it 'your brother' designates not only your sibling but is also a synonym for 'your relative' (*qarobh*, קרוב), 'your neighbor' (*re'a*, רע), something or somebody that is similar or analogous. The archaic or genitival form, *'achi*, אחי serves as a prefix for many male names.

The linguistic usages of *'achot*, אחות 'sister', are much more limited in quantity as well as in semantic scope. Blood sister (sibling by father or mother, or both) prevails; in a couple of instances (twice in Genesis 24?) perhaps the more vague 'female relative' is meant; in certain places (Exodus 26 on the tabernacle and Ezekiel 1; 3) the signification 'analogous' is found. Significantly, 'sister' is a term of endearment and intimacy, as in the SoS and twice more (Prov. 7.4; Job 17.14). An offensive usage, to be found in the Prophets, is to pair cities and political entities such as Sodom and Jerusalem, Jerusalem and Samaria, Israel and Judah, as 'sisters': here

the principles of similarity and intimacy/sexuality are fused to produce a negative and violent allegorical portrait of double perversion (Jer. 3.7, 8, 10; Ezek. 16.45, 52; 23.4, 11 and more). This negative signification, or usage, understanding ‘sisters’ as ‘partners in crime’ or ‘one as evil as the other’, is a usage not extended to ‘brothers’. For brothers, positive solidarity is envisaged. For sisters, morally negative solidarity is described. Just a metaphor, would you say? Let us remember that metaphors are neither innocent nor accidental: they are deeply rooted in the subconscious or the unconscious. In what follows I shall attempt to examine whether the city/state trope of ‘sisters behaving badly’ is borne out also by some, or many, occurrences of ‘sisters’ in various genres—narrative, poetry, and juridical texts.

### *Sisters and Brothers*

Sisters are mentioned in narratives and juridical texts often enough but mostly either as an afterthought or as relational to their brothers. Thus Naamah (Gen. 4.22), even Miriam (Num. 26.59), Tamar daughter of David (1 Chron. 3.9) and Dinah (Gen. 30.21) are mentioned as an afterthought after their brothers, as is Tamar daughter of Absalom. So Tamar daughter of David is mentioned between her two brothers, Absalom and Amnon (2 Sam. 13.1); appears out of nowhere until we get to 1 Chronicles. Unlike her brothers, she is not mentioned beforehand in David’s list of progeny, which is limited to sons (2 Sam. 3.2-4). Both Dinah (Genesis 38) and Tamar daughter of David (2 Sam. 13) serve as pegs in stories, in which the brothers ostensibly act according to the honour and shame paradigm, avenging their own honour that was compromised by a sexual assault on their sister. However, in both the Genesis 38 and the 2 Samuel 13 stories, it is clear that the brothers act out of self-serving political motives.

Looking further it would appear that, indeed, quite a few ‘sisters’ would be mentioned as such in a sexual/marriage context—which is relevant to Sarai/Sarah and Rebekah in the Genesis wife/sister motif, as to the brothers’ thinly if poetically disguised worry about their sister’s virginity which frames the SoS at its beginning (1.6) and end (‘we have a little sister’, 8.8). So the stories round Dina and Tamar, and the same applies to Rebekah’s betrothal—here, once more, the brother Laban is the most active actor in addition to Abraham’s servant. A big cluster includes incest taboos concerning sisters, of full or half parentage, in Leviticus 18 and 20 (cf. 21.3, Deut. 27.22).

Another occurrence is linked with Miriam. Whether as sister to Aaron or to Moses, she is a savior sister (Exodus 2), but also a competitor (Exod. 15.22; Numbers 12). This motif of sibling rivalry is much more dominant in the description of male siblings, from Cain and Abel onwards (although the sibling/wifedom rivalry between Leah and Rachel cannot be ignored; Genesis 30, and see below).

Some sister figures are simply identified after their brothers, or both father or husband and brother. I have found two such cases: Jehoshava sister of Ahazia (2 Kgs 11.2; cf. 2 Chron. 22.11) and the nameless ‘wife of Hodiah, sister of Naham’ (1 Chron. 4.19). But even going into 1 Chronicles 1—9, where nuggets of significant sisterhood can be traced in the extended genealogies to be found there ((and see Ingeborg Loewisch’s work in progress), wherever possible the order is kept: brothers are listed first, presumably in their birth order, the sister at the end (1 Chron. 1.39, Timna’; 2.16, Zeruah and Abigail; 3.9, Tamar after all sons, including the concubines’ sons, 3.19, Shelomith; 4.9, Hazeleponi; 7.15, maacah; 7.30, Serah; 7.32, Shu’a). The two exceptions in this periscope—wife of Hodiah sister of Naham and ‘his sister [ie Zelophehad] Ha-Molecheth’ (7.18), which do mention the sisters as subjects of

information in their own right, are the exceptions.

Another category is that of the sister-in-law, *yebhamah* יבמה. This category again is linked to procreation, sex and family politics (land ownership). According to Deut. 25.5-10, in certain circumstances a dead man's brother should have or marry, his sister-in-law if her marriage to his brother ended with the brother's death without male offspring. If the brother refuses, a humiliating ceremony (for him) ensues that simultaneously releases him from this duty and the woman from her link to her late husband's family. The custom is known from elsewhere outside the HB, is not followed in the Tamar and Judah story (Genesis 38), is known in the book of Ruth (Ruth 1 if not necessarily in ch. 4). This custom is practiced in halakhic Judaism until today, with the Rabbis leaning towards the *chalitsah* חליצה, the release ceremony rather than its performance. But lest we think that the custom is designed to protect the sister-in-law, as some authorities religious or otherwise would have it, let us remember that the main issue here is progeny, not the woman, and land inheritance rights.

The message is clear. The listing of sisters as an appendix after their brothers, irrespective of birth order or maternal status in the patriarchal household, is fairly consistent. This literary convention may well point to a reality where sisters are socially inferior to their brothers; they have to be protected by their brothers; they may be trouble, sexual trouble and cause their brothers shame; but they and their position can be exploited for the brothers' gain. Sibling love between brothers and sisters? Do the brothers protect their sisters out of love? If so, this is not mentioned. Absalom supplies refuge for his violated sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13.20), a kind act surely; but when he avenges her honour it fits in with his political plans. The brothers in the SoS express no emotions towards the sister they guard so jealously—although

she implies sisterly love towards her lover, as he does towards her when they call each other brother (SoS 8.1-2) and sister (SoS 4.9, 10, 12; 5.1,2) as terms of endearment. We know nothing about Michal's relationship with Jonathan, for instance, certainly worth noting in the light of the profuse information about the love triangle of Jonathan, David and Saul. Emotions there must have been, I suppose; as with brother-to-brother, no doubt. But what we are told largely reminds us of Claude Lévi-Strauss' famous dictum, defining exogamy and endogamy as two sides of the same coin, the coin being wife-givers and wife-takers, with the brothers defined as the chief caretakers of this social currency system, together with the honour/shame matrix attached to it. A reminder, if one is needed: the custom still rampant in the Mediterranean basin and other Islamic countries of 'honour killing' of women suspected of sexual immodesty or adultery is a brother's duty, first and foremost.

### *Sisters to Sisters*

An older friend and colleague of mine—I will not name her because some of you must know her and her work—is fond of telling her family's genealogy. Her father, his first wife and their children immigrated to the US from Russia sometime before WWII. When the wife dies some years later he sent a ticket to the Old Country and imported her much younger sister. And she had no say in the matter: the family deemed it right and honourable and good for the children that she steps into her dead sister's shoes: much like the sister of Samson's Timnite wife (Judg. 15.2), wouldn't you say? She obeyed and proceeded to feel and act miserable all her life. But she married her former brother-in-law, mothered her sister's children, and had some of her own. My friend was born to the sister, the second wife, in this family whose relationship between siblings and parents would defy conventional genealogical

description. Perhaps this is the reason for the command in Leviticus (18.18): ‘Do not marry a woman as a rival to her sister and uncover her nakedness in the other’s lifetime’ (JPS). Lest you think that this command stems out of consideration for the co-wives, let us remember that the motive given, ‘uncover her nakedness’, is the usual term for performing incest, especially in Leviticus 18 and 20. In all instances, prohibitions of incest betray a concern with ordered lineage, parental factors and inheritance, rather than with emotions or notions of morality.

This story therefore deserves to be told because it is of our time (almost) as well as of the past. Leah and Rachel are sisters married to the same man. The HB is silent about the emotions they must have felt (although there is plenty of gap-filling in the Jewish Midrash for this situation). Is it possible that they didn’t mind, apart from Rachel being jealous of her sister because of her fertility (30.1)? Is it possible that they didn’t cooperate, for instance, in deceiving Jacob that Leah was in fact Rachel, whom he wished to marry? We don’t know. We do know that they compete for his attention and supply him with surrogate mothers in order to supply him with male children (Genesis 29-30); and they finally cooperate with each other and with Jacob against Laban, their father, when Jacob wants to leave and go back to Canaan (ch. 31). In their competition as well as cooperation the motivation given for their behavior is their concern for their children’s inheritance. Again, nothing is narrated about their emotional relationship toward each other. Their present as co-wives seems to override their history as siblings.

And this is how it goes on. A shared interest binds Zelophehad’s daughters together, once again a matter of land inheritance. Machlah, Noah, Choglah, Milkah and Tirzah approach Moses as one woman, a collective body (Numbers 27; cf. ch. 36; Josh. 17.3). They remain a faceless, non-individualized entity, known as daughters

rather than sisters. Their position as reported is learned and uniform; we get nothing about a process of consultation or a deliberation among them. And the same applies to the sisters-in-law Ruth and Orpah (Ruth 1): the Midrash intervenes and fills in their relationship with each other, a relationship that must have been but is neither stated nor even hinted at.

By comparison, the motives for male sibling behavior, such as that of Joseph's brothers in relation to him and his dreams (Genesis 37), or Jacob and Esau (ch. 28), to name but two examples here? The relative lack of motivation, always relatively present in the BH, makes sisters in the HB mostly poster figures, with neither depth nor substance. That in 'reality' things were different is born out by certain traces, such as David's relatives and trusted military men described as offspring of two sisters, Zeruah and Abigail, rather than fathers; or the toponyms Choglah and Tirzah, whose identity with two of Zelophehad's named daughters is clear.

#### *Metaphorical (?) Sisters in Jeremiah and Ezekiel*

In Jeremiah 3 Israel and Judah are depicted as sisters (vv. 8 and 10). In Ezekiel 16 Samaria, Jerusalem and Sodom are sisters as well. In Ezekiel 23 Ohala and Ohalibha (Samaria and Jerusalem) are sisters too, daughters of the same mother. These cities/political entities, the metaphorical female siblings, are accused of sexual fornication and disloyalty to their husband/god. In my view such passages are best defined as pornoprophetic: they accuse female figures, hence also women out of the text, of naturally inherent adultery tendencies and lack of religious morals. The trope of 'sisters' was chosen to convey similarity of character, or behavior. Once again: whereas a 'brother' in the HB, beyond the blood kin denotation, can signify positive or neutral qualities of similitude and communal solidarity, sisterhood is presented as a

negative trait. Moreover, this negativity is once again linked to the sister—sanguine or metaphorical—as a sexual commodity.

### *Interim Conclusion*

In the HB sisters and sisterhood are underrepresented and underrated. Sisters and their virginity or sexual modesty are the basic exchange coin for the culture; nevertheless and dialogically, they are mostly depicted either negatively or else vaguely as emotionless. They become true sisters when there are interests at stake, or where evil is being performed.

In comparison: the concept of brotherhood is extended in the HB not only beyond kishi signification—this happens also to sisterhood—but into an understanding of communal solidarity and identity, into a fraternity. The concept of sorority is alien to the HB, unless a sorority of socio-political interests is at stake. ‘Sister’ as in early Christian usage, or contemporary usage, in the sense of sharing ideas and norms among females, is not to be found.

A consolation of sorts is perhaps contained in the book of Job, at both its ends. Job’s sons invite their sisters to feast with them (Job 1.4; and they perish while feasting together, vv. 18-19). At the end of the book, his brothers and sisters come to console him (42.11). Blood brothers and sisters here—brothers first, of course—celebrate together in what looks like social equality within the family circle. A departure from the HB norm, certainly. And a little like certain passages in Ugaritic epic literature, where both Anath and Pughat help their brothers, Ba'al and Aqhat respectively, as equals and even saviours in matters of life and death. But perhaps, in the ancient worlds, such cross-gender sibling mutuality and cooperation is restricted to royal stock.

This has been a survey, and a preliminary one, of a topic not much studied. As such, for the time being and for this presentation it would be unfair to require of it to contain a re-invention of proverbial Wheel of new scholarship. The literary facts are known; they await further interpretation.