

Baker, James R. *Women's Rights in Old Testament Times*. Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1992. 186 pp. \$17.95.

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Perhaps some of the most difficult passages in Scripture are those containing law codes and purification rites. Within these passages, those dealing particularly with women seem to be the most oft misunderstood. There are not many books in the marketplace today dealing with the issue of women's rights in the Old Testament. However, of the monographs printed on the topic, James Baker's *Women's Rights in Old Testament Times* is poignant.

Summary

James Baker is an attorney and a Mormon. Though not of the orthodox Christian faith, Mr. Baker provides valuable insight on the subject of women's rights due to his knowledge of law. His view is also remarkably conservative in nature, though not exactly complementarian. Baker does not seek to throw out the difficult passages, nor does he take a feminist position that says the Old Testament is oppressive to women.

Ultimately, Baker's purpose is to glean an idea of what life was like for women in biblical times by examining the laws (ix). Baker first examines other ancient legal codes surrounding the time and place of the Old Testament, such as Sumerian law, the Code of Hammurabi, and the Nuzi laws. Chapter two is poignant in that Baker realizes that the law ultimately is important not only for the people's relationship with God but also family (33). Baker then goes on to scrutinize the biblical text and the laws that pertain specifically to women. By examining the wives of the patriarchs, David, and other miscellaneous cases, Baker is able to discuss the issues of dowry, the position of chief

wife, firstborn and inheritance laws, etc. Thus, Baker covers the gamut on the subject of how women were treated under the biblical laws.

Critical Evaluation

Perhaps the most significant contribution Baker makes is his first chapter comparing other ancient legal documents outside of the Bible. The examination of the codes proves Israelite law was consistent with those of the surrounding nations. For Baker this affirms that “the Hebrew Bible was written by scribes who lived at or near the times they were describing, whatever the historicity of any particular story” (ix). Not only does Baker’s study give support to Mosaic authorship, but it also shows, contrary to the belief of many feminists, that the restrictions placed on women in Scripture are for their protection rather than oppression. For example, similar to the trial by ordeal found in Numbers 5, the Code of Ur-Nammu had a similar ordeal, which also provided some protection for wives (3).

While Baker acknowledges the importance of the familial structure in the biblical codes, he does not attribute this to God’s design for the family and the roles of men and women found in Genesis chapters one through three. In discussing what Baker calls the “law of the keeper,” he asserts that “the pervasiveness of law in biblical narrative and its importance in family relationships,” is revealed by this shepherding concept (32-33). Thus, Baker’s view of the biblical laws is that both property, cattle, and people are to be faithfully kept, honored, and protected. The “law of the keeper” therefore also stretches to women, who through a patriarchal society are provided for and given protection by their fathers, brothers, and husbands.

Many feminists make the claim that women were treated as chattel in the Bible. Baker unquestionably disproves this theory throughout the book in his treatments of bride price and dowry. The bride price is viewed as a husband's purchase and thanks for his new wife's services, while the dowry is a woman's opportunity to inherit from her father and give stability to her new marriage (41-43). These views raise the woman in esteem rather than lower her importance. A woman's service in the household was highly valuable in those times, for the men entrusted their wives with the running of the home. With these observations, Baker helps silence the biblical critics who deem God's laws oppressive to women. Baker also demonstrates that these laws are not put in place by chauvinistic men because a wasted dowry would disenfranchise them rather than their wives. A man who spent his wife's inheritance would have to recover what was lost (43). Thus, in one fell swoop, Baker's analysis of Israelite marriage rites puts to rest some of the issues feminists most assert.

Though discussed briefly in reference to Abraham and Hagar, Baker's handling of the issue of divorce is remarkable. He grasps what few Christians even do today, that "if God is involved in a marriage, divorce has no place in it" because the two would fail to remain one flesh in God (94). Today, divorce is viewed as something minor, but Baker draws forth what Scripture really says on the matter. And, while many make the case that divorce was allowed in the Old Testament as well as multiple wives, Baker points again to Scripture, claiming this was not God's ideal. While divorce was permitted, as Malachi 2:16 says, "God hateth divorce." Though Baker seems hesitant in this discussion, he comes to the right conclusion concerning divorce from the whole of Scripture.

There is one area in which Baker seems vulnerable. He is examining Scripture as a legal document rather than as inspired, infallible, and authoritative. While Baker acknowledges his goal of thoroughly examining the Israelite legal codes as they pertain to women and also comparing them with other laws is clearly stated, this hinders a clear view of what God really intended. For example, in dealing with the narrative of Joseph in Potiphar's house, a story wrought with not only the favor and providence of God but Joseph's faithfulness to his God, Baker misses these points. Baker's focus is rather on the laws regarding rape in Egypt (120-121). While this demonstrates Baker's intention for the book, an author must also be able to see the big picture when examining a biblical text.

In conclusion, Baker's monograph is one which all men and women should read to get a better grasp of the legal codes concerning women in the Old Testament. Baker is succinct and clear in his analysis, and he is successful in his goal of comparing the biblical text with other ancient documents. The book is an insightful and much needed work in an area which is often ignored or misunderstood by most in evangelicalism today.