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GEBIRA AT THE JUDEAN COURT

Scholars attempting to reconstruct the structure and functioning of state institutions in the Judean kingdom face a highly difficult challenge owing to the scarcity of source material. A reading of the Books of Kings may easily be subject to deception prompted by its chronicle-like style suggesting matter-of-fact credibility of the information offered. Yet its historical message was subordinated to theological objectives, and not to a need for a straightforward picture of the events described.

It is the dearth of source information and the limited credibility of the Biblical account that prompts a different outlook on the question of women the Hebrew Bible calls *Gebira*.¹ Helpful hints are provided by the word's philology, its structure, derivation, and usage, and by a confrontation of the Biblical text with archaeological material and with any information we have on the role of women in royal courts in the region.

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The root גבר and its derivatives suggest dignity, special strength and power. The verb *geber* (גָּבַר) means “to rule,” “exercise power,” “be the master.”² In Judges 5:31, it is used in the form *gebura* (גְּבוּרָה) meaning strength, power. The noun *geber* (גִּבּוֹר), “man,” is used in the Bible in the sense of tyrant, ruler (Isaiah 22:17), prince, or king (2 Sam 2:31, Jer 22:30; Hab 2:5; Ps 52:9, 89, 49), while in Job 38:3, 40:7, it means a valiant man. There also exists the form *gebir* (גִּבִּיר), ruler, used in Gen 27:29, 37, which is the masculine of *gebira*. The noun only appears in the Old Testament 15 times, whether in base form or in *status constructus*, including five times in relation to the wife, mother, or grandmother of the ruler of Israel or Judah. It is to this group of women that attention is devoted here. 1 Kings 15:13 and 1 Chr 15:16 mention Maacha as being stripped of the title of *Gebira* by King Asa. Prophet Jeremiah twice mentions King Jehoiachin and his *Gebira* (Jer 13:18, 29:2) in connection with their exile into the Babylonian captivity. In speaking of the sons of *gebira*, 2 Kings 10:13 refers to the sons of Jezebel. Apart from women of the court, the term is used three times to describe Sarah, the wife of Abraham (Gen 16:4, 8, 9), in the sense of the mistress of the house rather than a servant. A similar translation applies in Ps 123:2, Prov 30:23, Isa 24:2, and 2 Kings 5:3. In 1 Kings 19:11, it is used to mean the pharaoh's wife, in Isa 47:7 as a metaphor for Babylon.

¹ This text uses twin spellings of the word *gebira*. When capitalized, it refers to the title which the Hebrew Bible accorded to women involved with the Judean royal court. Otherwise, the word is in lower case.

² Alhstrom 1963, 61.

It should be thought that the word *gebira* was in use by the Hebrews long before they appeared in Canaan, which is why it is so difficult to trace its original meaning. Herbert Donner believes³ that it was first associated with the family, only later to acquire a broader sense. That the noun *gebira* was used about Sarah (Gen 16:4, 8, 9) seems insufficient evidence to confirm this hypothesis. It might equally well be assumed, considering other examples of its usage, that it was originally applied to a princely or kingly person and only later broadened its meaning.

An analysis of the word *gebira* leads to several conclusions about its usage with reference to women at the Judean court. First, the root גבר is visibly related to authority, power, rule, making it difficult to accept its translation as Queen Mother. It seems more in tune with its root sense to read it as Great Lady.⁴ Secondly, it seems surprising that *gebira* is used sparingly and that it is the only title accorded to women involved with the Judean court.⁵ The Old Testament only applies to them words defining their family position, such as mother, daughter, or wife. The Hebrew word *malka* is used solely for royal women in other countries.⁶ Similarly, *sarah*, a princess in the royal family, is used mainly for non-Israeli women.⁷

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Just four mentions of Great Lady is too little substance to hypothesize about her status and role at the Judean royal court. It may therefore be worth asking whether the Biblical authors did not in some instances omit to mention the *Gebira* title due to women close to Judean kings.

Some scholars take it for granted that all mothers of Judean rulers mentioned in the Hebrew Bible bore the title of *Gebira* as their sons ascended to the throne. Yet it seems that the mother's name appears as a routine part of an introductory formula.⁸ If the queen mother is not mentioned in the same way in the kingdom of Israel, it may be assumed that the deuteronomic editor was trying to lend emphasis to the solemn ascent to the throne of Judean kings. The practice would serve to highlight the continuation of David's dynasty.⁹ The formula does not title the king's mother as *Gebira*, instead using the phrase *veshem immo*, i.e. "and his mother's name is." Therefore, I suppose that associating the name in the formula with the Great Lady stems from a mistaken translation of *Gebira* as Queen Mother.

³ Donner 1959, 106.

⁴ Bowen 2001, 598.

⁵ Bowen 2001, 598.

⁶ 1 Kings 10:1; 2 Chr 9:1.

⁷ Judg 5:29; 1 Kings 11:3; Isa 49:23.

⁸ In the Books of Kings, a description of each reign is preceded by an introductory formula stating the dates, the king's age, etc., and also his mother's name. Only in the case of Jehoram (2 Kings 8:16–18) and Ahaz (2 Kings 16:2–3) does a woman's name not appear. For Asa, the mother's name was replaced with the grandmother's. According to 1 Kings 15:8 and 2 Chr 14:1, Asa was a son of Abiah, but 1 Kings 15:2, 8 and 2 Chr 16:16 suggest that both were sons of Maacha. Albright 1963, 157–158 believes that Asa could be a younger son of Rehoboam, whose mother had died.

⁹ Ben-Barak 1991, 24.

Most often, the title of the Great Lady is ascribed to two royal women: Bathsheba, the mother of King Solomon, and Athaliah, the mother of King Ahaziah. Although the former woman was connected with the court of the united monarchy, I recall it because scholars often treat Bathsheba as *Gebira*,¹⁰ although the Hebrew Bible never calls her that.

The reason Bathsheba is seen as a Great Lady is an erroneous interpretation of 1 Kings 1:11–21 and 1 Kings 1:28–31. It is understood as a sign of her co-responsibility for the royal succession. A closer reading of the text leads to an entirely different conclusion. Bathsheba does not turn to David about succession of her own accord, but yields to manipulation by Nathan, who persuades her to save her own life and that of Solomon (1 Kings 1:12). If Adonijah were to inherit David's throne, he could exile or execute Bathsheba and Solomon to eliminate a competitor. Therefore her collusion with Nathan should be seen as driven by her will to survive rather than as an indication of her political role in the state.

Likewise, the passage in 1 Kings 2:13–18 interpreted as evidence for Bathsheba's mediatory responsibility between political factions in the kingdom seems to carry little conviction. It seems that her behavior toward Adonijah was no more than a ploy finally to get rid of an internal threat. It is hardly believable that the queen did not realize that his request was impossible to grant and could be seen as a clumsy attempt to capture the throne.¹¹ This is suggested by the final outcome of her actions, which was the death of Adonijah and his supporters.

The case of Athaliah was quite different. Her elimination of members of the royal family and seizure of full power in the kingdom may be seen as evidence of her considerable political influence.¹² Some scholars suggest that her rise to the throne (1 Kings 11:1–3) was an act of despair,¹³ rather than proof of her holding the title of Great Lady. Her having murdered the royal family in Israel and witnessed the death of her son (1 Kings 9:24–37) may have instilled fear in Athaliah, leading her to desperate action to save herself.

The material presented above, therefore, does not permit the conclusion that Bathsheba or Athaliah held any title giving them a specific status and power in the state.

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Maacha and Nehushta are the only royal women in Judah to be described in the Hebrew Bible as *gebira*. Other than designating them as bearing the title, the Old Testament offers no explanation as to any power or responsibility that went with that

¹⁰ She is called the first Gebira in Israel: Ahlstrom 1963, 118. Information on Bathsheba's elevated status may be found in the following publications: Berlin, 1982, 70–76; Flanagan 1983, 48–49.

¹¹ Adonijah asked permission to marry Abishag as a subterfuge to seize power. Abishag was in David's harem. After his death, the harem was taken over by his successor Solomon. According to the law in the East, a son succeeding to kingship after his father also became the master of his wives and concubines (cf. Hdt. III, 68). That is why any approach to the women of a deceased king was considered a coup d'état.

¹² Ahlstrom 1963, 63–64.

¹³ Ben-Barak 1991, 28.

status. We must therefore turn to non-Biblical sources for hints about the nature of the title.

Maacha was a grandmother of King Asa and probably exercised rule before he came of age. According to 1 Kings 15:13, she was deprived of the title of Great Lady because she had committed *mipleset la asherah*. This phrase can be translated as either an “obscene thing for Asherah,” here understood as the goddess, or an “obscene thing of the asherah” as an object of cult.¹⁴ The earlier translation seems better, since in deuteronomic prose the word *asherah*, or idol, occurs as a noun without qualifiers, as is the case here.¹⁵

The text of 1 Kings 15:13 implies that Maacha worshiped the goddess Asherah and fashioned a cultic effigy for her, for which Asa stripped her of Great Ladyship. The king’s reaction may suggest that the figure was an alien element introduced to Judean worship. Maacha’s background seems to confirm this possibility.¹⁶ Yet the Bible and archaeological research demonstrate that such reasoning is erroneous, and Asa’s belief was not of the common variety. S.M. Olyan argues that the cult of Asherah might have been part of state-sanctioned worship, affording her the same devotion as Yahweh in official Judean religion.¹⁷ It may well be thought that her effigy stood in the Jerusalem Temple as it acted chiefly as the king’s chapel.

Therefore, Maacha’s worship of Asherah in the Temple was not a transgression that Asa purged. By all signs, Asherah was soon returned to her place. This is suggested by 2 Kings 18:4. Hezekiah removed Asherah from Jerusalem as part of his reform, but Manasseh soon erected another (2 Kings 21:7), which was not destroyed until under the reform by King Josiah (2 Kings 23:6).

Such and many other mentions in the Bible combine to suggest that it was the norm in the southern kingdom to worship both Yahweh and Asherah in the Jerusalem Temple. The fervor of such reformers as Asa, Hezekiah, and Josiah in removing what they felt was a devious cult was an exception rather than the rule. This conclusion is supported by epigraphic sources. The presence of Asherah is confirmed by the Khirbet el-Qom inscription from the 8th century BC¹⁸ and the Kuntillet Ajrud text of the 9th or 8th century BC.¹⁹

Therefore, the example of Maacha may be evidence of a link between the rank of the Great Lady and the official state worship in Judah, and more specifically that part of it which included the goddess Asherah. Unfortunately, the Bible supplies no information about the role of the *gebira* in the cult in the southern kingdom.

¹⁴ In the Bible, the term “asherah” appears frequently, but not always with reference to the pagan goddess; it also stands for an object of cult. The latter sense is older and occurs more often. Asherahs symbolized life and fertility and were long a characteristic element in Canaanite sanctuaries. Despite their wide occurrence, neither the Bible nor other sources report what they looked like. We may only guess that they were made of wood, since descriptions of their destruction mention them being hacked and burned.

¹⁵ In 1 Kings 16:33, Ahab made the asherah, in 1 Kings 14:23 men built altars, pillars, and asherahs – in both cases the word “asherah” is used without a qualifier and refers to an object of worship. For more arguments for this translation, see: Ackerman 1993, 389–391.

¹⁶ The very name Maacha and her father’s name Abshalom suggest a foreign background.

¹⁷ Olyan 1988, 9.

¹⁸ Miller 1986, 246.

¹⁹ Tigay 1987, 173–175.

Nehushta, the mother of King Jehoiachin (2 Kings 24:8), was another woman at the Judean royal court who was unquestionably a Great Lady. This is indicated by Jer 29:2, which speaks of the king and his *Gebira* being taken into captivity. Dry as this information is, it offers no clues to support our earlier conclusions about the role of the Great Lady in Judah. Susan Ackerman finds evidence²⁰ for her links with Asherah in her very name. In her opinion, the name Nehushta comes from the root *nahash*, or serpent, making her a “snake woman,” which points directly to Asherah, whose link with the snake is attested in archaeological material.²¹ Written sources are also extant which imply Asherah’s connections with the snake. A proto-Sinaitic text openly calls her a “snake woman.”²² Also a Punic tablet describing Asherah as *hwt* may help support our hypothesis.²³ The *hwt* is probably connected with old-Aramaic *hwh* and Arabic *hayya*, an epithet meaning “snake.” Such evidence leads by implication to the belief that *Gebira* was implicated with the cult of the goddess Asherah in the Judean kingdom. The Book of Jeremiah (Jer 13:18) supplies more information on the Great Lady. It clearly implies the *Gebira*’s high status in the kingdom since, like the king, she wore a crown, a symbol of royal power. Further confirmation comes in Jer 29:2, which, in listing those abducted from Jerusalem, right after King Jehoiachin, mentions the *Gebira*, suggesting her high position at the ruler’s side. The examples of Maacha and Nehushta have supplied us with arguments which may suggest the existence in the Judean kingdom of the position of a Great Lady and her connection with the cult of the goddess Asherah.

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The conclusion presented seems to be confirmed by examples of women serving a similar function as the *Gebira* in other Near Eastern communities. They may also help cast more light on the role of women at the Judean royal court.

The Hittite Tavannana was the wife of a king and the mother of the heir to the throne, and as such played an important role in politics and religion. After the king’s death, she retained her status during the reign of her son, or sons, if two brothers occupied the throne in a succession. As in Judah, she could lose her title due to a serious transgression against the king or crown.²⁴ De Vaux speculates²⁵ that in Ugarit the mother of the reigning monarch could wield large power, as is suggested by her title *adath*, the female equivalent of *adon* (lord, ruler). Also Acadian texts from Ras Shamra speak of royal mothers mediating in political affairs. Numerous examples of women who were the mothers or wives of the reigning king are quoted by Niels-Erik Andreasen.²⁶ Their common denominator with the Judean *Gebira* is their elevated

²⁰ Ackerman 1993, 396.

²¹ Ackerman 1993, 396–397. An image of a goddess mounting a lion and holding a serpent can be seen in many Canaanite and Egyptian relics; it is identified with the goddess Asherah.

²² Cross 1973.

²³ Wallace 1985, 152–157.

²⁴ Gurney 1970, 88.

²⁵ De Vaux 1961, 118.

²⁶ Andreasen 1983, 179–194. The author steps outside the Near East and quotes examples of women in eastern and southern Africa.

status in the kingdom and associations with a religious cult. Such evidence confirms that mothers or wives of kings played a significant political part in many countries of the Near East. Bearing a title of their own, they were not mere passive observers of the country's political and religious life, but helped build it within the authorization afforded them by their position. Another case worth noting is that of those women in the Near East of whom we are not certain whether they held any official rank or owed their place in the state solely to their strength and charisma. Some we know by name, because their impact was sufficient to have been noted in sources. Without a doubt, the best known of them is Sammuamat, the wife of King Shamshi Adad V of Assyria. She played a significant role in the state when she exercised power on behalf of her underage son Adad Nirari III²⁷ and became a prototype for the Semiramis of the Greek legend. During the reigns of her husband and son, Assyria maintained its dominant position in the region. Zaki'a Nehuta, the wife of another Assyrian ruler, Sennacherib, caused her son Essarhaddon to ascend to the throne, and after his death helped her grandson Ashurbanipal.²⁸ During their reigns, she held considerable authority in the state, as indicated by her impact on royal succession, as neither of the above-named rulers was first in line for succession. Furthermore, King Nabonid of Babylonia rose to power through the influence and political talents of his mother Adad Guppi.²⁹

Such examples prove that women in Near Eastern royal courts were more than passive bystanders. There is no reason to suppose that Judah differed much from other kingdoms in the region. Cultural intermingling due to trade, conquest, peaceful exchange, political marriages designed to bolster alliances – all these could lead to similar institutions and practices spreading throughout the Near East. Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that the Great Lady enjoyed powers about which Biblical authors are silent, but which were exercised by her equivalents in other countries. Perhaps co-deciding about succession was one of her rightful prerogatives.³⁰ The Old Testament mentions just two women as holding the title of the Great Lady, but it may be assumed that there were many more.

²⁷ Lucknebill 1968, 264–265.

²⁸ Lewy 1952, 264–286.

²⁹ Wiseman 1987, 7–12.

³⁰ Ben-Barak 1991, 23–34.

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