



**REDISCOVERING THE ROLE OF WOMEN:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE ISRAELITE WOMAN  
AND THE CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN WOMAN  
IN THE FAMILY CONTEXT**

Research Conducted by

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my parents Mr Ramsamy Vencatsamy & Mrs Susheila Devaki Vencatsamy for their many sacrifices in affording me the opportunity of higher learning.

## DECLARATION

The Registrar (Academic)

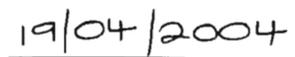
**UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU - NATAL**

Dear Sir/Madam

I, **Beverly Vencatsamy (Registration No. 9703364)** hereby declare that this dissertation/thesis entitled: **Rediscovering the Role of Women: A Comparative Study of the Israelite Woman and the Contemporary South African Woman in the Family Context** is the result of my own investigation and research and that it has not been submitted in part or full for any other degree to any other University.



Signature



Date

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## PREFACE

In this thesis I addressed the topic *Rediscovering the Role of Women: A Comparative Study of the Israelite woman and the Contemporary South African Women in the Family Context*. I examined the roles of women in the Ancient Israelite context as well as in the New Testament period. I also did an overview of women in India in order to get a comparative view as to how societies that place such high emphasis on the roles of wife and mother differed in their treatment of these women. In trying to foster an understanding for the role change in the lives of these women I compared these older societies to that of the modern Indian women in South Africa as well to the modern Christian family. In attempting to understand the changes and why more wives/mothers are entering the ranks of employment, I found that in both these instances motherhood is given high regard. However, with the cost of living on the rapid increase many women have no choice but to get a job, while others do it as a means of self-fulfilment.

My main findings were that the family eventually suffers and that children are not being socialised within the confines of the family as in the days of our forefathers. Therefore women need to find a balance between work and home and give the family the due priority it deserves because the family in all its diversities is ordained of God.

Beverly Vencatsamy

December 2003

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>PAGE</b>
<b>TITLE PAGE</b>	<b>I</b>
<b>DEDICATION</b>	<b>II</b>
<b>DECLARATION</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>IV</b>
<b>PREFACE</b>	<b>VI</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH DESIGN</b>	<b>1</b>
1.0 TITLE OF THESIS	1
1.1 SUPERVISOR	1
1.2 OBJECTIVES OF AND NEED FOR THE STUDY	1
1.2.1 Theoretical Framework	1
1.3 RATIONALE/MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY	2
1.4 THEORETICAL CONCLUSION	5
1.5 KEY QUESTIONS	5
1.6 RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY	5
1.7 LIMITATIONS	6
1.8 CONCLUSIONS	6

<b>CHAPTER TWO: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL</b>		
<b>PERSPECTIVE ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN:</b>		
	<b>ISRAELITE CONTEXT</b>	<b>7</b>
2.0	INTRODUCTION	7
2.1	THE FAMILY STRUCTURES IN ANCIENT ISRAEL	8
2.1.1	The Fratriarchal Family	9
2.1.2	The Matriarchal Family	10
2.1.3	The Patriarchal Family	10
2.2	THE ISRAELITE FAMILY	11
2.3	WOMEN IN EARLY ISRAEL	13
2.3.1	Primary Roles and Images	14
2.3.1.1	The Economic Role	14
2.3.1.2	Role of Wife and Mother	16
2.4	ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT	19
2.4.1	Women's Class and Work	20
2.4.2	Raising Children	23
2.4.3	Life and Ministry of Jesus	25
2.4.4	The Early Church	27
2.4.5	Official Service	27
2.4.6	Patterns of Life	28
2.5	THE HOUSEHOLD CONCEPT	29
2.6	THE EPISTLES OF THE APOSTLE PAUL	30
2.6.1	Paul's Teachings on the General Role of Men and Women	30
2.6.2	Paul and Women's Head Covering	32
2.6.3	Paul's Teachings on Wives' Submission	35
2.6.3.1	The Social Setting	35
2.6.3.2	Ephesians 5:22-33	36
2.7	CONCLUSION	39

<b>CHAPTER THREE: THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN</b>	
<b>INDIA</b>	<b>41</b>
3.0 INTRODUCTION	41
3.1 STATUS OF INDIAN WOMEN	42
3.2 FAMILY LIFE	48
3.3 MOTHERHOOD	50
3.4 TRADITIONAL TASKS	52
3.5 DOWRY	55
3.5.1 The Organisation of Dowry	56
3.5.2 The Distribution and Control of Dowry	57
3.5.3 Dowry and Inheritance	60
3.5.4 Dowry as a Social Problem	61
3.6 CONCLUSION	62

## **CHAPTER FOUR: THE PLACE OF INDIAN WOMEN**

<b>IN SOUTH AFRICA</b>	<b>65</b>
4.0 INTRODUCTION	65
4.1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF INDIANS IN SOUTH AFRICA AND THE INDIAN WOMAN	68
4.2 INDIAN WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICA	69
4.3 INDIAN WOMEN AS WIVES AND MOTHERS	71
4.3.1 The Joint/Extended Family	72
4.3.2 The Nuclear Family	74
4.4 INDIAN WOMEN AND RELIGION	76
4.5 CONCLUSION	76

## **CHAPTER FIVE: THE FAMILY IN MODERN**

<b>SOCIETY: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE</b>	<b>78</b>
5.0 INTRODUCTION	78
5.1 THE FAMILY	79

5.2	CHANGES IN FAMILY LIFE	80
5.3	CONSEQUENCES FOR MODERN LIFE	83
5.3.1	Isolation	83
5.3.2	Emotional Support	83
5.3.3	Parents and Children	84
5.4	THE WOMAN'S ROLE	85
5.5	SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR	87
5.6	CONCLUSION	88
	<b>CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION</b>	<b>91</b>
	<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>95</b>

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **1.0 TITLE OF THESIS**

Rediscovering the Role of Women: A Comparative Study of the Israelite Woman and Contemporary South African Woman in the Family Context

### **1.1 SUPERVISOR**

**Prof. PP. Kumar:** School of Religion & Culture, University of Durban - Westville

### **1.2 OBJECTIVES OF AND NEED FOR THE STUDY**

#### **1.2.1 Theoretical Framework**

One of the major objectives of this research will be to draw an analogue between the Israelite Woman in the Biblical Texts and the contemporary South African Woman. The objective will be to try and understand the role of the woman within the family structure.

My second objective will be to try and understand the functions of the Israelite woman within this family context - i.e. economical, religious, social and political.

My third objective will be to gain an understanding of Indian women, as the oppression of these women are still rife in many parts of that country.

My fourth objective will be to draw an analysis of the contemporary South African (Indian) Woman and her functions within the contemporary family context, which are also economical, religious, social and political.

My final objective will be to draw a comparative study of the Israelite woman and the contemporary South African woman and understand how they differ and also how they are similar.

The following are some of the texts that will be analysed:

Selected passages from the Old Testament

Selected Passages from the New Testament

Selected Passages from literature on the Role of Women in India.

### **1.3 RATIONALE/MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY**

Extensive societal changes that accompanied the processes of urbanisation and industrialisation not only influence the structure of the family but also have far-reaching effects on family relationships – the husband-wife, father-child and mother-child relationships.

Since the nature of these relationships essentially determines the quality of family life and marital life, it also determines the effective socialisation of the child and the stabilisation of the mature personality. It is therefore of vital importance that there should be proper insight into the knowledge of these family relationships, and also the manner in which these changing patterns of relationships influence the effective functioning of the family.

A number of factors influence the nature of family relationships, which often make these relationships and the family as a whole extremely vulnerable. On the one hand, a great deal of stress is generated in the way in which a structurally differentiated society functions. This stress is normally transferred to the family where it can have a constraining influence on familial relationships. On the other hand, there are several problems inherent in the way in which certain family structures are integrated into the broader social structure. These may have constraining influences on the relationships within the family.

One of these problems encountered within the family is that the changes that occur in society and the family have implications for the authority patterns within the family. Over the recent years there has been a drastic movement away from the traditional male-dominated pattern of authority and variables such as the availability of resources and exchange begin to play a role in the development of the authority pattern within a particular family. Thus a variety of authority patterns may manifest themselves in families today. It is therefore important to determine what the nature of these patterns are and how these affect the quality of life within the family.

A significant factor which has contributed to the profound changes in family relationships is the fact that woman, as a consequence of the nature of the structurally differentiated society, higher educational qualifications and demographic variables - such as earlier marriage, fewer children in the family and longer life expectancy - has increasingly entered the ranks of employment. Her employment status on the one hand led to a greater degree of self-realisation for the woman, which may have a positive influence on family relationships (Steyn 1987:). On the other hand her participation in the workforce has resulted in several problems. If these are not correctly dealt with, they may have detrimental influences on family relationships. Thus, the woman's entry into the field of employment implies a redefinition of roles within the family, a change in the role content of different positions such as wife and mother and the nature and quality of relationships in the family. Certain conflicts may escalate if family members do not agree on the changes and shifts in role content and as a result if provisions are not made for effective childcare in the absence of a working mother, the socialisation of the child may also suffer.

It therefore seems important that research be done with regard to these changing role structures within the family and the influence these changing role structures has on family relationships.

## **1.4 THEORETICAL CONCLUSION**

My theoretical conclusion is that by analysing the role of the women in the Israelite family and by drawing an analysis to the contemporary women, it can foster a better understanding about how the Biblical traditions impact on the lives of contemporary women in the struggle to find their rightful place in society and particularly within a patriarchal family system.

## **1.5 KEY QUESTIONS:**

- Are there contrasting voices in the Biblical texts depicting the role of the women within the family context?
- How do these contrasting voices affect women in the contemporary society?
- How can the roles of the women within the Biblical society challenge the role of the women within the contemporary society?
- Can a close reading of the Biblical texts provide a tool for liberating contextual women within the oppressive patriarchal system?

## **1.6 RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY**

1. An analysis of the Biblical Texts
2. Literature Survey of Contemporary discourses by prominent South African Women Scholar.

## **1.7 LIMITATIONS**

Although the changing role of the women in the context of the family is not a new concept, literature on this subject is wanting not only on the lives of women in the ancient societies but also within the contemporary South African context. It is therefore important that academics and researchers alike focus more of their attention on the changing role of women especially within the family.

## **1.8 CONCLUSION**

In the chapters that follow I examine the daily lives of women in the Israelite context (chapter two). In chapter three I analyse the role of women in India in what was and still is a patriarchal society. In chapter four I examine the lives of working women in contemporary society, paying some attention to the lives of Indian women in South Africa. In chapter five I analyse the contemporary family from a Christian perspective and in chapter six I offer an understanding of how the changing role of women within the family can still adhere to the traditional family value system.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

# **A SOCIO-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN: ISRAELITE CONTEXT**

### **2.0 INTRODUCTION**

In the Hebrew Bible women appear as minor or subordinate figures, even though they play an essential role in the history of Israel's faith. The names of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Miriam, Deborah, and Ruth are indispensable to the rehearsal of the Biblical story. Key to understanding the roles, images, and limited appearances of women in the Old Testament literature is the patriarchal organisation of Israelite society and its family centered economy (Bird 1992: 951).

Women in the Biblical texts are presented through male eyes, for purposes determined by male authors. However, behind the disparate images and life histories, lies a common set of expectations and values that governed the life of every Israelite woman of every period and circumstance. These are rooted in the need for woman's labour in the domestic sphere, and more specifically in childbearing and nurture. This was the primary expectation of every woman coupled with the tasks of household management and provision. The importance of this expectation in a society in which the family, rather than the individual, was the basic social, economic, and religious unit, is clearly evident in the honour and authority given to women in their role as

mother. These roles were a source of self-fulfillment for many women, for whom barrenness was a bitter deprivation. It was the woman's primary and essential role within the family, with its demands of time and skill that accounts for her highest personal and social reward.

## **2.1 THE FAMILY STRUCTURES IN ANCIENT ISRAEL**

Family, in ancient and classical Judaism needs to be understood not in contemporary terms as a nuclear unit but rather as a household. Jacob Neusner proposes this in explaining family in classical Judaism. He says,

But we should err if we saw the family in classical Judaism through contemporary spectacles. People conventionally think of the nuclear (or extended) family as the primary social unit, distinct from society and autonomous of the political economy that sustains the social order. But in the Torah as set forth by the ancient sages husbands and wives and their children do not form the primary social unit, the building block of society. The household does, and it is not quite the same thing as the family. In the household, the family – husbands and wives and children, the husband's extended family and dependents – finds its defining context. By 'the household' in the setting of classical Judaism is meant a coherent social unit, built upon ties of consanguinity and/or dependency, which is also a unit of production, ordinarily meaning agricultural production. Only when we grasp what is at stake in the family, which is the household, shall we understand

the rules governing what the husband owes the wife and the wife to the husband. To ask about husbands, wives, and children in Judaism, we must find the context in which their mutual obligations take shape, and that means, how husbands, wives, and children work together to support the household (Neusner 2000:281).

According to ethnographers several types of family existed in ancient Israel. The three types of families noted in the biblical texts are: '*Fratriarchate*', '*Matriarchate*', and '*Patriachal*'.

### **2.1.1 The Fratriarchal Family**

In the '*fratriarchate*' family, the eldest brother is the head of the family. This authority is handed on, along with the property, from brother to brother. Evidence of this type of family structure was also found among the Hittites and Hurrites in Assyria and Elam. A trace of this type of family structure is noted in the Old Testament. In Genesis 34, we see the actions of Jacob's sons to avenge the rape of their sister and in Genesis 24, Laban played an important role in the arrangement of the marriage of his sister Rebecca. Although these examples are not conclusive, it is admitted as a hypothesis that between the Assyrian and Hurrite, there was the existence of the '*fratriarchate*' system (De Vaux 1978:19).

### 2.1.2 The Matriarchal Family

The second type of family structure was the '*matriarchate*', which was more common in the primitive societies. The characteristic mark of this type of society is not that the mother exercises authority, but that a child's lineage is traced through the mother. 'The child belongs to the mother's family and social group, and is not considered as related to its father's connections, even rights of inheritance are fixed by maternal descent.' Certain Old Testament customs and stories indicate the presence of this regime among the Israelites. In Genesis 20:12 Abraham is excused for passing off Sarah as his sister, because she was in fact his half-sister, whom he married (De Vaux 1978:19).

### 2.1.3 The Patriarchal Family

Whatever may be true of the epoch of prehistoric Israel, there is no doubt that from the time of our oldest documents, the Israelite family was '*patriarchal*'. The Hebrew word to describe this structure is *bêth 'ab* translated as the '*the house of one's father*'. The genealogies are always given in the father's line, women are rarely mentioned. According to Leviticus 25:49 the nearest relation in the collateral line is the paternal uncle. In this family structure the husband is the *ba'al* (master) of his wife. He had absolute authority over his children, over his married sons if they lived with him, and over their wives. The family consisted of those who were united by common blood and common dwelling-place (De Vaux 1978:20).

While De Vaux presents the Israelite family in terms of genealogical characteristics, Neusner argues that family in ancient and classical Israel was defined as an economic unit (Neusner 2000:281). He, however, also admits that family is a unit of production and is controlled by males ordinarily.

## 2.2 THE ISRAELITE FAMILY

The Israelite family was in all periods a male-headed household (*bêth'ab*), in which descent and males determined transmission of property. In early Israel, family associations and tribes based on patrilineal descent exercised primary political and social functions. Although the monarchy deprived the lineage system of its political power, the Israelite family continued to function as the basic social and economic unit, and bear a patrilineal and patriarchal stamp, exhibited in patterns of organisation and authority, marriage, place of residence and inheritance (Bird 1992:952).

Neusner points out that in theory the Torah provides for a woman to own land and be householder. But in practice it is always a male who is considered the householder. He says,

I cannot point to a passage in which it is assumed that a woman is head of a household. But in the law of the Torah, women can own land and engage in the economic activities of a household, so the system theoretically could accommodate a woman-householder. In practice, however, a woman is always taken to relate to a man: to her father, then her husband, when he is alive, and, when he is deceased, to her male sons or step-sons by her deceased husband.

These support her as a widow. It is further taken for granted that when a woman is divorced or widowed, she will remarry within a brief spell, so that the alimony provided in the marriage-settlement is meant to tide her over until she does so. Or she reverts to her 'father's house,' which means that she rejoins the household of her father, alive, if dead, of her brothers (Neusner 2000:283).

A consequence of patrilineal organisation was that women were seen as aliens or transients within their family of residence. Married women were outsiders in the household of their husbands and sons, while daughters were prepared from birth to leave their fathers' home and transfer loyalty to a husband's house and lineage. A foreign woman was perceived as a threat as seen in the repeated condemnations of foreign marriages in Deuteronomy 7:3 and in the book of Ezra. This Old Testament attack on foreign wives is an indirect testimony to the independence and power of women within the family, despite the formal structures and symbols of patriarchal society. According to Judges 14:17 and 1 Kings 1:15-21, it reflects the power of influence wives exerted over their husbands as well as the educational role of the mother in transmitting basic religious values and wisdom essential for life (Bird 1992:953).

Another consequence of the patrilineal family organisation was that women did not normally inherit land. The fundamental rule was that only sons had the right to the inheritance and among the sons, the eldest had a privileged position and received a double share of his fathers' goods (De Vaux 1978:53). Exceptions were made in the absence of sons, where the daughters were seen as placeholders, bridging the gap

between generations until their sons could resume the paternal line and legacy. Requiring the daughter to marry within her fathers' tribe, to prevent the family property from passing to another tribe, also insured this. There is, however, one notable exception in Job 42: 13-15, where Job's three daughters received a share of the inheritance along with their seven brothers (De Vaux 1978:54).

According to Meyers (1988:246), the family was the primary social and economic unit. It provided the basis for life in the public sphere in which women exercised significant formal and informal power often equalling or exceeding that of men. Even in its reduced economic role under the monarchy, the family continued to play a dominant role in socialisation. The family was represented in the public sphere by its male head or adult male members. Women were regarded as outsiders characterised by temporary appearances (e.g. marketing, legal processes, payment of vows) or marginal roles (e.g. prostitutes and cult attendants). Men were also given legal authority over women, even in the sphere of the women's primary activity, the family.

## **2.3 WOMEN IN EARLY ISRAEL**

Israel's settled existence in the Promised Land and its economy was firmly based on agriculture. Daily life centered on what can be called the family household, which was the basic unit of society. The family household was clearly an economic unit as well as a biological one. It produced and processed all the food, clothing and implements necessary for survival. This household remained the determinative location for many

Israelite women, men and children, as their daily lives and activities took place within its physical and social boundaries.

## **2.3.1 Primary Roles and Images**

### **2.3.1.1 The Economic Role**

Most households in Israel survived by growing grains, such as wheat and barley, olives (as a food source and for oil) and grapes (as fruit and for wine) in varying proportions. A number of other orchard and garden crops, such as figs, dates and nuts supplemented the basic diet. Families also kept a small number of animals, which served as source of dairy products. They were also used as draft animals, and their skins and wool were used for making clothes and other items. The role of women in such systems was fairly well understood. They were involved in outdoor farm work, just like women in less advanced agricultural societies, where women and men contributed almost the amount of hours per day to farming tasks. In the Israelite society, a woman's tasks had to be compatible with childcare, thus cultivation was carried out in plots close to the living quarters. This made it easier for women to tend to both children and crops.

Another major factor in the daily schedule of Israelite women was that their staple crops did not only require preserving but also processing activities. Cereal crops required a complex and time-consuming series of tasks to make them edible. Grains had to be soaked, milled and ground, then the flour had to be mixed, set to rise and baked. Only then is bread, the staff of life, ready to be consumed. However

agricultural tasks and the preserving and processing of foods were not the sum total of the economic role of women in the Israelite household. Their indoor activities included the responsibility of sewing items of clothing for family members. Women are almost universally responsible for such tasks, and Israelite women were no exception. This task included the processes of shearing of wool or preparation of flax, the carding and spinning of thread, the weaving of cloth and finally the sewing of garments.

This brief overview of women's economic contributions to the family household can be summarised by emphasising two important features. The first is the extraordinary amount of time involved in carrying out life-supporting daily activities. And secondly the degree of technological expertise involved in many if not most of the tasks. Many female jobs were simple and repetitive but the majority of the female tasks involved skill, experience and planning.

The intricacy and time-consuming aspects of women's farm labour meant that Israelite women exercised control over critical aspects of household life. The diversity of activities and the expertise required had important implications for women's other role as mothers and wives. Although it is important to note that women during this period were content with their lifestyle, many contemporary scholars would view this as subordination of women these despite their contributions. A contributing factor to this subordination was the patriarchal context in which these women lived.

### 2.3.1.2 Role of Wife and Mother

The life and work of the Israelite women centered in the home and duties to the family. According to Proverbs 31:10-29 the ideal portrait of the adult female depicts her as the mother of many children and the wise and industrious manager of the household, providing for the welfare of husband and children. The latter image, which gives rare attention to the role “wife,” is the product of Wisdom literature designed to counsel men concerning the path of success in life (Bird 1992:953). The emphasis on this portrait is on skill, resourcefulness, industry, wisdom and charity rather than fertility and beauty.

The role of wife is rarely separated from the dominant role of mother, appearing outside the Wisdom literature primarily in tales of courtship, conflict and conquest (Judges 14). Behind the different scenes of courtship lies a genealogical theme, which ultimately points to the role of mother (Bird 1992:953). According to the Book of Genesis, the woman as wife also describes a fundamental biosocial category, designating the one who provides the essential sexual and social complement to the man. Thus, creating the pair that represents the species, and assuring its continuity as evident in Genesis 7:13 when Noah and his sons who are named, enter the ark with his wife and his sons’ wives (unnamed). In the above scripture the role of the woman is depicted as two-fold, that of wife and mother (Bird 1992:953).

The role of mother dominates Old Testament references to women. Motherhood was expected and revered, reflecting social need (Judges 21:16-17) and divine sanction (Genesis 1:28). The desire for many children, especially sons, is a prominent theme in

the Old Testament (1 Samuel 2:7; Genesis 30:1; Psalms 127:3-5). Texts in the Old Testament show that the Israelites wanted mainly sons to perpetuate the family line and fortune, and to preserve the ancestral inheritance. Daughters were held in less regard as they would leave the family when they married, and so the strength of a house was not determined by the number of its daughters (De Vaux 1978:41). This theme was attributed to both men and women despite the pain and dangers of childbirth (Bird 1992:954). Although both parents welcomed children, the prospect of multiple pregnancies carried grave risks for women. The infant mortality rate in ancient Israel was high. Fifty percent of the children born during that period failed to reach adulthood. This meant that women had to have almost twice as many pregnancies as the number of children desired (Meyers 1992:248).

Rooted in the economic needs of subsistence agriculture and social need for perpetuation of the lineage, the demand for childbearing was rewarded with security and prestige (Deuteronomy 5:16; 27:16). Women thus identified children with status and sometimes competed with one another in childbearing (Genesis 30:1-24). Having children and caring for them were integral parts of women's life, except if she was barren (Meyers1992:248.). According to Genesis 30:23 and 2 Samuel 6: 20-23, barrenness was viewed as the ultimate disgrace, understood as a sign of divine disfavour. The barren or childless woman suffered not only from the lack of self-esteem but also from the threat of divorce or expulsion from her husbands' household after his death. Because she was unable to continue his lineage, she could not claim his inheritance, and she had no sons to support her in her old age (Bird 1992:954).

In the first years of a child's life it is primarily the mother who undertakes the upbringing. The small child is entrusted to her. In Exodus 2:3-9 Moses loses his mother when he is three months old, but by means of a trick he gets her back as his nurse. Until the baby is weaned, which may not be until its third year, the mother usually provides for it entirely (Wolff 1974). According to De Vaux (1978:49) it was the mother who gave her children the first rudiments of education especially in their moral formation (Proverbs 1:8). Although she continued to advise her children well into their adolescent stages, as the boys progressed to manhood, they were entrusted to their father. One of the father's most sacred duties was to teach his son the truth of religion (Exodus & Deuteronomy) and to give him a general education. The father also gave his son a professional education. In practice, trades were usually hereditary and crafts were handed down in the family workshop (De Vaux 1978:49). Although upbringing was the responsibility of both parents, it was the mother who had a special role in educating daughters in the traits and competencies expected of the adult woman (wife) as well as in specialised female skills (Bird 1992:954).

Because of the complex, multigenerational population of many households and the multiplicity of tasks in family life, the role of women as mothers included managing the tasks of those junior to her. They not only taught younger family members – children, daughters-in-law, nieces or servants – how to perform certain tasks; they also assigned jobs and saw that they be accomplished (Meyers 1992:246). Although there is no direct evidence explaining the way in which multiple wives, in the case of polygamy, shared responsibility in household management, some sort of seniority system may have been assumed, especially where a second wife had the status of a concubine. Each woman, however, had control over her own children. Many of the

specialised roles and activities outside the home or involving public recognition and action (prophets, mediums, wise woman, midwives) were performed by older women no longer burdened with caring for children (Bird 1992:954).

It is because of the woman's active contributions to the household's economy, the relationship between husband and wife is seen as "shared personal and material obligations" (Neusner 2000:284). There are clear guidelines and restrictions on men as to how they treat their women. For instance marital rape is not allowed, abuse of wife is not permitted and in the case of a divorce, husband must return the property that he had received at the time of marriage to the household of the wife's father.

Neusner says,

Hence the husband has a strong incentive not to impose a vow upon the wife that denies her the right to gain benefit from him e.g., eat at his table, share his bed, and the like (Neusner 2000:285 col. 1).

## **2.4 ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

Although the New Testament contains many images of women it reveals very little about the larger fabric of their everyday lives. Images of women drawing water, grinding grain, anointing bodies, travelling, conversing, and praying shows us the diverse world in which these women lived. The New Testament itself suggests great diversity among women's lives. Geographic and ethnic variety within the Roman Empire accounted for some of the differences among these women; however,

economic status featured more prominently in shaping the conditions and choices a woman encountered in her work, family, social relationships, as well as in her religious life. In the Greco-Roman period economics had a profound effect on the amount of time required to provide necessities like food, clothing, and shelter. It also affected the extent to which a woman's life was determined by the requirements of people who had authority over her. For early Christian women, economic status shaped the way in which they participated in Christian communities and in the way in which they lived out their faith in their daily lives.

Full participation in Greco-Roman culture, economics, and politics required wealth. Citizenship, which gave the right to own property and transmit that property to heirs, was granted on the basis of wealth (Wordelmann 1992:391). The Roman Empire granted citizenship to the aristocracies of conquered territories in exchange for their cooperation. The poorer people irrespective of ethnic groups were not able to fulfil the pre-requisites for citizenship, and the policies of Rome worked to perpetuate their exclusion from empire wealth.

#### **2.4.1 WOMEN'S CLASS AND WORK**

The class structure of the Roman world resembled a pyramid with the small, wealthy or 'citizen' class occupying the upper tip of the structure and controlling most of the empire's wealth as well as its political power. A huge gap in resources and life-style existed between wealthy citizens and the wide and densely populated base of the pyramid. This 'base' was made up of slaves, former slaves, urban working people,

and rural farmers and labourers, none of whom held citizenship. A small middle class of merchants, soldiers, civil servants, traders and entrepreneurs also existed, and often depended on the state or citizen patrons for capital and employment (Wordelman 1992:392). Some of these people managed an upwardly mobile path to citizenship while others merged into the working-class base.

The fundamental unit of social organisation was the household, a structure different from the modern family. Within this period the household structure mirrored the pyramidal shape of the empire's economic structure. The head of the household and immediate family occupied the upper tip and controlled the slave members of the household. According to the Greco-Roman ideal, a citizen male acted as head of the household while his wife oversaw the daily running of the household according to his orders. It is important to note that widows of citizen men and a few independently wealthy women also served as household heads with authority over its members. In the same way that male power and authority dominated political life, men also controlled many aspects of economic and household life. Law and tradition strictly regulated, according to a woman's class, her property and inheritance rights, her occupational choices, and her reproduction. Although these standards differed for each class they worked together as an interlocking system of law and custom that served to maintain both male power and authority and the economic and political privilege that came with citizenship (Wordelman 1992:392).

Citizen women enjoyed the economic security and social privileges of property ownership and inherited wealth. Although actual ownership and control lay in the hands of fathers, husbands, or other male relatives, some women owned and

controlled property, which they obtained through widowhood, inheritance and even some lucrative business deals. In most of these cases a legal male guardian was required, but they did not always exercise control over the estate. Even if a woman had only limited control she still enjoyed the material benefits and social privileges that accompanied the possession of wealth.

Citizen women had one primary responsibility to marry and produce an heir. Virtually every citizen woman had to marry, and she had to marry a citizen man. Fathers and potential husbands arranged a marriage contract in what was first of all an economic venture designed to produce heirs and to cement family alliances. Love was not the prerequisite for marriage. In the interest of assuring a legitimately conceived heir, a citizen woman could not consort with any man apart from her husband. If she did she faced severe punishment and even death. Once a woman produced an heir, she completed the part of her work deemed crucial by her society.

In many large and wealthy households, household management was delegated to high ranking slaves, while in less affluent households, citizen women participated more directly in the daily tasks. Greco-Roman descriptions of an 'ideal' wife often refer to her for her care for children, her diligence in overseeing the work of the household slaves, and her skill in weaving and spinning. Wool working was the household task that occupied the time of almost all the women except the wealthy ones.

In contrast to citizen women, slave women were legally classified as 'property.' Slaves constituted part of the 'property' that citizens owned and transmitted through inheritance. Slave women did work assigned to them by their masters. The

inscriptions on the tombstones of slave women identified them by their occupation. Other working women were either free, non-citizen women of the lower classes or women who had been freed from slavery. The differences among women's lives during this period, stemmed from the class status, which had one fundamental element at its core: a difference in power. The effects of these power-permeated relations impacted women of different classes, not just in economic life but in social and religious life as well.

The New Testament builds on the Old Testament Tradition. The view of women in the New Testament reflects the influence of the Christian as well as the Jewish community.

### **2.4.2 Raising Children**

Family life and its structure can only be understood from the perspective of the passing on of life from one generation to the next (Clark 1980:64). Thus childrearing is a central element in the roles of both men and women in the family. Child rearing involves a differentiation of roles between men and women, a differentiation, which endures from their different roles at the moment of conception to the death of either the parents or the children. The man in the family – the husband – is also the father, and part of his role in the family is to engender and raise children. The woman in the family – the wife – is also the mother, and her role is to bear and raise children. Thus the role of husband and wife in raising the next generation are closely related to their roles in all aspects of family life.

In the New Testament Jesus uses a common understanding of the father-son relationship in His society to explain his own relationship to his heavenly father. In John 5:19 Jesus' words refer to an important feature of the Jewish family that is rarely part of contemporary Western families. In Jewish society in Biblical times the mother had primary charge of all the children from their birth until approximately five to seven years of age (De Vaux 1978:41-52). At this time, care of the boys would pass from the mother to the father. From this age on, boys would be raised by their fathers, or in some cases, by another male relative or male friend in the family. This meant that the boy would live his life by his father's side. He would work along with his father, helping him and thereby gradually learning his father's trade. During that time the father would form his son as a man. He would raise his son in his own presence and teach him what he knew (Clark 1980:64).

Daughters were raised in a similar way to sons. The daughters would stay with the mother when the sons went to their father to be raised, although a daughter could in certain circumstances be sent to another family to be raised just as the son could be. The daughter was reared by living and working with her mother. The mother would teach her daughter how to live as a good Jewish or Christian woman and would train her to rule a household and be a good wife and mother. When she was of marriageable age her father would ensure that she married the right man. Once married she would leave her father's house and go with her husband. She would not stay with her mother in the same way a son might remain in his father's house after marriage. However, marriage would not break the bond with her family. In many cases her marriage was arranged to link the two families more closely. The daughter was raised to carry on her mother's life, in the same way the son carried on his

father's life. Although there was a division of care in rearing children, there was a unity of concern and authority within the family structure.

Many contemporary parents often think of childrearing responsibilities in terms of pre-school training. When children reach the age of five, parents turn them over to schools and other social institutions for the bulk of their formation and training. New Testament practises differed drastically from this model.

The above description of childrearing in the Christian family brings into account the two main structural lines of the Christian family. In contemporary writings it is to common stress the husband-wife relationship as being truly constitutive of the family. In the light of this the task of raising children should be the responsibility of both parents. The other structural link of great importance is the parent-child link, especially that between father and son and between mother and daughter.

### **2.4.3 Life and Ministry of Jesus**

The gospels are filled with references to women who were directly involved in the ministry of Jesus. The most important woman in the New Testament is Mary the mother of Jesus. However, her importance does not derive from her active role in the ministry of Jesus, but rather from her maternal relationship to the Son of God (Lake 1976:953). The Western text of Luke 1:28 states: "Blessed are you among women" whereas the traditional states "Hail 'O favoured one, the Lord is with you." In both cases Mary's unique role is affirmed. During the earthly ministry of Jesus, Mary

remains in the background - except for the terse reply recorded on John 2:4. From His emphasis upon the will of God as the condition for familial ties in Matthew 12: 46-50, it is assumed that Jesus had a close bond with His mother. It is therefore understandable why He made special preparations for her while still on the cross (John 19:25-27). In a similar relationship Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist is portrayed as an agent of God's power (Luke 1:5-25; 39-66).

Specific women played an important role in the actual life of Jesus. Mention is made of Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the other Mary, the mother of the sons of Zebedee as well as Mary and Martha, in the Bible. Most of Jesus' ministry was centered upon the needs and requests of women. One of His earliest acts of healing was that of Peter's mother in Mark 1:29. In addition to the healing of the woman with the haemorrhage (Luke 8:43), there is also recorded the raising from the dead, the son of the widow of Nain (7: 11-17). At the same time, Jesus often addressed His teaching to women as illustrations in his parables: a woman loses a coin (Luke 15:8) at the well in Sychar it is a woman of questionable reputation who meets Jesus and the passage in the book of John chapter 7 focuses on a woman charged with adultery (Lake 1976: 954). It is also important to note that it was women who are specifically mentioned as following Jesus on His last journey to Jerusalem and His subsequent crucifixion (Matthew 27:55-56). They were also present at the scene of the crucifixion (Luke 23:49); they prepared His body with spices and ointments for burial and followed the body to the grave-site (Matthew 27:61; Luke 23:55,56). Women are also present on the morning of the resurrection and they were the first to witness His triumph over death (Matthew 28; Mark 16 & John 20).

#### **2.4.4 The Early Church**

The gospel was available to all humanity irrespective of gender. Women received it and helped promote it within the New Testament church. In the book of Acts we read of men and women who were imprisoned because of their faith. We also read of Timothy's mother and grandmother who were held up as examples of faith (II Timothy 1:15). Against the power of pagan cults and customs, the Christian community erected a wall of protection in the form of rules to control the conduct of women. The New Testament writers stressed the duty of modesty, submission and piety in accepting the Biblical view of woman's subordination to man. Women were not allowed to speak in church, because God had created them from man for man (I Corinthians 14:33-34). In I Timothy 2 we learn that women were not permitted to teach or in any other way 'upset' the man's position in the church. It further states that a woman should be known for her works and faith rather her words. It is, therefore, clearly evident that a woman was expected to exhibit domestic virtues as a demonstration of her piety and faith.

#### **2.4.5 Official Service**

Although the word office may be too ecclesiastical, in Acts 21: 8-9, the daughters of Philip are described as 'prophesying.' Paul also describes Phoebe as a 'deaconess of the church at Crete... a helper of many' in Romans 16:1 (Shewell-Cooper 1976). Even though evidence points to women's participation in the Early Church, it is impossible to understand the reasons for the restrictive roles imposed on women in I

Corinthians 14: 33-35; I Timothy 2:11-12 and I Peter 3. Paul bases these restrictions for women keeping silent in public worship on Adam's priority of creation (Lake 1976:955). Modern scholarship affirms that his prohibitions were applicable only to the peculiar conditions of his own time. A woman's culture, grace, scholarship, ability, religious devotion and spiritual endowment make it evident that she is often called of God to public address and instruct as men. It is also evident in the New Testament and in the writing of the Apostolic Fathers that women were assigned official duties in the conduct and ministrations of the early church. The Epistles of Paul regarding women will be discussed further on in the chapter (Pratt 1943:3103).

#### **2.4.6 Patterns of Life**

Christ's teachings regarding divorce were intended to protect the rights of women; the New Testament reinforces the Old Testaments teachings on the women's primary domestic role. Matthew 5:32 implies that divorce forces a woman into a life of prostitution in order to survive. Paul's description in I Corinthians 7:1-7, of the sexual relationship is unparalleled in ancient thought and literature: 'the husband does not rule over his body, but his wife does.' Paul also insists that the Christian wife must not dress or act in a way that might bring shame to her husband (Lake 1976:955).

## 2.5 THE HOUSEHOLD CONCEPT

The basic unit of the Greco-Roman society in which the Apostle Paul lived and ministered was the household. The household consisted of members of the immediate family and extended to include slaves, freedmen, servants and labourers. The householder ('Lord', *Kyrios* or *despotēs*) had full authority over the members of the household (Towner 1993:417). He also had obligations and legal responsibilities to them. The cohesiveness of the unit depended on the sense of loyalty to the household, which stemmed from economic, social, psychological and religious factors. The household provided members with a sense of security and identity that the larger political and social structures were unable to provide. Given the dominant place of the household concept within Paul's cultural setting, its impact on his teaching is understandable (Towner 1993:417). Paul brings to life his descriptions of the church and various relationships within it by drawing on terms and concepts associated with the household.

There are a number of references to the secular household in the Epistles of Paul. In some of these the household is identified as the place in which believers met for worship (Romans 16:5; I Corinthians 16:9; Colossians 4:15 & Philemon 2). As distinctions between Judaism and Christianity became pronounced, forcing Christians to separate from the temple and synagogues, access to the home of certain believers led to the natural development of 'house churches.' Paul's subsequent references to churches are probably to these house churches. In I Timothy 3:15 the church in Ephesus is described as the 'household of God.' Rather than referring to a building or meeting place, Paul uses the concept of the household as a social unit, consisting of

various members, each responsible to one another and ultimately to the household, to emphasise the need for appropriate behaviour among the various groups in the church. This theme recurs in II Timothy 2:20-21, where the church is compared to 'a great house' in which both common and valuable vessels can be found (Towner 1993:418). To be a member of a household meant refuge and protection, at least as much as the master was able to provide. It also meant identity and gave the security that comes with a sense of belonging. A distinguishing factor in Paul's teachings is his tendency to address members of the church according to household role and status (wives/husbands, children/parents, slaves/masters).

## **2.6 THE EPISTLES OF THE APOSTLE PAUL**

### **2.6.1 Paul's teachings on the general role of men and women**

Paul's letters were occasional letters, they were written for specific circumstances and thus addressed specific situations as response to them (Keener 1993 :584). Although Paul's earlier letters do not specifically deal with men, women or marriage, the topic did come up in I Corinthians 7.

In I Corinthians 7 Paul addresses Christians who have come to value the single lifestyle. Their view however was not without problems. One of the complications was that those people who valued the single lifestyle were in fact already married. Thus their perusal of celibacy within the marriage context provided a danger of sexual temptation to their spouses as well as to themselves (I Corinthians 7:2,5). In this chapter Paul's language is quite sensitive to both the genders , as he addresses both

the husbands and wives on equal terms. Although the Jewish marriage contracts, of that time, stipulated certain duties required of husbands and wives, Paul's focus is on one relevant duty, that of intercourse. According to I Corinthians 7:3-4 sexual intercourse is a reciprocal duty. Both the Jewish contracts and Paul show a special sensitivity for the wife's feelings regarding this matter. This is in sharp contrast to the Greek culture's emphasis on male sexual gratification (Keener 1993:584).

Another complication or problem that arose was that some Christians now wanted a divorce. The main reasons for this were either due to lack of sexual fulfilment or to pursue a celibate lifestyle. Thus in response Paul cites a saying of Jesus: divorce is not permissible (I Corinthians 7: 10-11). According to Keener (1993:584) it is true that the believer is not allowed to initiate the break-up of his or her marriage; however if the believer is forced into the situation, that is, through abandonment or forced divorce, he or she is 'not under bondage.' In the Jewish divorce contracts 'not under bondage' means that the persons are free to remarry. Throughout his discussion on marriage, Paul is careful to maintain his balance of inclusive language, involving husband and wife equally in spiritual responsibility and freedom (Keener 1993:584).

Paul saw marriage as a primary, binding and exclusive relationship, even within the close-knit Christian community. He stressed the permanent nature of this bond when he says 'a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives' (I Romans 7:2). This permanency of the marriage bond is explicitly made in I Corinthians 7. In this extract Paul also stressed the dignity and value of marriage as part of God's plan and as the truest illustration of the love between Christ and the church. The importance of the Christian home as a foundation for Christian living is

strongly emphasised in Paul's writings. In Corinthians Paul shows the reader how seriously he takes the primary responsibility of married people toward their families. It is also interesting to note that I Corinthians 7 supports the concept of the wife's place being in the home in the same way that it supports the concept of the husband's place being in the home. (Evans 1983:69-73).

### **2.6.2 Paul and Women's Head Coverings**

In I Corinthians 11 Paul refers to the custom of women covering the heads during worship. Often a shawl was used for this purpose but in some places a face veil was used. There are many contexts in which head coverings were used. It is therefore important to understand the context that Paul addresses. For example, people covered their heads due to mourning or shame, but because both men and women practiced this it seems unlikely that it was this practice of which Paul wrote.

Although Greek women were traditionally secluded in the home to a great extent, there is not much evidence for frequent head covering among them during Paul's time. In contrast to Greek men and women Roman women did cover their heads in worship.

In the ancient Mediterranean world a woman's hair was the prime objective of male lust. Societies that employed head coverings thus viewed uncovered married women as unfaithful to their husbands – seeking another man (Keener 1993 :585). For those women who covered their heads, the uncovered women were seen as a threat. Women

who opted for the uncovered head, viewed the covering custom as restrictive and saw the way they 'dressed' their hair as their own business. It is significant to note that the uncovered women probably included the cultured women of higher status, whose family homes hosted the house churches. Evidence shows that women with a higher status pursued fashionable hairstyles and uncovered heads, which the poorer women deemed seductive (Keener1993:585). Given the class conflict in the Corinthian church, this could have been a major issue of controversy.

In reading his epistles we find that Paul's purpose in advising head coverings may have been the unity of the church. He proposes four main arguments for his position: family values, the creation order, the example of nature and of propriety as dictated by custom (Keener1993:585). First, Paul argues from the issue of family values: the husband is the wife's head, so if she dishonours her head by uncovering it in a culture where it is deemed dishonourable, she therefore dishonours her husband. By drawing an analogy between the uncovered and shaven heads, Paul reinforces this sense of shame: when a woman's hair was cut short or shaved, it was a great dishonour and symbolised the loss of her femininity. According to Ephesians 5:23 the wife is to submit to her husband as her 'head,' that is, one with authority over her although the husband is simultaneously expected to define headship in terms of his sacrificial service to his wife (Keener 1993:586). However, Ephesians 5 does not explain the transcultural view of the husband's authority. The husband's authority in this passage reflects the status of women in society where they were already subordinate to their husbands.

Secondly, Paul argues from the creation order in I Corinthians 11:7-12. The essence of what Paul is saying is that because Adam was created before Eve, women should therefore wear head coverings. Although this argument does not work well in modern logic, there can be no doubt that Paul admirably made this point to the Corinthians. Even though Paul knew that both man and woman together represented God's image (Genesis 1:26-27), he states that woman, taken from man, also reflects man's glory (I Corinthians 11:7) and therefore can distract men from worship. This distraction may have related to the danger of male lust within that culture (Keener 1993:586).

Thirdly, Paul argues from nature – from the natural order of things (1 Corinthians 11:13-15). Finally Paul employs a classic argument of both early Jewish and other Greco-Roman rhetoric: “That’s just the way things are done” (1 Corinthians 11:16). Again we find Paul upholding the importance of the Christian family and church unity. In providing arguments for propriety of dress to keep the church unified, he also seeks to persuade women to keep these arguments without questioning her right to dress as she will (1 Corinthians 11:10).

Many modern people view the woman's head covering as degrading but for Paul it was clearly something honourable. It was a sign of the woman's belonging to her husband. This sign brought her honour and respect, because her position as wife and as a woman was honourable. For her not to have the appropriate expressions of her positions as wife and woman would be degrading.

Contemporary society is losing its awareness of how symbols of status and subordination can be honourable. However whether they are honourable or not

depends on the nature of the position involved. Many symbols of subordination degrade people and many symbols of status are used to dominate and humiliate others. But such symbols can often serve to express honour and 1 Corinthians 11 should be interpreted from that perspective. The Apostle Paul saw head coverings as honourable, and he laid down his rule to safeguard the honour of both the men and the women (Clark 1980:171-172).

## **2.6.3 Paul's Teachings on Wives' Submission**

### **2.6.3.1 The Social Setting**

Although women experienced some upward mobility during Paul's time and women in some areas experienced more freedom than in other areas, nowhere in that culture did women enjoy the social freedom we now recognise as our rights. Influential ancient male attitudes toward women often sound harsh to our ears, and to some Jewish teachers, women were inherently evil (Keener 1993:587). Such attitudes naturally affected the treatment of women in ancient households, where men always held the power. Roman law vested complete authority over the wife, children and slaves in the male head of the household. This became known as the *pater familias*. The wife's quiet submission was viewed as one of her greatest virtues throughout Greco-Roman antiquity (Keener 1993:587).

According to Keener (1993:587), due the proliferation of female infanticide there seemed to be a shortage of women in Greek society. Thus the marriage of men in their thirties to teenage girls was a standard practice. However this situation was not as

dismal throughout the Empire of Paul's day. Tomb inscriptions testified to the abundance of genuine love between husbands and wives, but the very structures of ancient society taught against husbands perceiving their wives as potential equals. From the time of Aristotle it had become customary for moral philosophers to advise their male readers on how to govern wives and other members of the household properly – household codes (Keener 1993:587). Aristotle classified the three main categories subordinate to the male householder as (1) wives, (2) children and (3) slaves. Although he allowed that the character of their subordination differ, - that is male children required less subordination as they grew older - he argue that their subordination was a matter of their nature and not their culture. These moral themes appealed to the Romans, whose culture emphasised duty and order, and who were suspicious of any potential threats to their social order (Keener 1993:587).

### **2.6.3.2 Ephesians 5:22-33**

Like its parallel passage in Colossians 3:18-19, Ephesians 5:22-33 forms part of a section of the epistles commonly known as a 'household code' (*Haustafel*). Both the epistles of Ephesians and Colossians contain a series of exhortations to wives and husbands, children and parents and slaves and masters. These exhortations are further paralleled in I Peter. The household codes in all three of these books form a wider category of teachings, which instruct Christians on how to approach important relationships according to God's design. The household codes depicted in both Ephesians and Colossians are examples of how this teaching was done.

The teaching on how to conduct particular relationships, like the husband-wife relationship, was part of an even greater body of Christian learning on personal relationships found in many places in the New Testament (Clark 1980: 73). The core content of the exhortation in Ephesians 5:22-33 is the wife's subordination to the husband and the husband's love of his wife. It is important to take into consideration two phrases that appear in the text, that is : 'Because you fear Christ' and 'as to the Lord.' These phrases invoke the authority of the Lord with regard to these directions. The Apostle Paul presents it as Christian teaching calling for obedience as a response to the Lord (Clark 1980:78).

The first phrase occurs in Ephesians 5:21: 'Because you fear Christ, subordinate yourselves to one another.' The fear of Christ is a reason or motivation for subordination. The phrase 'fear of the Christ' is analogous to the 'fear of the Lord' in the Old Testament. Wisdom literature presents the 'fear of the Lord' as the response, which produces obedience to the commands of the Lord. According to the bible those who fear God are those who obey him. 'Fear' in this case does not primarily mean a servile terror, or a fear simply of punishment but rather reminds us that we cannot disregard God's will with impunity. The 'fear' in the wisdom literature is the first step in wisdom. It recognises God's power and position as well as our position as his dependents. To subordinate oneself out of fear of Christ means that one is subordinate out of the reverence and obedience. Christ's stands behind the order of subordination within the Christian community (Clark 1980:78).

The phrase 'as to the Lord' in Ephesians 5:22 has a similar meaning to 'because you fear Christ.' It refers to the manner of the wife's subordination. She should

subordinate herself to her husband in the same way she would if he were Christ. Subordination within the Christian community is not simply a human affair, a matter of convenience or even wisdom. Christ's authority stands behind it, because He is concerned for the good order which, makes His body, functional (Colossian 2:5). The husband's authority over his wife is not because of nature or a social custom, but because Christ has delegated that authority to him. So when a wife subordinates herself to her husband, she is obeying Christ.

The subordination that Paul urges in the text, stems from the unity of husband and wife in the family. The purpose of the subordination is to provide a deeper more solid oneness between the husband and wife as they faction together in the household. The Greek term translated 'subordination' (*hypostassō*) has a military use that makes a helpful comparison. It was used to describe an ordered army or a fleet drawn up in battle array, ready to function together as a unit (Clark1980:81).

According to the New Testament, something similar should be true of husbands and wives. Their subordination has a practical aspect in that it creates a greater effectiveness in their working together as one.

This passage as a whole indicates that both the subjection of the wife and the love of the husband are in fact to be expressions in different ways of the mutual subjection called for in verse 21 - Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God. Both can be seen in terms of a readiness to subordinate one's own will and advantage for the benefit of the other. The Apostle Paul describes the union between husband and wife as a give and take, an exchange of offering and receiving, seeking and finding,

tension and fulfilment. His use of marriage as an illustration to symbolise the relationship between Christ and the church is a reflection of the high value that is placed on the institution of marriage (Evans 1983:76).

## **2.7 CONCLUSION**

In the first part of this chapter we were introduced to the family within the Israelite context. It is without question that Israel followed a patriarchal way of life, and it was within this system that the Israelites established a unique and admirable family structure. Various biblical passages confirm the family as an important component of the Israelite society as a whole. In the creation of a unique family identity of the Israelite nation, solidarity to family and tribal organisations together with family customs were of vital importance. I examined the role of the women within this time period and discovered their primary role was as wives and mothers. The domestic sphere was their haven. The daily household tasks did lower her status but rendered her sincere consideration, as an important and vital member within the family structure. Modern society may argue that the picture of Israelite women is one of subordination to men, however one needs to take into consideration that it was custom in this social setting to be submissive to the authority of the man, who was the head of the household.

In the New Testament we find a similar view on the role of women as wife, mother and primary caregiver to members of the extended household, thus building on the Old Testament tradition. Even in the teachings of the Apostle Paul we find the family

is given high regard. Although somewhat questionable it is important to grasp the underlying issues in his epistles, that is, the family is ordained of God and therefore should be given priority.

The home and family in present society have lost their key functions. Thus the role of the household has significantly diminished. The rate at which couples are divorcing and families are being split is increasing at an alarming rate, leaving women with no choice but to leave the young children and seek employment. However, divorce is not the only factor. There are a number of other contributing factors. With the number of women joining the workforce basic family values are being neglected. It is therefore the aim of this research to find a way to incorporate the values that the people of ancient Israel deemed important with that of our very busy modern lifestyle.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN INDIA**

#### **3.0 INTRODUCTION**

In attempting to understand the role of women in the context of the family, I analysed their roles as wives and mothers in the Biblical period, as is evident in chapter two. This was done to gain insight into the lives of these women but more importantly in order to foster an understanding of how their lives may be used as a foundation for bringing up families in our very modern society. However, in this chapter I examine the role of women in India not only to get a glimpse into their lives but to see how it differs from the lives of South African Indian women (chapter four). South African women are slowly gaining their independence from the patriarchal system that once governed them and still governs the majority of women living in India.

India is currently undergoing dramatic changes in every sphere, and the lives of the nation's women are being altered in many aspects. A majority of Indian women are playing major roles in effecting these changes. They are actively involved in politics, the professions and virtually in all of the nation's occupations. Millions of women are seeking higher education, while millions more are employed in jobs outside the familial homes. Spheres of activity are widening especially for women who dwell in the urban areas. However, a vast majority of India's women still live in the villages where they carry out the traditional domestic and agricultural tasks and adhere to the

norms that have been espoused for many generations. These traditional roles and values relating to women find wide acceptance even in the rapidly growing urban areas. Although India was led for nearly sixteen years by a dynamic woman Prime Minister, countless numbers of Indian women still veil their faces and submissively live under the dictatorship of others.

### **3.1 STATUS OF INDIAN WOMEN**

According to ancient Hindu texts and tradition, until approximately 500 B.C. women in India enjoyed considerable freedom in choosing their partners and participating in public functions. Well-educated upper class women married late and were considered to be equal to their male counterparts regarding religious matters (Jacobson 1995:56). During that period divorce and the remarriage of widows were deemed acceptable by society. However, over the next thousand years, the position of women gradually deteriorated: educational and religious parity were denied to them and widow remarriages were forbidden to those of high status families. Many scholars on ancient Hindu civilisation share the same opinion regarding the freedom women were given during that particular period, however evidence for these assumptions are wanting.

The laws of Manu, written during that period, are still quoted on the proper role of a woman:

She should do nothing independently, even in her own house.

In childhood subjected to her father, in youth to her husband,

And when her husband is dead, to her sons, she should never enjoy independence... Though he be uncouth and prone to pleasure, Though he have no good points at all the virtuous wife should ever, worship her lord as god (Jacobson 1995:56).

In the above law and in recent Indian writings the notion that a woman must always be subordinate to men is embedded. Presently, everywhere in India, the status of women is relatively lower to that of men. In her article, Jacobson (1995:56) quotes a Nimkhera woman on status: "Men are high and women low; this is the rule of the world. Men are the breadwinners. In the wedding ceremony, the woman is given to the man and she belongs to him."

In many Indian villages, a woman walks behind her husband, and a *bahu* (daughter-in-law) sits on the ground in the presence of her father-in-law. Before travelling to a far place a woman must obtain permission from either her father or her husband. Like in many other cultures across the continent, an Indian woman is considered 'unclean' during her monthly menstrual cycle and is separated from others. A woman is also required to eat after her husband and consume his left overs, while her left overs are said to defile him. Even if a woman is a Brahman, she is not allowed to become a priest and conduct ceremonies as Brahman men do. A woman of high status may only marry once, but if a man is widowed or divorced he is permitted to marry again if he can find a bride.

According to traditional Hindu custom, a woman does not inherit land or house from either her parents or her husband; such property is inherited patrilineally only by sons

and can only be used by a widow during her lifetime. A widow cannot sell her husband's land or give it to any of her natal relatives, and if she has no sons, her husband's closest male patrilineal relatives, upon her death or remarriage, claim the land. The only property over which a village woman has full rights of ownership is her jewellery, especially those given to her by her own family. On the rare occasion that a man has no sons he formally bequeaths his property to his daughter. Modern Indian law assures widows, daughters and mothers the right to inherit and own property, but village women fear the risk of alienation by their kinsmen by challenging tradition. According to Jacobson (1995:57) many observers view the veiling and seclusion of women as an indication of their low status. For Jacobson, men and women are actors in a complex social and ecological system which functions fairly smoothly and provide benefits to both sexes. Men do dominate activities outside the home – they take positions of leadership in their communities, make important decisions regarding agriculture and make purchases. However, women do affect men's actions and have important spheres of influence of their own Jacobson (1995:57).

A number of cultural symbols stress the value of women. The *Mahabharata*, states:

Even a man in the grip of rage will not be harsh to a woman, remembering that on her depend the joys of love, happiness, and virtue. For woman is the everlasting field, in which the Self is born (Jacobson 1995:57-58).

Goddesses are worshipped throughout India, and in the village wedding ceremony; the bride is likened to Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. In India the concept of motherhood is revered. The words *Mātā* and *Mā* ('mother') connote the warmth,

protection, and life giving power. Ideally, a child should always honour the mother. The cow is sacred to Hindus because of its usefulness as a producer of milk, dung and bullocks, is called *Gao- Mātā* ('mother cow'). The most powerful local goddesses, responsible for the care and protection of the whole village and surrounding regions are known as *Mātā*.

Women are usually dominant in home activities – childbirth, caring for children, housework and food preparation. Although men are in charge of work outside the home and bringing home the food and money, it is the women who are responsible for storing and allocating these resources. In both the rural and urban settings both men and women make monetary decisions within the limits of each family's financial situation.

Women also perform essential roles in ritual matters. They vigilantly ensure ritual purity of household food and water. Through prayers, fasting, and ceremonial observances, women enlist divine succour for their families. In the Varanasi area, women are solely responsible for seeking divine aid to ensure the health and well-being of their men folk and children. Indian women are also actively involved in the decision making of other family matters, such as selecting suitable mates for their children. Although men do some scouting, through their networks of ties with the women in other villages, it is essentially the women who have access to vital information for evaluating prospective suitors. Muslim women, however, play an important role in the selection of wives for their sons and nephews, since most marriageable Muslim women are in purdah and can only be seen by other women and

a few male relatives. Mothers and mothers-in-law have full control over their daughters and daughters-in-law.

The fact that most women are secluded and veiled does in some ways contribute to male domination, but in other respects the *purdah* is a symbol of high status. In ancient times noble women veiled their faces and travelled in curtained carriages to protect themselves from the profane gaze of commoners. The association of seclusion (*purdah*) and prestige is still evident in many Indian villages. Many poor Muslim women strive to remain housebound as much as possible, in emulation of the strict seclusion afforded to wealthier Muslims. Some well-to-do Hindu men take pride in their ability to afford farm hands and water bearers, thus freeing their wives from the need to leave their homes. These women value their status as ladies of relative leisure. In addition to its association with the economic well-being and rank, the *purdah* has other meanings. Traditional town women appreciate the protection afforded to them by the veil from the stares of lecherous men. For Hindus the veil is a symbol of the distance between a woman and her husband's relatives thus contributing to a harmonious family life.

*Purdah* restrictions on the mobility of traditional women do contribute to their subservience to males. Village women of good repute should not travel to another village or town except for an approved purpose. It is also significant that in a country where travel has traditionally been a bullock cart, women never drive one. Even among the wealthier urban classes it is very rare to see a woman driving a car. Unless a woman in India has access to a bus line, they cannot travel far without a male to accompany her. The family elders usually greet attendance at a school or non-

religious public gatherings with much disapproval, as a result sequestered women are often poorly educated and ignorant of events outside their own villages. Even within her conjugal village, the young wife is often isolated by restrictions on her movement. She is unable to visit the neighbours and consequently forms few bonds of friendship within her husband's village.

Given the societal restrictions placed on women, it is therefore not surprising that the vast majority of women do not participate in extra-familial politics. Even though Indian women have had suffrage since 1949, many of them fail to vote and those who actually do cast their ballots do so in favour of candidates of their husbands' choice.

Although the formal trappings of female subservience are clearly evident within the Indian culture, the relationship between a woman and her husband is not easy to characterise. In the beginning, the husband and wife are strangers coyly meeting each other at night. Their first encounters may be emotionless enactments of sexual activity, but as the relationship progresses it may become more romantic. Initial embarrassment makes way for warmth and pleasure. The traditional bride shyly veils her face from her groom, but he gradually encourages her to talk. Publicly, the young couple pretend indifference to each other, neither uttering the other's name. Because they are not daytime companions, it is not until they are much older that they actually have a conversation in the presence of others. Among the Brahmans of Kashmir, a wife is called 'the parrot of the pillow,' in reference to the fact that she is only free to talk to her husband in bed (Jacobson 1995:63). It is important to note that even very westernised couples refrain from public acts of affection.

A majority of marriages in India are arranged, even though some couples eventually fall in love with each other, for many others this union is not so blissful. Many village and urban women resort to deep involvement in religious matters when they cannot find satisfaction in their marriages. In North India, a woman cannot easily return to her parents' home, therefore pilgrimages may be the only respite from her husband and his family. Other women devote many hours to prayer or depend on their children for much needed affection.

### **3.2 FAMILY LIFE**

In North and Central India, a bride always goes to live with her husband and his parents and siblings in a joint family unit. She may live in this joint family all her life, and as the group loses its members through death and division she may find herself in a nuclear family – with only her husband and unmarried children. Nuclear family living is generally characteristic of people who do not own large portions of land and property or who find it advantageous to move away from their home in search of employment or both. Good examples of this are government servants who are frequently transferred. They are given small living quarters and usually live in nuclear families. Although some farmers live in nuclear families this is usually not for long. For a farmer, joint family living is generally economically advantageous, since it involves a group of kinsmen living and working together on land that they cooperatively farm (Jacobson 1995:67). With the exclusion of some urban circles, this joint family is ideal, even some of India's wealthiest industrialists live in large joint families. However, in spite of the ideal brothers often quarrel and divide their

property after the death of their parents. Joint family living is frequently found among the village kinsmen of urban migrants. When a village man migrates to the city to find work in a factory or as a labourer, he usually leaves his wife and children behind with his family. He normally lives alone or with fellow male workers and may visit his family approximately once or twice a year.

The nature of a woman's relationships with her in-laws depends a great deal on whether she is living with them in the same household. The wife of a government official living away from his parents may meet her parents-in-law on the rare occasion, thus allowing her with as much autonomy as his job allows. However, a village farmer and his wife living with the husband's family must modify daily their actions to satisfy his relatives. Restraint and concern coupled with hierarchy permeate the joint family life (Jacobson 1995:68).

*Purdah* observances are important for village women. A woman's respectful veiling and avoidance of her father-in-law and husband's elder brothers are lifelong, but in some families a middle-aged *bahu* may exchange a few words with an aged father-in-law. The new bride also veils from her mother-in-law for a short period of time and from her husband in the presence of others. As mentioned before such veiling aides harmony within the joint family, because it emphasises the subordinate relationship of the woman to those in authority in the family and de-emphasises her tie with her husband. A woman's veiling and seclusion in her conjugal home serves as a reminder of her position as *bahu* in quiet subjugation to those of the group/family.

In most Muslim families, *purdah* is observed from strangers rather than male relatives. A bride may be shy in the presence of her father-in-law or her husband's elder brother, but if she has married a cousin she is normally at ease with them. Muslim *purdah* serves to define the kindred group thus heightening the family's sense of unity. The seclusion of marriageable women from strangers helps to ensure that a girl only marries a man acceptable to her family. This is particularly important for Muslims who own property, since Muslim women inherit and control land and other valuables.



### 3.3 MOTHERHOOD

Every Indian woman looks forward to having children. It is common among village women to say they want 'as many children as God gives me' and hope to give birth to about six or seven children. Many urban women, however, who have been influenced by government family planning campaigns, have just two or three children. Although the fertility rate in India is quite high, the infant mortality rate is just as high, with the average number of living children per mother being about three or four. High infant mortality is an influential factor in persuading women to have as many children as they possibly can, because culture stresses the importance of children, a woman without a son at home is materially worse off than a woman with sons and *bahus* in her household.

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Having a child is essential to a woman's emotional health and to ensure her status in her family as well as in the village. By giving birth to a child, a woman knows that

she is contributing to the well-being of her family, as best she knows how. Although there is deep satisfaction in being able to have children, giving birth to a son brings with it a lot of prestige for a woman usually looked down upon. Childless couples are pitied while a barren woman is an inauspicious guest at a wedding or a *Chauk* (infant blessing) ceremony. In the same way an unmarried adult woman is considered incomplete, a married woman with no children is also considered incomplete. Fear of childlessness is so overwhelming that it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy where childless women go in large numbers to visit *shamans* who are believed to hold the power to bless them with children. A high percentage of these women often return with babes in arms to offer gifts of gratitude to these faith healers. Many women feel that her position in her husband's household and in his heart depends on or is improved by her production of children. Sometimes a man may seek another wife if his first wife hasn't bore him any children (Jacobson 1995: 67-72).

Contraceptives are used by a small percentage of women in the rural villages in India; however, many of these women are ignorant on how to use such devices and cannot afford the services of a gynaecologist who might instruct them on proper usage. Lack of access to contraceptives as well as lack of privacy also militates against their use. Due to the general distrust of government personnel many villagers are suspicious of the government family planning campaigns.

In a study conducted by John Marshall in 1971, a small village in the Delhi area was subjected to an intensive family planning campaign for six months, yet none of the women adopted the idea of contraception. Twenty women were shown two pictures – silhouettes of a pregnant woman and an unpregnant woman. All saw the pregnant

woman as happier, healthier, better fed, more secure, more influential and more respected. Most the village women did not believe that individual use of contraceptives would slow population pressure on the limited land resources. Some thought the growth of the village would lead to the opening of new shops and other facilities, which would provide job opportunities (Jacobson 1995:73-74). Nevertheless, women who have borne several children without medical attention are often anaemic or suffer from other illnesses and would prefer to prevent future pregnancies.

Women's conversations often centre on children and childbirth, and all gatherings include babies that are either being suckled or cuddled. Young girls watch and listen and grow up with the expectation that they will eventually become mothers. For many villagers in India there are no alternatives, even those girls with careers, expect to have children. Girls hear of the pain of childbirth and learn in advance to accept it as a part of femininity. The pregnant woman not only fears the pain of childbirth but also the fear of death.

### **3.4 TRADITIONAL TASKS**

For all Indian women, work centres around childcare, food processing and care of the household. Although some women perform other tasks both at home and outside the home, they are still responsible for housework, which is considered to be the woman's proper domain. In the regions of North and Central India, it is the man's job to bring home food for his family, having procured it either through sowing and reaping a crop

or by earning money and purchasing it. The woman's job is to convert the raw foodstuffs – wheat, rice, lentils, vegetables, tea, sugar, salt, fruits, meat, milk, and spices – into meals to serve her family. Pre-processed or convenience foods are expensive, distrusted and seldom available, thus food preparation occupies several hours of a woman's day.

For many village women, fetching water is an important task. Twice daily, women and girls bear heavy brass and earthen pots filled with cool well water atop their heads. Young girls learn to balance the pots at an early age, while Hindu girls are taught to avoid contact with ritually polluting lower-caste people they may encounter between the well and home. Although this is quite a difficult task many women prefer to fetch water as it is only at the well that they are able to meet women of different households and exchange news and gossip. Women in strict seclusion do not visit the well but rather depend on their men folk or male servants to bring water. While the men are in charge of major structural additions and repairs to the house it is the women who are responsible for maintaining the house cleanliness and beauty.

Many women work in her own field or in the fields of others, but there is no agricultural task that is considered primarily a woman's work. The essential activity of ploughing, which requires driving bullocks, is regarded strictly as a man's duty. Women are particularly active in rice cultivation in areas where the crop is grown, helping with planting and performing the arduous task of weeding, harvesting and threshing. In some areas, women are also actively involved in sowing and harvesting wheat and other staple crops. Women who belong to poor families spend many hours in the fields each year, some work as sharecroppers or hire themselves out as day

labourers in the fields of others, thus making a substantial contribution to the family income. The assistance of women during these short but crucial harvesting periods is vital to many families as it is imperative that these tasks be carried out quickly and efficiently. It is therefore not surprising that a woman's parents and in-laws vie for her presence at these times.

In many Indian villages, a special system of intercaste exchanges of goods and services exists. Under this system which anthropologists call the *Jajmāni* system, service and artisan caste families have a hereditary right to provide certain services for the families of castes other than their own. In return they receive traditional payments of grain and money (Jacobson 1995:83). In some areas *Jajmāni* ties between families have been in force for generations, while in other areas the system is slowly breaking down. Women of these castes perform traditional caste-associated tasks in addition to their normal housework, childcare and agricultural work.

It is abundantly clear that Indian women perform a wide variety of tasks and that their services are essential to the well-being of their families. However, there are cultural limitations to women's activities, and women usually perceive their jobs as being less important than those of their men folk. It is a fact that women in these cultures consider themselves beholden to and dependent upon their fathers, brothers and husband.

### 3.5 DOWRY

Traditionally, dowry in India was regarded as a burden for the bride's parents but an honour for the bride. Feminists in India argue that this institution brings no honour to women; rather the pressure put on young brides to persuade their parents to give more dowries may lead to their humiliation, ill treatment or even death (Sharma 1993:341). It is important to look at the issue of dowry not only as part of the symbolic order of the Hindu society, but as a concrete form of property in which members of the household, men and women, have different kinds of interest as well as different kinds of control. In the northern region of India, dowry consists of movable property made over to the husband's family, or to the newly married couple at or soon after the wedding.

According to the conventional ideology in north Indian society, property accrues to the household as a corporate group rather than to an individual person. Although land and houses are officially registered in the name of the senior male the property is administered by the senior members of the household on the behalf of all its members (Sharma 1993:341). Modern legislation in India assumes a more individualistic notion of property. Legislation shows an increased tendency to accentuate legal individualism concerning the inheritance rights of women. According to Sharma, there is often tension between the legal - and economic individualism demanded modern capitalism and the more traditional corporate attitude that still operates informally within the domestic unit. An example of this is, a young woman who earns an individual wage may be expected to hand over her wages to her parents-in-

law, who will then pool this with those of other members of the family and then decide on how the money will be utilised (Sharma 1993:342).

There are two main principles, which underlie the structure of authority in most households, those of seniority and of gender. Juniors, irrespective of sex are expected to defer to elders and women are expected to defer to men. This all comes down to the salient fact that brides as women have little control over the way in which dowry is given or received. As these women become older they also participate in the dowry system more actively as givers of dowry (mothers of brides) or as receivers and redistributors of dowry (mothers of sons).

### **3.5.1 The Organisation of Dowry**

The gifts subsumed by the term dowry (*daj, dahej*) are given at the wedding ceremony or very soon after. The gifts usually include household goods (furniture, utensils, bedding and may include electrical appliances) and clothes (most of which are redistributed among the groom's kin). Although dowry predominantly consists of movable property, in the case of wealthy urban families immovable property such as house sites may also be given.

Irrespective of what the dowry actually consists of, the gifts are given in a series of presentations made by the bride's family to that of the groom. It begins with the exchange of sweets and cash made at the engagement ceremony, and continues throughout the bride's lifetime and into that of her offspring, as her brothers make substantial contributions to her children's marriage expenses (Sharma 1993:343).

Thus when arranging the marriage of a son, parents not only look forward to the dowry they will receive but also to the bride's family's general capacity to give.

During the initial negotiations for the marriage, dowry is seldom mentioned as this is regarded as poor taste and bad manners. However, negotiations are conducted on the assumption that the groom's family expectations and the bride's family's capacity will be more or less matched. According to Sharma (1993:343), a certain amount of status can be 'bought' by a girl of an undistinguished family who marries into a better family by means of a large dowry, although she argues that it is pointless in marrying one's daughter into a family with high expectations or in creating such high expectations with expensive gifts during the initial gift giving if these standards cannot be sustained over the years. The ideology to which high caste groups try to conform, and which is respected by low caste groups is the *kanya dan* (gift of the virgin) marriage. The bride's parents make a 'gift' of their daughter with as big a dowry as can be afforded to the groom and his family. This concept of the bride as a gift implies the idea that she herself is regarded as a piece of property to be handed over by one family to another. According to ideology the father of the groom cannot explicitly demand anything, but we do not live in an ideal world, and the fight for status and wealth seems to overwhelm tradition.

### **3.5.2 The Distribution and Control of Dowry**

Many parents begin to collect items for a daughter's dowry well in advance of her wedding. This depends on how many daughters they have to provide for and their

financial circumstances at the time. In some cases it is usual for a prospective bride to prepare some of the items that will form part of the dowry such as embroidered bedding and cushions. These days it is not uncommon for working daughters to buy some items with their own money, although the ideology of *kanya dan* does not wholly accept this, many parents welcome help from relatives especially if their financial status is in dire straits.

The bride herself has very little say in what happens to her dowry once it leaves her parents' home. As a new bride she is expected to carry herself in a respectable manner and if she wishes to win the favour of her new family she will not risk her future happiness by asserting her wishes until she has established a firm footing in her new household (Sharma 1993 344-345). Because it is common for a newly-married couple to live together with the husband's parents the household dowry items are usually merged with the stock of the household goods, on the understanding that these would be made available to the couple if they decide to set up house on their own. However, this separation is not always easy for other members of the household who have been accustomed to the use of the goods, especially electrical appliances. In her discussion on the distribution of dowry goods, Hooja notes there are some conflicts between the couple and the husband's parents regarding this issue. According to her these conflicts arise from the contradiction between the traditional ideas that since children are effectively the property of their parents, the parents may control the property of the children. The modern notion is that if a man can afford to set up his household without the help of his parents he is entitled to complete autonomy in the organisation of his own home. In this respect it is not only the bride who has limited control over the dowry goods. Her husband may also find it difficult to assert his

rights in them (more especially if he is young) owing to the close relationship between seniority and authority in the Indian family (Hooja1969: 9-11).

With regard to household goods and items of clothing, it is the bride's mother-in-law who has the greatest say in how these items are to be distributed. This is partly by virtue of her seniority, but also relates to her position as senior woman. It is the senior woman who controls the flow and pace of gift giving both within the household and with other households (Sharma 1993: 345). The proper regulation of gift-making at all important ritual occasions is an important function of the women of the household and it is the senior woman of the household who has the prime responsibility for seeing that these obligations are met and proper relationships maintained. It is therefore clearly evident to see the control the mother-in-law has over the goods which are the property of the newly-wed couple partly in terms of the general authority senior members of the household have over their juniors as well as in terms of the senior women's responsibility to maintain reciprocal relationships within and outside the household.

The mother-in-law may consult her husband when she distributes the dowry items, but if cash is involved the father-in-law immediately assumes control. It is up to him whether these funds are earmarked for the future use of the couple or whether it is to be merged with the general funds of the household. According to Sharma, the pattern control in the process of redistribution is therefore in keeping with the informal principle that senior women have immediate control over household goods, and men have control over large sums of cash (Sharma 1993:346). Although the Hindu bride's dowry may bring her self-respect and prestige in the household and possibly the

community if her parents have been particularly generous, it certainly will not bring her economic power.

### **3.5.3 Dowry and Inheritance**

Many Hindus believe that a bride's dowry is her share of her parent's estate. It is regarded as a form of pre mortem inheritance, which a woman receives when she leaves their parental home at marriage (Sharma 1993: 351). Because sons remain in their father's home, they receive the immovable property after the death of their fathers, which is divided equally among them at some point. Daughters traditionally did not inherit land unless they had no male siblings. Although the law now allows them to do, very few women actually exercise this right.

Goody and Tambiah (1973), both anthropologists, view dowry as a form of inheritance. Goody treats dowry in India as a form of inheritance common in European societies. However, in contrast, women receive their portion at marriage. For them dowry ensured that women secure partners of an equal or a superior position. If dowry is in fact to be seen as a form of inheritance two important facts come to light. Firstly the dowry does not represent a fixed share of a particular divisible estate as the amount depends on what a prospective bridegroom and his family will accept as well as the bride's family's financial status at the time of the impending marriage. Secondly the dowry is not paid to the bride herself but rather to her husband's family (Sharma 1993:352). Contrary to the dominant ideology of traditional Hindu law, dowry is not a woman's wealth, but rather wealth that goes

with women. They are merely the vehicles that transmit it from one household to another.

### **3.5.4 Dowry as a Social Problem**

The inflation of dowries, which has taken place in many Indian states, is drastically disproportionate to the general inflation of the country. These days, providing a dowry for a daughter has a greater strain on family resources than it was fifty years ago. Sharma argues that the quantitative increase in the amount of dowry given over the years has led to a dramatic yet qualitative change in its significance for women. The dowry is now one of the major determinants of whom a woman is expected to marry and of how she will be treated by her in-laws after marriage. A bride's wealth is measured more by the amount of material goods and cash her family can provide rather than by the reputation or prestige with which they can endow her. As a consequence, the provision of dowry involves a great strain on the household and thus many daughters see themselves as burdens rather than blessings (Sharma 1993:353).

In recent years there have been numerous cases of 'dowry deaths' in which young wives in urban families have either been driven to suicide by their in-laws' outrageous demands, or in which brides have actually been murdered by families disappointed in the first dowry, in the hope of a second from the remarriage of their son. Given the tendency in India for women to be married to status equals or superiors, very few brides are likely to have parents who are more powerful and influential than their parents-in-law. Therefore as long as women identify themselves in situations as mothers (dowry givers) and as mothers-in-law (dowry takers) their interest appear to

be forever divided until they come to the realisation of the common cause of their oppression as women.

Dowry favours and is favoured by a cultural ethos in which brides can be viewed as objects to be passed from one social group to another, both as a means of procreation of children and as vehicles for aspirations to social change. If the institution of dowry diminishes the social power of brides and endangers their lives, it strengthens the hand of the mother-in-law. The mother of the bride may also derive a deep moral satisfaction from what seems as a public and honourable display of generosity (Sharma 1993:356). Feminists are thus hampered in their efforts for equality in such a rich and diverse culture, because of the division of women amongst themselves.

### **3.6 CONCLUSION**

From Vedic times, Indian women enjoyed a great deal of freedom. India has the longest record of famous women in mythology and history and even today women in villages are heard singing songs about their heroines. These women played an integral part in the cultural history of India, providing evidence that in the early history of India, there existed opportunities for education and self-expression. However, due to the political and economic unrest as well as foreign invasions, there was no organised education for these exceptional women for about eight centuries (Joshi & Shukla 1995).

The social customs such as early marriage, seclusion of women (*purdah* system) were largely responsible for the disabilities suffered by Indian women during these years.

The fear that the unmarried young women were likely to be unprotected at a time when raids were common was perhaps the reason for the early marriage system. It was probably the same fear that made many young widows join their dead husbands in the funeral pyre (*a system known as Sati*). Thus the need for early marriage may have also been responsible for the growth of the cruel dowry system that prevailed for centuries in India and still exists among some castes. For centuries the idea that it was 'divinely' ordained that women should have inferior status went unchallenged in India. Therefore, in recent years the present trend towards equality of status has constituted a major social transformation in India.

Today in principle, Indian women have won their emancipation, but in actual practice they still have a long way to go. Social customs and prejudices die hard, more especially in India, where the existence of the different castes, creeds and races complicate the problem. Different kinds of social systems exist in different parts of the country. But this new awakening is clearly evident in almost all the states of India and is further illustrated by the various women's organisations that have since been formed.

Traditionally the rearing of children has been considered to be the sole responsibility of women, but with the inception of the feminist movement and female liberation, the whole question of child welfare and family responsibility is seen as much as the duty of the men as of women. It is also important to note that in a society where women are wholly dependent on their fathers, husbands and sons throughout their lifetime, these men are not solely responsible for their emancipation. It is rather the women in

their lives, in the cases of dowry, who contribute to their demise in their selfish efforts to emulate people of the higher castes.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICA**

#### **4.0 INTRODUCTION**

In chapter three we were introduced to women in India. In examining their status and familial roles it was important to note the patriarchal society in which these women live. Much like Ancient Israel the role of Indian women was seen as that of wife and mother, however, unlike the women in the Biblical texts the fact that they were female led to the exploitation of these women. This exploitation is clearly evident in the dowry dilemma. Even though this custom is considered illegal, many people still practice it thereby leading to the further suppression of women in India. The main aim of including the previous chapter was to provide a background for studying the role of Indian women has changed over the last century with their emigration from India to different colonies around the world. In comparison to their counterparts from the Indian subcontinent it is astounding to see the progress South African Indian women have made and continue to make in the fields of employment.

We are currently experiencing a radical transformation in the nature and character of family, work and society itself, as more and more mothers enter and remain in the workforce in unprecedented numbers. The major change is not only the women's role as such, but rather their duration and sequence. Today, a majority of women engage in employment and child-rearing simultaneously, a somewhat impossible task in a

world fashioned for families where fathers serve as breadwinners and mothers as homemakers (Moen 1992).

Throughout history women have been workers as well as wives and mothers although not necessarily at the same time. Young unmarried girls commonly worked in factories or as domestics leaving after marriage if it was financially viable to do so. As wives and mothers, women also contributed to the family economy when necessary. For many women sequencing work and family roles meant working outside the home before marriage and motherhood, then permanently withdrawing from the fields of employment in order to take care of the children and household. Although at a time when the cost of living is so high this is not always an option. The notions of gender equality render women's employment even more essential and desirable, but the customary institutional patterns (at home/work) make the combination of motherhood and employment both frustrating as well as exhausting for these women.

Women may enact many different roles – daughter, sister, friend, volunteer, and neighbour but it is essentially the wife/mother family role that is central to her identity, while it is the employment role that has become increasingly prominent in women's lives, just as it has always been in men's. It is the combination of employment with that of mothering that is especially demanding and controversial. The changing role of women are now being widely discussed and debated in the media, in the classroom, and in government, as well as at work and at home. However, this is not a new issue, many social scientists have studied and written about women's employment throughout much of the twentieth century. What is new,

however, is the urgency with which these discussions and debates are voiced, as the issue of working mothers becomes a fact of life. According to Moen (1992), social observers have concluded that the lives of women will never resemble the 'traditional view' because this transformation process penetrates the heart of two of our most fundamental institutions: the family and the economy.

There is a considerable difference in which women organise their lives. The transition from full time homemaker to that of mother/career woman means that there may be some discrepancy between a woman's actual behaviour and her personal preferences. While some employed mothers feel the full conflict about their work or feel as though they are captives of their jobs, wishing they were full-time homemakers instead, homemakers see themselves as captives, wanting to seek employment outside the home but lack the necessary qualifications to do so. Other women have resolved to accommodate work and family by either having fewer children or by working on a part-time basis. But there are still a growing number of women who are strongly committed to their jobs and are somewhat reluctant to forego lucrative career opportunities for family obligations.

In vast contrast to their mothers and grandmothers women in their 20s and 30s are now better educated, have fewer children, and bear them later in life. They are postponing marriages and are more likely not to marry or in some cases divorce if they are married. Women are also more likely than ever to gain employment irrespective of their familial responsibilities. Decisions about marriage and divorce, the number and timing of children, and personal aspirations all influence and are

influenced by whether or not women are employed. As younger generations replace older ones over time, new lifestyles emerge for both men and women.

The latter half of the twentieth century has witnessed the emergence of a new role for the mother, that of provider. Her entry into this role has not been an easy or painless one. It has been denounced by many in society. Many employed mothers themselves have been ambivalent and somewhat guilt-ridden concerning this new role that competes so strongly with the responsibilities for child and household care traditionally assigned to them (Nye 1973). Indian women living in South Africa have also been caught up in this new surge of employment. In this chapter I very briefly discuss their role as the employed wife and mother.

#### **4.1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF INDIANS IN SOUTH AFRICA AND THE INDIAN WOMAN**

The development of the sugar industry in Natal stimulated the immigration of indentured Indian labourers to South Africa in the nineteenth century. During the 1860s the white farmers depended upon African labour, but the Zulu, a 'proud military people were not prepared to sell their labour for long periods of time to the White man whose economy and values were alien to their own' (Kuper 1960:117-119). The labour problem became so severe that assistance was sought outside the colonial borders of that time. The British government began to negotiate with the Indian government to import labourers, after efforts to import labour from European countries had failed (Ferguson-Davie 1977).

However, the exploitation of these labourers violated any attempt at human dignity and the oppressive nature of the system also subjected the small number of Indian women to physical and mental abuse, with sexual harassment being rife. According to Beall (1982), in order to fulfil the required quota for each shipload of indentured immigrants, agents responsible for recruitment resorted to clandestine measures. Once on the ship, conditions were unbearable and many immigrants died due to lack of food and maltreatment. Female passengers were sexually assaulted and raped by fellow male immigrants as well as by the crew. The position of Indian women in society was a pathetic one. Meer (1969) stated that women bore the brunt of hard labour conditions, even in advanced stages of pregnancy. This brief description shows us some of the oppression Indian women had to endure.

## **4.2 INDIAN WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICA**

South African Indian women working in a professional capacity is a relatively recent phenomenon and with it comes a history of formidable struggle against patriarchal controls and state legislation. However, the 'professionalisation' of Indian women and its legacy of problems are far from over. Many professional women *per se*, experience many hardships and frustrations both in the work and home environments in adapting to the predominantly male-oriented value systems, as well as the additional roles of being a professional, a wife and a mother. Padayachee (1988:38-39) states that despite the progress made in legislation and policy concerning the rights of women all over the world, traditions and practise reveal otherwise. She writes:

Although the formal legal rights of women have improved, we are not in fact witnessing an equalisation of rights...although inequalities of power within the family have been modified, the basic patriarchal structure of the family, still entails dominance and dependence.

A serious problem facing Indian women in South Africa is that of wife abuse. This phenomenon is attributed to the inability of Indian men/husbands to cope with the enormous strides made by Indian women and her changing role in society. Many Indian men have chosen to cling to the traditions and beliefs that perpetuate the suppression of women and relegate them to the domestic realm. Education and economic independence have entitled women to a certain degree of freedom from the constraints of men, but the dictates of religion, tradition and cultural expectations place them in a dilemma. Although they would like to free themselves of these customs and beliefs that relegate them to a low status within the ranks of society, it means challenging the ideologies still practised in their families and sustained by men. The embedded attitudes of the patriarchal tradition within the Christian, Muslim and Hindu religions, have secured men the monopoly of leadership positions. Even where men recognise the necessity of women joining the workforce, they cannot reconcile themselves with the economic and personal independence it brings. Liddle and Joshi (1988:158) have argued that there are various mechanisms of male control, which are used to limit the freedom of the emancipated professional woman:

In the family, women's lives continue to be controlled through the male and (in the joint family) the female authority structure, by imposing the entire burden of domestic work upon them in addition to their paid work, by defining women as primarily domestic workers and sexual reproductive

property, and by assigning priority to the man's paid employment and the woman's domestic labour in any conflict of interest... In employment, thanks to the way work is organised under imperialism, men receive a greater proportion of jobs, and benefit from the reduced competition from women of the same class. As a result, men gain a greater degree of economic independence than women, especially where there is high unemployment...At home, men can relax, continue their professional work, or pursue other interests, whilst receiving the benefit of women's domestic work and personal services, and can raise a family without contributing to any of the labour involved in such undertaking. And they can gain an increased standard of living through the wife's paid work, at no cost to their benefits from her domestic labour.

### **4.3 INDIAN WOMEN AS WIVES AND MOTHERS**

The Indian woman's transition from housewife to working woman has culminated in the modification of her role as wife. Previously her sole duties centred on her home and the welfare of her family. Her new role however, has to accommodate a wider range of responsibilities and obligations. While it is evident that her movement into the workforce has brought about variation and transformation in her functions, it is also safe to say that some areas of her role as wife have remained fairly intact. In order to gain a better understanding of this transition we need to get a better grasp on the concept of the joint/extended family and the role of the wife in the nuclear family.

### 4.3.1 The Joint/Extended Family

Hilda Kuper (1970:117-119), in her book *Indian People in Natal*, wrote the following of the Indian wife:

An Indian wife is subservient to her husband, yet to describe her as inferior is to oversimplify and falsify a highly complex relationship. Wisdom and virtue rather than weakness and inferiority may be said to underlay much of her attitude. No one with any perception would deny the tremendous influence exerted by the average wife who leads by withdrawing, rules by submitting and most importantly creates by receiving... The domestic role of women, - the care of the home, bearing and rearing of children, preparing the food, is recognised as the foundation of family life...It is assumed that 'good' women have no inclination to work outside the home; if driven by necessity or poverty they are pitied, but if by ambition for freedom or the desire for adventure they are adversely criticised.

While Kuper aptly summed up the Indian woman since the post-indenture period, the historical role of the wife and daughter-in-law in the joint/extended family needs to be established before pursuing the role of the working Indian woman as wife. Meer (1969:54-66) highlighted the position of joint family living in Durban since the Indian immigrant's earliest settlement in South Africa:

Whatever attitudes the Indians brought to the South African situation, there was at first little chance for them to establish the normal Indian family structure. When permanent residence in South Africa became a certainty

...the joint extended family became, both by choice and economic necessity, the most common pattern.

The extended family was and still is an institution of social security, moral support, co-residence, co-responsibility and the repository of cultural and religious values. Meer (1969:66-69) outlines the extended family network and the role of women within it:

Parents and children, siblings and cousins, paternal uncles and their wives, nephews and nieces, all have mutual expectations, and the demands and privileges will interflow without any sense of indebtedness... The *kutum* (joint household) is like an intimate collective conscience which socialises and controls; binds and integrates members into a closely watched system of social interaction...Despite some adaptation to the individualistic nature of Western urban life, Indians continue to a large extent, to see people as members of a kin group... After her marriage a woman is expected to become integrated with the members of her husband's *kutum* and to have as much loyalty towards it as she has towards her own *kutum*. Her complete acceptance as a daughter, however, is rare and this provides ground for divided loyalties and conflict...it often happens that it is to a daughter that a mother-in-law turns in old age and illness, probably due to mutual disenchantment suffered in a mother-in-law daughter-in-law relationship common in a household.

In the traditional joint family the new wife is expected to accept and endure an already existent female hierarchy. If she was the only daughter-in-law then she was

only subject to her mother-in-law. But if she was the youngest daughter-in-law among others, then she was considered subordinate to them as well. Liddle and Joshi (1988:143) mentions that her domestic responsibilities include cooking, cleaning, washing, shopping, rearing children and looking after the elderly or ailing members of the family, as well as carrying out the necessary social obligations of attending functions and religious ceremonies – all under the supervision of her mother-in-law.

### 4.3.2 The Nuclear Family

In her book *Portrait of South African Indians*, Meer (1969:72) mentions the following reasons for the nucleation of the Indian household:

The urban milieu has generally proved inconducive to an extended family... While there is some evidence that Indian families are becoming increasingly nucleated, this does not necessarily indicate that there has been a weakening of *kutum* bonds, which often transcend physical nucleation. This occurs when an extended family grows too large and can no longer be contained within the single house, or when a son, having gained professional status, finds the standards of the *kutum* unsuited to his newly acquired tastes, or when there is a friction between women, and a young wife overtly or otherwise challenges her husband to intervene between herself and their children and his extended family. The nuclear family then moves out and sets up its own establishment while maintaining close contact with the rest of the family.

While Meer offers predominantly male reasons for the process of nucleation as well as the wife's rejection of the extended family hierarchy, Liddle and Joshi (1988:143) attribute the appeal of a nuclear family to young, modern wives (in India), solely to the rejection of the female authority structure characteristic of the traditional joint family rather than the imitation of a Western model.

Both the above-mentioned studies indicate a lack of independence and privacy as the main reasons for leaving the confines of the joint family. They do reiterate that women had to do the same work in the nuclear family as in the extended family, with the exception of looking after their in-laws. In her study Pattundeen (1998:124-125) noted that many working-women living in nuclear families relied heavily on their mothers to take care of their children. She also notes that a large percentage of these women employed domestic workers to look after their children while they were at work.

In contextualising the role of working Indian women as wives, an examination of the position of the wife within the nuclear and extended family structures served to elucidate the contemporary reliance of the women on family members (especially in caring for young children). Therefore the traditional forms of family structures have given way to permutations, modifications and changes in family organisation.

#### **4.4 INDIAN WOMEN AND RELIGION**

The position of women in the religious professions has always been contested. In South Africa, the laws of apartheid alienated women of all race groups from reaching the higher echelons of organised religion. Indian women were no exception. While Indians are predominantly Hindu, only a small sector of the Hindu population accepts female priests. Muslim women are allowed to progress to the ranks of religious teacher but only to women and children. Christian women of Indian descent were originally (since indentureship to the 1960s) the most highly educated of the Indian women in South Africa, being the first to excel in the professions. However, the acceptance of women in ecclesial duties and the higher levels of organised religion have only been noted over the last fifteen years.

#### **4.5 CONCLUSION**

The traditional wife's obligations of cooking, household chores and the rearing of children has given way to the contemporary demands of the 'professional wife.' The reliance of these women and family members on domestic workers has led to the delegation of duties that once constituted the sole role of the wife in both the extended and nuclear family structures. Thus the roles of wife and mother are inextricably bound and the responsibilities of each closely linked.

Indian tradition dictates that the ideal mother remains in the home to nurture and rear her children. This cultural assignation of women and their role expectations largely

determines behavioural patterns concerning motherhood. However, access to tertiary education and socio-economic pressures have prompted Indian women into the ranks of employment.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

# **THE FAMILY IN MODERN SOCIETY: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

### **5.0 INTRODUCTION**

In the previous chapter, I looked at the role of South African Indian women as working wives and mothers. The changes that Indian women have made over the past few years are amazing. Even though cultural mindsets are yet to change, the number of Indian women entering the workforce is rapidly increasing. It is important to note that even though kinship patterns have diminished with the emergence of the nuclear family systems a few women still rely upon their families to care for their children. Therefore, the socialisation of these children still remains within the domains of the family. In this chapter I look at the role of the modern working woman from a Christian perspective and examine the effects it has on the family.

To understand modern society, we need to assess its impact on the family. The family constitutes the basic unit of both traditional society and to a limited extent contemporary society. According to Clark (1980:490) the family is also the unit of society, which resists functionalisation most stubbornly. The dynamic of family life is contrary to the dynamic of contemporary society, and family life increasingly manifests the strains that come from inhabiting an inhospitable environment (Clark: 1980:490).

## 5.1 THE FAMILY

Although the institution of the family is encountered in all societies, there are wide inter- and intrasocial variations (such as a working wife/mother) regarding the particular structure the family may adopt, as well as the specific nature and number of family functions. Despite these variations in the family structure and function, the family is regarded as an institution of major importance in all societies because of the central functions the family fulfils in every society, that of nurturant socialisation.

The centrality of this function was demonstrated by Reiss (1971:26), in his attempt to formulate a definition of the family at such a high level of generality that it accommodates all types of family structure. It focuses solely on this function: 'The family can be seen as a small kinship-structured group with the key function of nurturant socialisation.'

From the point of view of the individual, socialisation is a process of personality development through which the biological being develops into a 'social person' within a particular social context and through which he or she eventually develops the ability to act as a mature adult.

In traditional society, the process of socialisation occurs mainly within the context of the family and the kinship ties. As society increased in complexity it became increasingly difficult for parents to communicate to their children the technical knowledge required for complete socialisation. Thus, significant facets of the socialisation process and the preparation of the child for adult life have been

relinquished by the family and transferred to external structures such as day care centres and schools (Steyn 1987).

However, even within modern society, the family remains the place where basic moral and social elements of the individual are formed. It is within the structure of the family that the child learns that he or she is dependent on the cooperation of others for the satisfaction of his or her own needs and for the realisation of his or her own goals. Apart from learning the basic behavioural norms, the child's will to conform to these norms is developed within the family during the formative years of his or her life. It is therefore important that mothers play a vital role in the socialisation of their children and not leave it to strangers such as teachers and domestic workers.

## **5.2 CHANGES IN FAMILY LIFE**

For Clark (1980), there are two major changes that lead to the breakdown of the family in contemporary society. The first change involves the gradual weakening of kinship ties and supportive neighbourhood groupings. In traditional society, the family consists of more than the nuclear unit of husband, wife and children. The traditional family consists of conjugal units linked to common descent. This broad set of committed kinship relationships exist regardless of whether the group lives together in one building. The joint family or kinship group has several important functions. It provides financial aid to the individual conjugal unit in time of special need, and often functions as a unit of economic operation. In the case of agriculture the land belongs to the larger kinship group instead of to the head of a conjugal

family. Thus this grouping serves as the social security, welfare and insurance system all in one. The members of the larger family also share in one another's good fortune.

Contemporary society changed the relationship between the conjugal unit and both the wider kinship and village-neighbourhood networks. Thus the bonds within the kinship groupings began to weaken, and the family group as a whole became smaller. Therefore, the conjugal grouping of husband, wife and children assume a new independent existence and became the only major familial unit of society.

Many internal features of the conjugal unit also changed. Descent lost most of its importance, and the descent system therefore shifted from a matrilineal or patrilineal structure to a bilineal structure. This meant that an individual now traced his or her descent through both his or her father and mother. Thus the kinship groupings became less unified and distinct. This change predated contemporary society in the Western European family but affected many other family systems in the process of modern development. In contemporary society, the nuclear family unit of husband, wife and children becomes 'the family.'

The second change affecting the family is the loss of family functions (Nye & Bernado: 1973). In traditional society, the family provided for most of the needs of the individual members. The traditional family was the major economic unit. Whether the family consisted of farmers, craftsmen, merchants, rulers, or warriors the individual normally found employment through the family relationships, and often worked in the context of the home. The family was also a social welfare unit, where family members would care for the sick at home. The aged would live with younger

healthier relatives, and would receive material and emotional support from them. Individuals who had financial trouble or experienced other types of difficulty would generally turn to members of their extended family for assistance.

Thirdly, the family was the primary educational unit. Young people received their basic and technical education from their parents. In contemporary western society schooling did not become common for wealthier children until the seventeenth century whereas mass education was a product of the nineteenth century (Clark 1980:493).

Fourthly, the family was the unit of defence and protection as the members were frequently armed. Although family functions varied from society to society, it is true that an individual in traditional society spent much of his life within his family and under the care of his family. The basic unit of society during those times were the family and not the individual.

The contemporary family only retains the functions of reproduction and early childhood rearing. Thus the burden of emotional support falls on the nuclear family's kinship ties and neighbourhood-type groupings weaken. The family is, therefore, the only place in society where the individual receives unconditional love and concern. As society assigns more tasks to specialised groupings designed for specific purposes, the contemporary family has lost many of the functions, which the family performed in traditional society.

## **5.3 CONSEQUENCES FOR MODERN FAMILY LIFE**

The weakening of kinship ties coupled with the loss of family functions that occur in modern society has several consequences for family life.

### **5.3.1 Isolation**

The conjugal family becomes isolated from other relational groupings that support the pattern of family life (Bronfenbrenner 1970:90-95). This view assumes that as the conjugal family becomes more independent of the wider kinship group and makes more decisions on its own it increases in strength and vitality. However according to Clark (1980:494), this isolation weakens the family. For him, the traditional kinship network had a great interest in the stability of the individual nuclear family. The kinship network strengthened the individual family by placing it in a larger communal setting that reinforced family ties and compensated for individual family weaknesses. Although the institutions of contemporary society provide some support for family life, they will never be able to replace the traditional kinship relations.

### **5.3.2 Emotional Support**

Secondly, the nuclear family life is not able to carry the heavy burden of personal and emotional issues that contemporary society lays upon it. Modern society is dominated by situations that demand much from the individual but gives little in return. Since the kinship network is no longer strong, the conjugal family is responsible for shouldering the burden. In the absence of other family functions there is a tendency

to make this one function the focal point of family life. Thus the conjugal family is not able to cope with the strain it brings.

### **5.3.2 Parents and Children**

A third and major consequence of the changes in the family within contemporary society is the weakened relationship between parents and children. As family functions are attenuated and emotional support becomes the basis of the family relationship, the bond between parents and children grows increasingly fragile. According to Ryder (1974):

The links between parent and child, unlike those between husband and wife, are forged during the long and intimate process of interaction required for child socialisation. In spite of this solid foundation it is uncertain that those links will survive the child's transition to adulthood, because their structural supports, which are characteristic of a traditional society have now largely vanished. The parents once controlled access to land and provided most of the training necessary for the child's later work, but now land is not the prime base of production and education is acquired outside the home and the family. The shift of the control of rewards and punishments from the family to the society has attenuated the traditional authority of the parent over the child. Deference, respect and gratitude have been diluted into the family structure of the alien ideology of individual rights and liberties.

Many parents in contemporary society are becoming less important to their children in every area other than emotional attachment. They provide less for the needs of their children. As they grow older, children tend to rely on their parents only for financial assistance. As society develops perform less work within the family structure. The breakdown of structural supports puts considerable pressure on the emotional bond; in many cases the bond is too unstable to bear the pressure. The parent's authority in the family is questioned, and the relationship between parents and children breaks down.

#### **5.4 THE WOMAN'S ROLE**

Of the many changes in the family life, which occur in contemporary society the one most affected, is that of the woman. Clark (1980) believes that society, as we know it seriously undermines the traditional role of women in the family. Today's woman who assumes the role of wife, mother and domestic manager becomes increasingly isolated and dependent. The continual weakening of kinship ties means that her household role no longer places her in the midst of a lively attractive set of personal relationships. Also the loss of family functions means that she no longer participates in the economic activities of the family. As a result she becomes isolated from economic, social and political life and therefore grows more emotionally and financially dependent on her husband. Another contributing factor of this isolation is that she finds her traditional household role significantly shrinking. The contemporary mother has fewer children to care for, and as a result of increased longevity she spends a smaller portion of her life caring for those children.

With the new found wave of equality for both men and women, many women enrol into institutions of higher learning and the desire for achievement outside the confines of the home becomes greater. The traditional role of women is also weakened by trends, which tend to detach many women from family units. In traditional society women were always attached to men and family life. However, the many changes of contemporary society have altered this condition. More and more women detach themselves from men and the family. In many parts of contemporary society it is assumed that females will eventually become independent of the parental conjugal family. These days they can often expect to spend much of their time alone because of a husband's death, divorce, or in many cases because they never marry. In traditional society, unmarried and widowed women would automatically become part of the family group. Now being single or widowed usually means being on one's own. It therefore becomes almost impossible for a woman to fulfill the traditional female role.

Thus the role of women as traditionally defined is undermined by the ongoing changes in family life that occur in contemporary society. The female role within the family therefore begins to lose much of its substance. It is for these reasons that many women are drawn into the workforce. Children are then entrusted to various institutions and surrogates, such as the crèche, domestic workers, and school and in most cases the television set. The family – the one place in modern society that caters for the roles of men and women – diminishes as a significant relational group.

## 5.5 SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR

In social systems that are uninfluenced by modern society, men and women have distinct spheres of responsibility. The nature of these responsibilities varies from culture to culture, but the distinctions between the male and female spheres are clear. This distinction allows relatively large social groupings to gather and function without extensive planning. The women heed to their responsibilities, as do the men. Generally there is an understanding of precedence so that it is clear who has the responsibility to take the lead. According to Clark (1980:603), this sexual division of labour should exist within the Christian community.

A clear division of responsibilities between men and women is beneficial to both individuals and communities as a whole. The sexual division of labour normally assures that certain important needs within the community will be dealt with effectively. Thus when women take primary concern for direct service to people's needs, this care is of higher quality than when both sexes provide it equally. Charitable service, the rearing of young children, the training of other women, and the general daily management of the home as a centre of care and service work better when women take a primary concern for them.

A workable sexual division of labour is often difficult in contemporary society, but such a division is an essential aspect of a full functioning of men and women's roles. Some of the elements of the division of labour seem clear. Within this context, women are primarily responsible for internal house management such as the cooking and serving of food, care of clothing and care of the living space. Men are

responsible for heavy physical work, overall government, and ensuring that the needs of the family are provided for. However, this is not always easy to incorporate this division of labour into the daily life of a contemporary family. It is especially difficult to apply this method in families where both the husband and wife work. It is important that a division of labour should still exist in these situations, but it does not mean that the women should work twice as hard as the men. Men should have their own set of household tasks so that women are not solely responsible for all the chores within the home. For Clark (1980:604), in order for the concept of division of labour to work in contemporary society, it must be accompanied by a new attitude toward female responsibilities. Contemporary society is marked by a tendency to devalue personal service, childrearing and all domestic tasks and to place a greater value on positions of political and economic power. According to scripture the role of the woman is central in shaping the lives of those around her, and they in turn should express their appreciation and respect for the services she renders.

## **5.6 CONCLUSION**

The Christian woman occupies a difficult and ambiguous position in modern society. Their traditional role within the household, as discussed in chapter two, no longer places them in the mainstream of social and economic life. Women therefore face a challenging dilemma: if they maintain their traditional role, they become isolated and dependent and unable to assume a functionally productive role in society. However, if they pursue an occupation and a career, they are less able to care for a family. Many women arrange some compromise between these two alternatives, but some

ambiguity and tension remains. The female role operated much differently in Ancient Israel. Because the family was so important to society, women were able to both care for her family and participate in the wider society. There is little evidence to suggest that women in traditional society experienced dissatisfaction with their role in society. They knew that they were valued as women, and they could achieve a great deal of respect through fulfilling their womanly role well. In contrast, modern society tends to put less and less value on their role as women, and more value on their functional success as individuals.

While the primary area of concern regarding working women is the preservation of social roles, especially in the family. The Christian needs to adapt their expression of these roles to conform to certain elements of contemporary society. The need for this adaptation can be seen in the woman's role in the home. While Christian teachings on social roles emphasise the woman's role in the home, these teachings do not necessarily indicate that the woman should always be at home. The significance of some women's household responsibilities would indicate that they should only work at home, but in a modern society like ours this is not always feasible. A major change has occurred in traditional family functions with the result that the majority of a woman's traditional tasks (economic, social, educational) for the most part no longer occur within the confines of the home. For women to remain at home under these circumstances would leave them underemployed and, in addition, underrepresented in some of the most vital areas of modern society.

As the Christian community develops, more of these activities may return to their traditional place in the home. Yet, short of a complete withdrawal of the Christian

community from most modern social institutions, there will always be a significant need in contemporary society for women to work outside the home.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **CONCLUSION**

The aim of attempting this research project was to examine how the role of women within the context of the family has changed over the years. The traditional view of women as stay-at-home wives and mothers has given way to that of the employed wife and mother.

It is without question that Israel followed a patriarchal way of life, and it was within this system that the Israelites established a unique and admirable family structure. Various biblical passages confirm the family as an important component of the Israelite society as a whole. In the creation of a unique family identity of the Israelite nation, solidarity to family and tribal organisations together with family customs were of vital importance. I examined the role of the women within this time period and discovered their primary role was as wives and mothers. The domestic sphere was their haven. The daily household tasks did lower her status but rendered her sincere consideration, as an important and vital member within the family structure. Modern society may argue that the picture of Israelite women is one of subordination to men, however one needs to take into consideration that it was custom in this social setting to be submissive to the authority of the man, who was the head of the household.

In the New Testament we found a similar view on the role of women as wife, mother and primary caregiver to members of the extended household, thus building on the

Old Testament tradition. Even in the teachings of the Apostle Paul we find the family is given high regard. Although somewhat questionable it is important to grasp the underlying issues in his epistles, that is, the family is ordained by God and therefore should be given priority. It is also important to note that women played an important role in the life and ministry of Jesus, in what many deem a patriarchal society.

In chapter three we looked at lives of women in the Indian subcontinent. Although India is a country rich in culture and diversity, I found that many women are still being 'ruled' under a patriarchal system. The traditional role of the woman as homemaker continues to be upheld in many rural parts of the country. For centuries the idea that it was 'divinely' ordained that women should have inferior status went unchallenged in India. Therefore in recent years the present trend towards equality of status has constituted a major social transformation in India.

Today Indian women have won their emancipation, but in actual practice they still have a long way to go. Social customs and prejudices die hard, more especially in India, where the existence of the different castes, creeds and races complicate the problem. Different kinds of social systems exist in different parts of the country. But this new awakening is clearly evident in almost all the states of India and is further illustrated by the various women's organisations that have since been formed.

Traditionally the rearing of children has been considered to be the sole responsibility of women, but with the inception of the feminist movement and female liberation, the whole question of child welfare and family responsibility is seen as much the duty of the men as of women.

I also looked at the lives of Indian women in South Africa and their transition from the joint/extended family to that of the nuclear family. It was interesting to discover that although the younger generations are moving away from the traditional kinship structure (as discussed in both the Ancient Israel and Indian context) many young mothers still rely on their kin to care for their children while they are at work.

Finally in Chapter Five, I compared the role of women in contemporary society to that of the more traditional one (Ancient Israel). This was done under two major headings: "Changes in Family Life" and "Consequences for the Modern Family." Regarding changes in family life I found that from a Christian perspective a great deal of emphasis is placed on kinship ties, much like the Indian family in the previous chapter. The traditional family was a major economic and educational unit and the individual spent much of his life within this unit. Under the second heading I found three major consequences that affected the contemporary family: isolation, lack of emotional support within the smaller family unit and most importantly, the weakening bond between children and their working parents.

On examination of the role of the women, I found that as society progresses women are also becoming increasingly independent and isolated. With the rise of the feminist movements and women's liberation more women are making the decision to have fewer children, thus with more free time many of them enrol in institutions of higher learning and enter the ranks of employment. The role of the woman as traditionally defined is therefore undermined by the ongoing change in family life that occurs in contemporary society.

While Christian teaching on social roles emphasise the woman's role in the home, these teachings do not necessarily indicate that the women should always be at home. The significance of a woman's household responsibilities indicates that they should remain in the domain of the home, but in an ever-changing society like ours this is not always feasible.

Traditional views of women depict them as wives and mothers, quite content with their lifestyle. However, society is changing as more women gain their independence from patriarchy. In rediscovering the role of women I found that many women enter the workforce out of sheer necessity. The fact that women are lured into the world of employment by lucrative job offers is not a sin. Upon entering this environment, women need to realise that this is not an opportunity for them to neglect their families. This newfound independence that women are experiencing is not without problems and these problems are even more significant when both parents from a household work. In most societies across the world the family is considered sacred, and it is within these ranks that children need to be socialised in what is deemed acceptable by societal standards and what is not. Women today are so caught up in their careers that they tend to leave this basic tool of socialisation to strangers such as domestic workers, day-care mothers and teachers. It is for this reason that the many parent-child relationships are weakening. Traditionalists are slowly adapting to the notion of the working woman; however, it is of vital importance that she balances her time between work and family equally especially where children are involved. In doing this she will be upholding the family value system that our forefathers/mothers worked so ardently to maintain.

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