

6 Concubines

In the previous chapter we saw that that a man could have a concubine and he could have children by her. In effect this is what the patriarch Abraham did when he took Keturah as ‘another wife’ in addition to his second wife Hagar (Genesis 25:1). When Laban gave his two daughters to Jacob, he gave them both a slave-girl, Zilpah for Leah and Bilhah for Rachel. Later the still childless Rachel gave Bilhah to Jacob saying,

Lie with her, so that she may bear sons to be laid upon my knee, and through her I too may build up a family.

Later Leah gave Zilpah to Jacob (Genesis 29:21–30:13). In Babylonia a man normally chose a concubine for himself. A commercial letter concerned with buying many goods including a slave-girl expresses a wish to have proof of that woman’s fertility, with this last request.

Take for my lap one slave-girl, who is good-looking and has given birth to one or two children.¹

Further west a slave-girl could attain a high status, particularly one who bore children. One such is commemorated on a Judaeen grave inscription dated ca. 700 BC for a man and his slave-girl.²

In Akkadian only one word, *esirtu*, which etymologically means ‘a woman imprisoned’, can unambiguously be translated as ‘concubine’. In Assyria and the surrounding regions some women are designated by this term. In Nuzi it occurs in a clause in a marriage contract:

He shall not marry a second wife; he shall not take a concubine (*esirta la isser*).

This suggests that apart from marrying a second wife other procedures were possible in that society for a man to raise his family.³

In Sumer and early in Babylonia there was no specific word for concubine. In Sumerian literary texts the closest we find is the expression ‘little wife’ who is distinct from the spouse. In a lullaby we read that the whole family should be happy with the husband:

1 A. al-Zeebari, ABIM no. 20:82.

2 KAI 191 with TUAT II/4 (1988) 558 f. with n. 2 (a).

3 HSS 9 24:8 f.; cf. C. H. Gordon, AnOr 12 (1935) 171, J. Paradise, JCS 39 (1987) 12 with n. 35.

May his spouse be happy with him,
 May the child be happy with him,
 May the little wife rejoice in his arms,
 May the child grow up at his good knee.⁴

And in a lament we read:

The mother does not seek out her child,
 The father does not say, 'My spouse!',
 The little wife does not rejoice on his lap,
 The children do not grow up at his knee.⁵

In other literary texts it is the spouse who is said to be on her husband's lap.

An Old Assyrian agreement with a 'holy woman', a text mentioned earlier when discussing the position of the second wife, excludes the possibility of the husband acquiring any 'girlfriend'.⁶

Šu-Sin has married Etari, the sister of Ennam-Aššur. Her head is 'open' (*qaqqassa pate*). He shall not have any girlfriend live alongside her. He shall not marry a 'holy woman' in Kaniš or Niḥriya.

The word 'girlfriend' can mean 'concubine'. A letter from Mari shows that King Yaḥdun-Lim thought so much of his girlfriends that he segregated his regular wives and made them live completely separately. They had to leave the palace. A second letter makes clear that these girlfriends were singers.⁷ A Sumerian-Akkadian dictionary equates the word *še'itu*, 'girlfriend', with the word for 'little wife'⁸ and the 'travelling-wife' (*dam kaskal*). There we also find mention of 'the little wife of the merchant', perhaps a girlfriend for his business trip.⁹

⁴ S. N. Kramer in ANET (1969) 652, lines 35–38.

⁵ P. Michalowski, *The lamentation over the destruction of Sumer and Ur* (1989) 36:12–15, with p. 72. See further H. Neumann in Durand, *La Femme* (1987) 134 f.

⁶ AKT I 77.

⁷ MARI 4 (1985) 406 A. 2548:13–17, MARI 6 (1990) 291–294 with LAPO 18 (2000) 175f. no. 1011 (A. 4471); N. Ziegler, *Florilegium Marianum IX* (2007) 36 f.; cf. B. Groneberg, NABU 1989/74. J.-M. Durand recognised that *še'it bābim* indicates such a person, which he translated as 'compagne de voyage'; AEM 1/1 (1988) 531 no. 252:4, 15; also Durand in: G. del Olmo Lete, *Mythologie et religion des Sémites occidentaux I* (2008) 408, 534. The translation of W. Heimpel, 'woman next door', is more likely.

⁸ PSD B 84 f., *bān.da* 'secondary wife' (lit.). In 'The Lamentation over Sumer and Ur', 14, *dam TUR* is certainly 'young woman', because it occurs with a normal family life in the background.

⁹ *Emar VI/4* (1987) 165 no. 569:10.

A variant of this Sumerian expression is ‘the travelling *lukur*’. In the Ur III period a *lukur* was a second wife. Kings could have female companions for a journey. It is recorded that Šulgi had two, Ea-nišu and Šulgi-simti.¹⁰ Nanaya-ibsa was the ‘beloved travelling-wife’ of King Bur-Sin.¹¹ These ladies were not concubines but the favourite wives of the king, whom he always wanted to have with him, even on his official tours.

The Middle Assyrian laws prohibit any man taking a woman married to someone else on a journey unless he is her father, her brother, or her son. If he does,

The man shall swear that he did not know that she was a married woman. Furthermore he shall give two talents of tin to the woman’s husband (§ 22).¹²

Sometimes Babylonian sources mention a slave-girl by whom a man has had children. This girl was not his second wife. As we have seen already, the second wife was a ‘slave-girl’ for his first wife, and a ‘wife’ for the husband. The definition of ‘wife’, as found in the laws of Hammurabi, depended on the existence of an oral or a written agreement (§ 128). So what would have been the status of a woman without such an arrangement in place? She could well have been described as a concubine, but the Babylonians would not have understood the term in this way. The Babylonian view of such women was that they were slaves. In this chapter we are concerned with slave-girls as concubines, not with situations where a married woman would go to live with another man and even have children by him (§ 134–136), or a widow would go to live with a man.¹³ But why women sometimes did this will be discussed elsewhere.

Law-books were chiefly concerned with the legal status of a man’s children who had been born by a slave-girl. The laws of Hammurabi provide for the adoption of such illegitimate ‘sons’.

¹⁰ J.-P. Grégoire, RA 73 (1979) 190 f., Šulgi inscr. 53c, 56b; M. Civil, Or. NS 54 (1985) 41 iii 8–9; the husband of this woman is called a *mudna*.

¹¹ Inscr. 3 (lukur ki.ág.kaskal.la.ka.né); RIME 4 (1990) 71.

¹² Cf. J.-M. Durand, AEM 1/1 (1988) 513. A connection has been seen with Abraham’s wife Sarai, who was considered unmarried both by Abimelech and the Pharaoh. There is also a link with the MA laws, A § 22, but nothing suggests that she was a ‘travelling wife’. See M. Weinfeld, *Mélanges M. Delcor* (1985) 431–436.

¹³ See the few relevant remarks of H. Neumann, in his article on marriage, concubinate and bigamy, in Durand, *La Femme* (1987) 134 f.

If a man's first wife (*hirtu*) has borne him sons, and his slave-girl has also borne him sons, and during his lifetime the father says 'My sons!' to the sons that the slave-girl bore and he reckons them with the sons of the first spouse, then, after the father has died, the sons of the first wife and the sons of the slave-girl shall divide the family property equally. The inheriting son, the son of the first wife, shall choose and take a share first (§ 170).

The following paragraph (§ 171) deals with a father who has not said 'My sons!'. In that case they cannot share the inheritance, but the slave-girl and her sons are freed after the man has died. We know of an actual case where the father adopted only his eldest son.¹⁴

A Sumerian text is also concerned with this problem:

An oath made by the king: The slave U. shall be freed and be made 'as the son of one man'.

This has been explained as an adoption of someone born from his father's relationship with his slave-concubine.¹⁵ In another Sumerian text 'his father' frees his slave and acknowledges him as his son. The slave's biological mother must have been a concubine.¹⁶

The laws of Lipit-İstar describe different situations when men subsequently marry women with a lower social status, from lower to the lowest. First it refers to 'the later wife', who would have been the woman he married after his first wife had died (§ 24). Then it is concerned with a man who has had children both by his wife and by a slave, and who freed the slave and her children (§ 25). In the end there is a clause concerning a man who married a prostitute (§ 27).¹⁷ In all these cases the legislator was concerned about the rights of inheritance of the children of the different mothers. According to the laws of Hammurabi a slave-girl with children who, as a result of debts incurred by her man, had been transferred to someone else, now has to be redeemed (§ 119).

A man who became particularly fond of his concubine could elevate her status, as suggested by a prediction in a liver omen:

The slave shall be as powerful as his master,

with the variant version

¹⁴ CT 8, 37d (VAB 5 12); Westbrook OBML, 11 f.

¹⁵ NSGU I 93 and 94, on no. 75:5–8.

¹⁶ C. Wilcke in: M. Stol, S. P. Vleeming, *The care of the elderly in the Ancient Near East* (1998) 53 f.; TUAT NF 1 (2004) 4 f.

¹⁷ A new edition of § 24–27 offers C. Wilcke, *Festschrift J. Krecher* (2014) 592–595, § f34–f37.

As for the slave-girl, her master shall love her and make her as powerful as her mistress.¹⁸

According to an omen, which links her to a disrespectful pig, that is something to be feared.

If a pig should enter its owner's bedroom, then the concubine will come into the house of her master.¹⁹

The reference in the laws of Ur-Nammu (§ 25) to the slave-girl who is made 'equal to her mistress' and who should not be offended possibly means a concubine. This fits with our earlier discussion of the slave-girl in relation to the second wife (Chapter 5).

More now can be said about the important position held by the Assyrian *esirtu*. Earlier scholars, before World War II, thought from the literal meaning of the word that these girls really were prisoners-of-war.²⁰ Certainly this did happen at Nuzi, where men took foreign slave-girls from the land of Lull(ub)û to get children by them. Stipulations in contracts from Nuzi show that a woman who failed to produce children for her husband could be demoted to the rank of concubine. For this sometimes a Hurrian word, *ḫelaḫelu*, was used. The stipulations are explicit:

If N. bears a child, then H. may not take another wife besides N., nor make her a concubine.
If N. does not bear a child, then H. may take another wife.²¹

In the Assyrian laws the *esirtu* is one of the women who had to veil herself in the street (*ina rebīti*). It applied to 'the concubine who went out on the street with (her) mistress', and to 'the holy woman who had married a husband'. But a prostitute never had the right to wear a veil (§ 40). The law is followed by one which applied to a man who married a concubine:

If a man veils his concubine, he shall assemble five or six of his comrades and he shall veil her in their presence. He shall say, 'She is my wife'. She is his wife. A concubine who is not veiled in the presence of lads (*šābu*), whose husband has not said 'She is my wife', is not a wife. She is a concubine. If a man has died and there are no sons from his veiled wife, then the sons of the concubine are the sons. They shall take the inheritance (§ 41).

¹⁸ CT 20 39:10 = U. S. Koch, *Secrets of extispicy* (2005) 92f. A 10.; cf. Veenhof, *Mélanges A. Finet* (1989) 186a with n. 13. Westbrook, OBML, 105b, speculates on 'the possibility of the husband divorcing his first wife because he prefers the second'.

¹⁹ A. R. George, RA 85 (1991) 146:6b; see CAD A/2 s.v. *asirtu*.

²⁰ Refuted by B. Landsberger, AfO 10 (1935–36) 144 ff.

²¹ J. Paradise, JCS 39 (1987) 12f. with n. 37.

Here it can be seen that to be elevated to the status of a wife was essentially a public event. There was no anointing ceremony, as there would have been at a betrothal. But a formal declaration was required, ‘She is my wife’, which is comparable to that for an adoption. In Mari a soldier, with a slave-girl who already had a child, wanted to ‘take her to wife’, but he was not allowed to do so.²²

A text from Tell Brak describes the son of a concubine who was set free in the presence of King Tušratta of Mitanni. He became a citizen of the land of Ḫanigalbat and his mother was allowed to go with him.²³ In Ugarit a high-ranking man had sons by three different women of different classes. One was the daughter of the king; there were also the *šrdt*, his freeborn (?) wives; and finally he had his slaves. A gentleman like that must have had two or three wives.²⁴

The harem (to be discussed in Chapter 24) would be teeming with concubines, so there we shall resume the discussion of the *esirtu*. In lists of people from Ebla the court lady (*dam*) was often followed by the concubines.²⁵ In a treaty the king of the Hittites permitted the king of Mitanni to take concubines besides the queen, who was his own daughter, on condition that no other woman should be higher in rank than his daughter.²⁶ In Nuzi a prince had nine concubines in addition to his one wife. They are all named in lists of food allocations, and the varying size of the allocations suggests that the women had a corresponding order of rank, possibly based on the number of children they had produced. In a separate text one of the concubines was named as ‘the wife’.²⁷

In the royal harem at Mari they were called girlfriends,²⁸ and we saw that there they were also ‘the singers’.²⁹ But this does not necessarily mean that all singers were concubines. In Nuzi the women in the harem (*esirtu*) were also involved with singing and music, and they came from abroad, from Babylonia and Ḫanigalbat.³⁰

22 AEM 1/2 538 no. 547.

23 N. J. J. Illingworth, *Iraq* 50 (1988) 99–105 no. 23; cf. SCCNH 15 (2005) 41–56.

24 *A history of Ancient Near Eastern law* I (2003) 726 (RS 94.2168); J. J. Justel, *UF* 40 (2008) 445–452 (‘polygyny’); D. Pardee in: W. H. van Soldt, *Society and administration in ancient Ugarit* (2010) 94–100.

25 *Thesaurus Inscriptionum Eblaicarum* A/1 (1995) 41, *a-si-ra-tum*, translated, however, as ‘female prisoner’.

26 E. F. Weidner, *PDK* (1923) 18:60–62; G. Beckman, *Hittite diplomatic texts*. Second edition (1999) 44.

27 G. Wilhelm, *Das Archiv des Šilwateššub* 3 (1985) 24 f.; M. A. Morrison, *JCS* 31 (1974) 4–8.

28 J.-M. Durand, *AEM* 1/1, 513; B. Groneberg, *NABU* 1989/74; S. Lafont, *RA* 91 (1997) 110 f. A. 1945:5 (*šawitum*).

29 N. Ziegler, *Florilegium Marianum* IX (2007) 36 f.

30 W. Mayer, *Nuzi-Studien* I (1978) 113.

What is also relevant to this discussion is something we shall deal with later in Chapter 30, concerned with sacred marriage. There we shall see that the god Nabû in Borsippa not only had his Nanaya but visited two girlfriends.