

## 7-4b Economic Change and Social Customs

Although their religious beliefs would have immense influence on Western civilization, the Jews were mostly minor players on the Near Eastern stage in economic affairs and politics. They had never been numerous, and the split between Israelites and Judeans weakened both groups. With the rise of Assyria, both Israel and Judea had to engage in numerous expensive wars and suffered economically. Both became relatively insignificant backwaters under the direct or indirect rule of powerful neighbors.

When the kingdom was founded under Saul, most Hebrews were still rural herders and peasants, living as Abraham had lived. Over the next half millennium, however, many Hebrews made the transition from rural to town life. As many people shifted from subsistence farming to wage earning, social tensions dividing rich and poor began to appear. The strong solidarity that had previously marked the Hebrews broke down. The prophets of the eighth through fifth centuries called repeatedly for social justice and reminded the people that exploitation of widows and orphans and abuse of the weak by the strong were by no means limited to the despised Gentiles (JEN-tiles; all non-Jews).

More than most, the Jews divided all humanity into they and we. This was undoubtedly the result of their religious tradition, whereby they had been selected as the Chosen. Jews looked upon non-Jews as distinctly lesser breeds whose main function in the divine plan was to act as tempters and obstacles that the pious must overcome. In their preoccupation with the finer points of the Law laid down by Moses and his successors, the Hebrews deliberately segregated themselves from other peoples. Intermarriage with nonbelievers was tantamount to treason and was punished by immediate expulsion from the community. Ancient Judaism was almost never open to converts.

The Judaic Yahweh was definitely a male lawgiver, speaking to other males in a society in which women counted only as the relatives and dependents of men. The nomadic background of the Twelve Tribes is evident here, exhibiting the universal tendency of nomadic people to subordinate females and consider them as the possessions of their men. In the *Tanakh*, even when a Jewish woman acts in a self-assertive fashion, the point is to secure some advantage or distinction for a male, not on her own behalf. For example, Judith slays Holofernes not to avenge herself for her sexual exploitation but to secure the safety of her people.

Marriage and divorce reflected these patriarchal values. The married state was strongly preferred, and in fact, bachelors were looked upon as failures and shirkers of duty. Young men were supposed to marry by no later than age twenty-four and preferably by twenty. Girls were thought ready for marriage at puberty, roughly about age thirteen. A man could have several legal wives and an unlimited number of concubines, but as in other societies,

only the wealthy could afford this practice. The wife married into the husband's family and moved into his house. The property she brought into the marriage remained hers, however, and could be removed again if her husband divorced her for any reason but unfaithfulness. Divorce was easy enough to come by for the husband but very unusual for a wife to initiate. Women caught in adultery could be killed, but typically they were divorced and sent back to their father's home. Infidelity by the husband was a crime only if committed with a married woman.

As with almost all early peoples, children were the whole point of marriage. The continuation of the family was the primary duty of both husband and wife. The oldest male child received the lion's share of the inheritance, but the other boys were not shut out. The girls, on the other hand, received nothing beyond their dowries because through marriage they would be joined to another family, which would care for them. The education of all children was carried on within the family circle and was religious in nature. Literacy was uncommon among the country folk but not so among the urbanites.

Jewish arts and sciences were relatively undeveloped compared with those of their more sophisticated and richer neighbors. Excepting the *Tanakh's* poetry, the Jews produced little of note in any of the art forms. The representation of living things was thought to be sacrilegious and was banned. There is no record of any important Jewish contributions to the sciences.

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