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Mourning Rituals of Women in Ancient Israel and their Meaning¹

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It is commonly held among specialists on ancient Near East that women in ancient Israel did not have much space in official public sphere. However, biblical texts witness to their special role as mourners. This paper presents some terminological considerations regarding the mourning women as presented in the Hebrew Bible (esp. Jer 9,16-21), the rituals that accompanied mourning, and the meaning of these women for society. Furthermore, the paper considers the role of the mourning women in the cultic life (Ez 8,14). Finally, a particular attention will be paid to Ritzpah, a special case of a mourning woman in the Bible (2 Sam 21,1-14).

Mourning Rituals, Women in Ancient Israel, Lament, Hebrew Bible.

Introduction

Destruction and death are traumatic events that require special behavior. Natural reaction to such situations is frequently mourning. People mourn in a number of ways and since men and women differ in their perception of these events, they also mourn in differently. This paper will focus on mourning rituals of women in ancient Israel as reconstructed on the basis of biblical texts. It will deal principally with three biblical passages: Jer 9,16-21; Ezek 8,14 and 2 Sam 21,1-14. It will also provide a comparison with some extrabiblical evidence. The paper will attempt to consider the meaning of mourning rites for women themselves and for the society in which they lived.

I. Professional Mourners

The first text to consider is a portion of Jeremiah (9,16-21).² Here the prophet delivers the words of the Lord and his command to gather *קִיִּינֹת* – wailing women (v. 16) who are to raise a certain type of lament – *נִהַי* over the people, so that they can burst in tears (v. 17). The reason for this is described in v. 18 – the destruction of the land (by the Babylonians at the beginning of the 6th cent. BC) which is already underway. In v. 19, the prophet exhorts women to listen to the word of the Lord and to teach laments – *קִיִּינֵהוּ* and *נִהַי* – to their daughters and neighbors. The reason is similar but not the same: death is entering the city in a horrific manner since it strikes little children (v. 20). The necessity of raising

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² The numbering of the verses in RSV translation is 17-21. The numbering of the Hebrew text is here followed. English translations of biblical texts are taken from the RSV.

laments is enhanced by a drastic image in v. 21: corpses will be falling on the fields and they will be like dung because the devastation is so great that there will be nobody to gather them (and eventually bury them). So the introduction of wailing women is connected with destruction and death.

A closer inspection of the passage yields the following. First, there is a special term for these wailing women – מְקוֹנְנוֹת – which is a hapax in the Hebrew Bible (HB) and is considered to be a denominative from a word for dirge – קִינָה.³ These women are to lift up נְהִי (v.17). The obvious question is why not קִינָה if their designation is derived from this noun? Is נְהִי another type of wailing or just a synonym of קִינָה? Although it is not easy to trace the etymology of קִינָה, similar expressions in other Semitic languages and its usage in the Bible suggest that it is to be conceived as a chanted performance (in Amos 8,10 and 2 Chron 35,25 words with the same root are paired with the root שִׁיר).⁴ The use of both nouns makes clear that they are associated in some way with lament over disaster or death (e.g. 2 Sam 1,17; 2 Chron 35,25; Jer 7,29; 9,9; 31,15; Ezek 27,32; Mic 2,4). Both nouns are accompanied by verbs: קוֹנֵן⁵ and נְהָה. The context suggests – this holds true also for Amos 5,16 – that they are something to be learned i.e. they are not just an improvised lament. Although it is difficult to say whether there is a difference between the two, Hardmeier makes a distinction when says that קִינָה is directed over the destroyed or dead whereas נְהִי is a lament with which survivors lament their own situation.⁶

The genre of קִינָה probably emerged from lamentation over the death of a family member. Since texts associated with this type of lament begin with words like אָיֵה, בִּי (which are also present here), this suggests that they are poetic work of art.⁷ N. Lee identifies it as “the communal dirge, modified from funeral song for an individual’s death.”⁸ In its later development קִינָה designates prophetic oracles of future disaster. They are not pronounced over individual, but over the nation who has abandoned the Lord, and thus prophet is announcing its destruction, its “death.”⁹ Prophets most likely adapted this women’s dirge genre for their oracles.¹⁰

Recent studies on the Book of Lamentations have even proposed that the voice of these professional women mourners might be behind the formation of this text. However, it is still debated whether women actually composed any part of the book, though it is possible that among the collected texts were some coming from the domain of female mourning. Lee affirms: “Some have suggested a woman skilled in dirge composing/singing is heard in Lamentations. This is certainly plausible, as women’s laments across cultures have been a vehicle for dissident sociopolitical expression.”¹¹ The woman voice in this book even contests the traditional theology and ideology of retribution.¹² This would point to the importance of the role of this woman.

Another important indication that these women were specialists in this role is the use of the word חֲכָמוֹת, which stands in parallelism with the מְקוֹנְנוֹת. Although this word literally means “wise women”,

³ Holladay, W. L. – Hanson, P. D.: *Jeremiah 1: A commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, chapters 1-25*. Hermeneia. Philadelphia : Fortress, 1986, s. 312.

⁴ Fleischer, G.: “קִינָה”. In: Botterweck, J. et al. (eds.): *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* 13, s. 18.

⁵ Fleischer even says: “The word qōnēn is a technical term for the ceremonial chanting of a dirge,” but does not say why. Fleischer, G.: “קִינָה”, TDOT 13, s. 19.

⁶ Fleischer, G.: “קִינָה”, TDOT 13, s. 20.

⁷ Fleischer, G.: “קִינָה”, TDOT 13, s. 20.

⁸ Lee, N. C.: *Lamentations and Gender in Biblical Cultural Context*. In Maier, C. M. – Calduch-Benages, N. (eds.): *The Writings and Later Wisdom Books. The Bible and Women: An Encyclopedia of Exegesis and Cultural History* 1.3. Atlanta: SBL, 2014, s. 199.

⁹ Lee, N. C.: *Lamentations and Gender*, s. 200.

¹⁰ Lee, N. C.: *Lamentations and Gender*, s. 201.

¹¹ Lee, N. C.: *Lamentations and Gender*, s. 200.

¹² Lee, N. C.: *Lamentations and Gender*, s. 212.

it can also mean “skilled women.”¹³ The Lord would thus give order to summon women skilled in the art of wailing.¹⁴ Relevant in this regard is the passage 2 Sam 14,1-17. Here Joab sends for אִשָּׁה חַכְמָה – wise woman from Tekoa who is to pretend that she has been mourning for a dead for many days (although here a different word for mourning is used – אָבַל). This woman seems to combine in herself both elements: mourning and certain professionalism.

So the text of Jer 9,16 seems to suggest that in ancient Israel there existed women who were skilled in chanting special mourning dirges, but whether they were also organized in a guild is a different question, which the biblical hints do not answer.

The structure of Jer 9 begs another question: Are the women in v. 19 the same as the women in the v. 16? These women are referred to with a standard designation נְשִׂים. They are to teach their daughters and neighbors the wailing songs (here are mentioned both נְהִי and קִינָה). Is this reference to the members of the guild or does it simply mean daughters and neighbors? C. Meyers points out that the word *daughter*, besides its literal meaning, may also designate a member of a professional guild (well known is the expression *sons of the prophets*, where the word *sons* is not to be understood literally, but as a reference to the members of this special group). The expression *neighbor* can be understood in a similar way.¹⁵ Moreover, this verse seems to place these two words in parallelism (as well as נְהִי and קִינָה) and thus they could be understood as synonyms, which would support the notion of a guild and the identification of these women with מְקַיְנֹת. However, J. R. Lundbom sees it differently: “This directive (in v. 19) goes out to all women of the city, not just the professional mourners who are summoned in vv 16–17 (17–18), The situation here is so grave that there are not enough professional women to lead all the rites that must be carried on.”¹⁶ He supports his claim also with 2 Sam 1,24 where “daughters of Israel” are called to weep over Saul and he also points out to the Egyptian depictions of mourning women, where can be seen both women and girls in the same gestures.¹⁷ Whatever the case, the women in this passage of Jeremiah are depicted as having a unique and professional role in the mourning over disaster and death.

References to such professional women mourners can be found also in the extra-biblical literature of surrounding cultures. For example, in the Mesopotamian poem *The Curse of Agade* from 2200-2000 BC in the passage that tells the story of the fall of the first Mesopotamian empire an exhortation is found that the old women are not to restrain the cry of woe over the city.¹⁸ Approximately from the same period are Egyptian texts combined with images from the tombs in Gizah recording the lamentation of a group of women. Another example is the depiction of two wailing women in the tomb at El-Kab with lamentation texts from the Egyptian environment, dated to the period of the New Kingdom. And there are also lamentation texts related to women from the last centuries of Egyptian civilization from a Theban tomb.¹⁹ Similar figures are mentioned in Homer’s *Iliad* when he describes the lamentation over the dead Hector. When his body is brought to the house, there are women singers that lead the lamentations.²⁰ The laws of the Greek legislator Solon regulate funeral customs and deal with the presence of women. They only allow the presence of women who are closely related to the dead and

¹³ Koehler, L. – Baumgartner, W.: “חַכְמָה”. In Koehler, L., et al (eds.): *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* 1. Leiden: Brill, 2000, s. 314.

¹⁴ Fleischer speaks even about the skill at magic. Fleischer, G.: “קִינָה”, TDOT 13, s. 20.

¹⁵ Meyers, C. et al. (ed.): *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eedmans, 2000, s. 327.

¹⁶ Lundbom, J. R.: *Jeremiah 1-20: A new translation with introduction and commentary*. AYB. New Haven: Yale University, 1999, s. 565. See also Claasses, J. M.: *Calling the Keeners: The Image of the Wailing Woman As Symbol of Survival in a Traumatized World*. In JFSR, 2010, roč. 26, č.1, s. 63-77, tu 67.

¹⁷ Lundbom, J. R.: *Jeremiah 1-20*, s. 565.

¹⁸ Pham, X H. T.: *Mourning in the Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible*. JSOTSup 302. Sheffield: Academic, 1999, s. 16.

¹⁹ Bleeker, C. J.: *Isis and Nephthys as Wailing Women*. In *Numen*, 1958, č. 5, s. 1-17, tu 1-2.

²⁰ Lundbom, J. R.: *Jeremiah 1-20*, s. 560.

women over sixty years of age. Further, they limit the possibilities for the expression of mourning.²¹ Even later texts talk about these women in the Near East. Jerome reports of the presence of wailing women at funerals in Palestine of his day: “This custom continues everywhere in Judea today; women scatter their hair and bare their breasts and then adjust their voice to rouse everyone to weeping.”²²

II. Rites Accompanying the Mourning of Women

As Jerome’s words already suggest, there are other rites accompanying the mourning of women. They are also recorded in the Bible. Majority of the references to mourning rituals mostly likely have to do with male practice, although sometimes it is not easy to say whether women are excluded. However, there are references to mourning rites that are addressed expressly to women. Isaiah 32,9-12 addresses the women of Jerusalem and calls them to perform rites that have to be expressions of mourning since he is proclaiming a disaster to the city. They are to make themselves bare, gird sackcloth²³ and beat their breasts (v. 11-12). Jeremiah 7,29 calls upon women (female form of the imperatives) to cut off their consecrated hair²⁴ and to raise a lament (קִיָּה) because the Lord has forsaken their generation. The feminine ending imperatives to cut off the hair in mourning are also found in Mic 1,16: „Make yourselves bald (קָרְחִי) and cut off your hair (גִּזֵּי), for the children of your delight; make yourselves as bald (הַרְחִבִי קְרָחֲמֵךְ) as the eagle, for they shall go from you into exile.“ In Isa 47,1 the prophet is proclaiming a destruction to Babylon as to a personified female figure and calls her to go down and sit in the dust. Similarly, in Jer 6,26 the Lord calls Jerusalem and invites her to gird with a sackcloth and to roll in ashes. Perhaps another evidence for a female mourning practice can be cited, although it does not deal with death – the story of Tamar in 2 Sam 13,19. After she has been raped and cast away by her brother Amnon, she puts ashes on her head, rends her garment, lays her hand on her head and cries aloud.

These descriptions cohere with archeological findings from the cultures surrounding ancient Israel, such as Egypt, Near East, and Greece. Here wailing women are often portrayed similarly. They have their long hair loosened, they are raising their hands or they put them on their head or one hand is raised and the other placed on the head. Sometimes, they have their breasts uncovered and sometimes they hold them with their hands or they hold one breast with one hand and the other hand is on the head. There are even figurines and depictions that present these women as having bloody incisions either on their chest or on their head and arms.²⁵ In the biblical text, this practice is never associated with women explicitly. There is only one reference that might point to such a practice regarding women in Mic 4,14, but the Hebrew text here is very problematic.²⁶ Moreover, the prophet addresses here a personified figure. Interestingly, the Ugaritic poems about Baal and Anath from around the middle of the second millennium BC mention that Anath, Baal’s consort, is cutting herself during mourning rituals over Baal’s death.²⁷

Another element that raises a question is that of women cutting their hair. Although biblical texts seem to mention it, it is hardly found among the graphic representations. In this regard, a mention may be made

²¹ Humphreys, S. C.: Family Tombs and Tomb Cult in Ancient Athens. In JHS, 1980, č. 100, s. 98-101, tu 99-100.

²² Holladay, W. L. – Hanson, P. D.: Jeremiah 1, s. 312.

²³ The girding with a sackcloth meant putting on of this mourning garment which was worn from the hips down and thus the upper part of the body was left bare, see: Pham, X H. T.: Mourning in the Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible, s. 14.

²⁴ Koehler, W. – Baumgartner, L. “קָרַח”, HALOT 1, s. 684.

²⁵ For the examples of the depictions and figurines see Schroer, S.: Traueritten und Totenklage im Alten Israel: Frauenmacht und Machtkonflikte. In Janowski, B. – Berlejung, A. (eds.): Tod und Jenseits im alten Israel und in seiner Umwelt: theologische, religionsgeschichtliche, archäologische und ikonographische Aspekte. Forschungen zum Alten Testament 64. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009, s. 307-310.

²⁶ Smith, R. L.: Micah-Malachi. WBC 32. Dallas: Waco Books, 2002, s. 43.

²⁷ Pham, X H. T.: Mourning in the Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible, s. 20.

of the practice in Byblos reported by Lucian of Samosata (2nd cent. AD). In his work *The Syrian Goddess* he talks about the rites of Adonis at the sanctuary of Aphrodite. According to this report, the women were supposed to shave their heads as a part of mourning rites during the annual celebration of the death of Adonis. The women who refused to do so had to offer themselves for one day to the strangers as a penalty. The money they obtained was supposed to be offered to Aphrodite.²⁸ P. Bird, in her article dealing with this Lucian's text where she is focused primarily on the issue of so-called "sacred prostitution", points out that it makes no sense for women to perform such rite every year. In support of this, she points to the known depictions of the mourning women where no hair shaving can be seen.²⁹ Moreover, she shows that usually the commentators fail to recognize Lucian's satire and parody of the accounts of Herodotus with regard to these practices of women in Byblos.³⁰ Indeed, annual head shaving especially for women does not make much sense and it is very hard to imagine that such practice would be a part of annual rituals. But perhaps some sort of hair cutting on particular life occasions might have been a part of mourning rites also for women (as some biblical texts mentioned above seem to suggest).

III. Meaning of Wailing Women for Their Society

The women in ancient world did not have the same public roles as men. Even at funerals, although they were professionals in mourning, their role was not "official" and all the ceremonial acts and public stage was reserved for men. Men were those who formed the political and social leadership. However, in the situations like the one behind Jeremiah's text, when all the official structures collapse, the nontraditional leaders might help the community in chaos to come together and face the situation.³¹ Here the role of such women appears as very helpful to the whole society. Since usually it was the older women who would hold such roles, their life experience and losses that they experienced would add to their "authority" as "leaders" in such circumstances.³² Examples of such professional women from the present day show that as the younger women learn from the older experienced mourners they have to pass a period of certain "storage" and "incubation".³³ The younger women have to learn to store the knowledge and to let it incubate in them so that they are able, when the right time comes, to pull out the appropriate types of lament which suit the situation best. This also means that acquiring this skill would not simply mean to learn certain wailing songs and perform them automatically when needed, but it would include adapting them to a particular situation: "By means of creative actualization of the lament tradition, wailing women vocalized what people would have said or ought to have said – their laments truly represented a community response to trauma."³⁴ Their wailing accompanied by expressive gestures and rites helps to deal with the situation properly. The situation of loss is often very difficult to bear alone. During the time of loss or disaster, it does not help to act like nothing has happened or just to forget. These women by performing their "art" help either individuals or, as in the case of Jeremiah's text, the whole community to face the trauma with full recognition of what has happened and to name the problem.³⁵ This recognition is the first step to a successful healing and moving forward. Moreover, they are calling the community to come together and thus to participate in the grief of another and to ease the whole situation.

²⁸ Bird, P.: *The Lucian's Last Laugh*. In Niemann, H. M. – Augustin, M. (eds.): 'My spirit at rest in the north country' (Zechariah 6:8): collected communications to the XXth Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament, Helsinki 2010. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011, s. 206.

²⁹ Bird, P.: *The Lucian's Last Laugh*, s. 207.

³⁰ Bird, P.: *The Lucian's Last Laugh*, s. 209-211.

³¹ Claassens, J. M.: *Calling the Keeners*, s. 66.

³² Claassens, J. M.: *Calling the Keeners*, s. 66.

³³ Claassens, J. M.: *Calling the Keeners*, s. 67.

³⁴ Claassens, J. M.: *Calling the Keeners*, s. 67.

³⁵ Claassens, J. M.: *Calling the Keeners*, s. 68-69.

A further reflection on the situation of the people of Jerusalem and Judah in Jeremiah's time reveals that these women are in a certain sense also performing a prophetic role. They become God's spokesmen (spokeswomen) and the conscience of the nation. They help to open the eyes of their co-nationals and see the reality in appropriate light. There is also an interesting parallel between them and Jeremiah who weeps over his people in Jer 8,21-23.³⁶ The prophet in 8,23 literally says: "*Who can make my head waters/and my eyes a well of tears/So I might weep day and night/for the slain of my dear people?*"³⁷ and in 9,17 he expresses that the wailing women are to be summoned "*that our eyes may run down with tears, and our eyelids gush with water.*" It is exactly these women who are to help him fulfill his prophetic action with extent to the whole people.

On the other hand, such behavior can also be seen as an act of resistance: "the wailing women's tears and laments vocalized the very extent of the injustice of the situation ... wailing women's tears became a way to resist the brutal devastation of the empire that has crushed everything in its way, by refusing to accept the current situation as it is."³⁸ By doing so they may help to raise community's hope and will to survive.³⁹

IV. Mourning Women in Cultic Sphere

A hint at another important aspect of women's wailing is found in Ez 8,14. The Lord in a vision shows to Ezekiel different abominations happening in the temple of Jerusalem. Among these are mentioned women who are wailing for Tammuz.

Tammuz was a deity in ancient Mesopotamia whose feast commemorating his death and descent into the netherworld was celebrated annually. Although the exact performance of the rites is unknown, it seems to have included a women's rite of wailing practiced over the ancient Near East over the centuries. As the biblical text suggests, this cult was at some point transferred to Judea.⁴⁰ The cult was most likely connected with the rhythms of nature and the feast was celebrated annually. With the death of this god people celebrated the end of spring and the beginning of dry season, the death of nature. Tammuz thus represented all young and flourishing life that was now dead.⁴¹ Tammuz' coming back to life was celebrated with the coming of the rain season and so with the awakening of nature.

An ancient cult that is similar to that of Tammuz, since it belongs to the same category of dying and rising gods, is found in ancient Egypt – the cult of the god Osiris.⁴² Here it is connected with the height of the water of Nile. Its low tide was bringing degradation of life, its high tide a new life. Although this cult had important role in the Egyptian religion throughout centuries, the details of the myth behind it are unknown. Some knowledge is available from ritual texts related to this cult. Osiris was killed by his brother Seth and was brought back to life by his sisters Isis and Nephthys. The important part of their action is lamentation over the dead Osiris. They are called "big wailing woman" and "small wailing woman". There are preserved texts of these lamentations that have a character of antiphonal litanies where the two sisters alternate. So this lamentation was not something improvised, but it had professional character. In these texts it is made clear that this lamentation is not just a simple expression of grief, but plays an important role in bringing Osiris back to

³⁶ Craigie, P. C.: Jeremiah 1-25. WBC. Dallas: Word Books, 2002, s. 150.

³⁷ Translation from Lundbom, J. R.: Jeremiah 1-20, s. 535.

³⁸ Claassens, J. M.: Calling the Keeners, s. 73. This voice of women throughout the ages points to the injustice taking place in the world every day.

³⁹ Claassens, J. M.: Calling the Keeners, s. 73.

⁴⁰ Allen, L. C.: Ezekiel 1-19. WBC 28. Dallas: Word Books, 2002, s. 144. Greenberg, M.: Ezekiel 1-20: A new translation with introduction and commentary. AYB 22. New Haven: Yale University, 2008, s. 171.

⁴¹ Van Der Toorn, K.: From her Cradle to her Grave: The Role of Religion in the Life of the Israelite and the Babylonian Woman. JSOT The Biblical Seminar 23. Sheffield: Academic Press, 1994, s. 116.

⁴² All the following references to this cult are from Bleeker, C. J.: Isis and Nephthys, s. 2-17.

life. A passage can be found here that contains the following words in the mouth of Nephthys: “they mourn thee, they resuscitate thee”.⁴³

The role of these women is not only to lament. They are also called “two female attendants”.⁴⁴ They were something like divine nurses taking care of the dead body of Osiris. These two sisters have found the dead body of their brother severely mangled and one text speaks of Nephthys as guarding and protecting Osiris’ body from further attacks.⁴⁵ This attending has a special purpose. It was to make “the glorified dead man as a figure of radiance”.⁴⁶ This cult is strongly linked to funerary rites. In texts used for lamenting the dead, the dead is called “Osiris + the name of the dead” and the lamentations have such a character that it is sometimes hard to say whether they are to be used for funerals or for cultic purposes. It is evident that cultic lamentation has its roots in funerary rites. Another hint in this direction is the fact that Osiris is mourned by his next-of-kin – his sisters. The first to mourn at funerals were women who were close relatives of the deceased.

There is a further similarity between the myths of Osiris and Tammuz. Tammuz is mourned by his lover, goddess Ishtar and the love-themes are well known with regard to this cult.⁴⁷ The wailing sister of Osiris, Isis, is able to preserve the procreative power of Osiris and bears him a son, Horus.⁴⁸ Themes of love and procreation are important for women. That might have been another contribution to the popularity of the cult among women.

It was further believed that at Tammuz’ coming back to life the dead were coming to the ceiling of the netherworld to receive some gifts from the living.⁴⁹ In the case of Osiris, his vivification was not in his actual coming back to life, but in his capacity to keep his creative power also after his death. In this he distinguishes himself from the human dead. This capacity he is able to retain because of the help of his sister(s).⁵⁰ In a certain sense it is possible to see here a connection between the two myths in the idea of helping the dead – another feature possibly appealing to women. On the other hand this feature may also reveal the meaning of the lamentation and care for the dead for the women at funerals. Perhaps by this action they wanted not only to express their grief and care, but also actively help the deceased in afterlife. Woman as a mother “was familiar, in a special manner, with the mysterious interdependency between life and death.”⁵¹

These considerations show that women transferred to cultic sphere the practices which they used to perform at any funeral – lamenting and taking care of the corpse. Their regular practice is thus made religious. The funerary character of such a feast allowed them to be fully involved in cultic rituals in a way natural for them.

V. Rizpah’s Silent Vigil – Woman Cares for the Bodies of the Dead

There is another woman in the Bible who appears in connection with the dead – Rizpah in 1 Sam 21,1-14. The passage describes a famine in the land lasting three years. King David seeks the Lord to find out the reason for it. It is revealed that it is because of Saul and his bloody house who tried to exterminate Gibeonites. David, after negotiating with Gibeonites, hands over to them seven descendants of Saul. Gibeonites put them to death. According to the logic from the beginning of the story, the text

⁴³ Bleeker, C. J.: Isis and Nephthys, s. 13.

⁴⁴ And sometimes they are also called “the long-haired ones” Bleeker, C. J.: Isis and Nephthys, s. 14. This may again point to the practice of women to have their hair loosened at the mourning.

⁴⁵ Bleeker, C. J.: Isis and Nephthys, s. 11.

⁴⁶ Bleeker, C. J.: Isis and Nephthys, s. 12.

⁴⁷ Van Der Toorn, K.: From her Cradle to her Grave, s. 118.

⁴⁸ Bleeker, C. J.: Isis and Nephthys, s. 8-9.

⁴⁹ Van Der Toorn, K.: From her Cradle to her Grave, s. 118.

⁵⁰ Bleeker, C. J.: Isis and Nephthys, s. 17.

⁵¹ Van Der Toorn, K.: From her Cradle to her Grave, s. 119.

might well finish here and the famine should have been ended – the revenge and justice took place. At this point, Rizpah, the mother of two of the deceased men, comes to the scene. She spreads sackcloth on the rock and does not allow birds of the heaven and beast of the field to come upon the bodies until the coming of the rain. When her action is reported to David, he orders to summon not only the bones of those seven, but also of Saul and Jonathan and to bring them and bury them in the grave of Saul's father Kish. Only after that it is said that "*God heeded supplications for the land*" (v. 14).

With regard to the subject at hand two things are to be noticed. First, the mention of the sackcloth may point to mourning, rites since this type of garment was typical in such situation (see above). Second, the woman shows enormous perseverance in protecting the bodies against birds and beasts.

The notion of "birds of the heavens and beasts of the field" eating bodies of the dead is found elsewhere in the Bible and it seems to indicate complete destruction – the worst thing that may happen to a human being. It is found among the curses toward those who will not keep the commandments of the Lord: "*And your dead body shall be food for all birds of the air, and for the beasts of the earth; and there shall be no one to frighten them away,*" (Deut 28,26). These words seem to be fulfilled at the destruction of Jerusalem – the most terrible event in the history of Israel. Jeremiah uses this image several times, e.g. 7,33: "*And the dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the air, and for the beasts of the earth; and none will frighten them away,*" or in 16,4: "*They shall die of deadly diseases. They shall not be lamented, nor shall they be buried; they shall be as dung on the surface of the ground. They shall perish by the sword and by famine, and their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth.*" This verse is similar to the passage in Jeremiah 9 studied above. There the bodies were also to be like dung in the field with no one to gather them, which implies that they would be exposed to animals. There women were to be summoned to lament, here the bodies lack even those who would lament – the horror of the destruction is even worse. There are several other instances where the expression occurs and it is clear that it expresses the horror of destruction (e.g. Jer 15,3; 19,7; 34,20; Ez 29,5; 31,13; 32,4; 39,4; 39,17). One can hardly imagine a worse end than to be laid on the field without a proper burial.

The severity of the image can be illustrated by yet another biblical passage. In Gen 9,2-3 after the flood God gives animals (among them birds of the air and beasts of the earth) as food to humans. In the texts studied above this is reversed: the bodies of humans are given as food to animals. So, the dead in the Rizpah story were exposed to the worst fate one can imagine – they are not only dead, but there is nobody to bury them.

David treated them like he treated Goliath. The threat: "*Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the field,*" which Goliath addressed to the approaching David, David repeated and then carried out when after Goliath had been killed all the Philistines fled, so there was no one to bury him (see 1 Sam 17,42-54). This is the only instance where the image is used in the story of David.

There seems to be a general consensus among scholars that 1 Sam 21,1-14 was composed as an apologetic text against the accusation of David that he got rid of Saul's descendants and thus of any possible threat to his position on the throne. A good occasion might have been found in the famine. He did not simply murder them – it was for the sake of the whole land.⁵²

Here the action of Rizpah comes to play an important role. It is not a simple mourning, though it coheres with what we have said so far. She takes care of the bodies of the dead as was a woman's

⁵² McCarter, Jr., P. K.: II Samuel: A new translation with introduction, notes, and commentary. AYB. New Haven: Yale University, 2008, s. 445. Anderson, A. A.: 2 Samuel. WBC 11. Dallas: Word Books, 2002, s. 251.

duty at the preparations for the funeral not only in Israel, but also for example in Greece.⁵³ Her action is similar to Nephthys' protecting the dead and mangled body of Osiris from further attacks and thus was helping him to gain his glory (see above).

Rizpah's faithfulness to her role to care for the body of the dead is a slap in David's face. Her action, which is accompanied by a deafening sound of her silence, as M. J. Melanchthon puts it,⁵⁴ can be seen as an action of resistance and protest against injustice, similar to mourning women in Jerusalem (see above). Melanchthon, reflecting on the Rizpah story, states: "But I see this 'sacrifice' as a manifestation of repressive institutionalized violence generative of patriarchal dominion, a violent instrument of a political and ideological mechanism. ... It was beneficial for the power that be to render it a 'sacrifice' so as to absolve themselves of the guilt of murder,"⁵⁵ and she may be right. If this commentary is put in the frame of Deuteronomistic laws, David transgresses two of them: Deut 24,16, where it is expressly said that fathers will not be put to death for the sins of their children or vice-versa, and Deut 21,22-23 where burial on the day of death is prescribed also for executed sinners.⁵⁶ Moreover, S. Frolov and V. Orel propose to understand the mention of the sackcloth differently than as a part of mourning ritual. In Is 50,2-3 the prophet uses sackcloth as a symbol of the sky at the time of drought.⁵⁷ Rizpah's stretching out the sackcloth would be a rite similar to Moses' raising the bronze serpent. With this action Rizpah would, so to speak, prevent the sky from raining and the famine ends only after her action is reported to David and the dead are buried. Thus she accomplishes exactly what David hoped to do by handing the seven men to Gibeonites. Here it is important to note that the text says that "*God heeded the supplication for the land*" (v. 14) only after the burial of the dead and not after their execution. "Waters falling from heaven in the midst of the dry season marked Rizpah's victory. They proved that the alleged sin of Saul had not caused three dry years."⁵⁸ Thus the silent but powerful action of Rizpah with her faithfulness to mourning rites peculiar to women (taking care of the bodies of the dead) challenges not only David, but also the theology according to which God could require human sacrifices for calming his wrath.

VI. Conclusion

It is commonly asserted that women in ancient world did not have much space in official and public sphere. This study, focusing on selected OT women,⁵⁹ has shown that the occasion of mourning offered them at least a certain satisfaction. They were inseparable part of the rituals not only at funerals but also at the times of national disasters. This role was so important to them that they even brought it to a professional level and might have influenced also the prophetic literature. These rituals helped them to enter into the cultic sphere in a certain sense. And what is even more important, in this role they were (and still are) able to resist and fight injustice, awaken conscience of others and bring them to higher sensitivity on what is important in life.

⁵³ Humphreys, S. C.: *Family Tombs and Tomb Cult*, s. 98.

⁵⁴ Melanchthon, M. J.: *Reading Rizpah across Borders, Cultures, Belongings ... to India and Back Bible*. In Havea, J. et al.: *Borders, Belonging(s): Engaging Readings from Oceania*. Semeia Studies. Atlanta: SBL, 2014, s. 171-188, tu 183.

⁵⁵ Melanchthon, M. J.: *Reading Rizpah*, s. 182.

⁵⁶ Frolov, S. – Orel, V.: *Rizpah on the Rock*. Notes on 2 Sam 21,1-14. In *Bibbia e Oriente*, 1995, č. 185, s. 145-154, tu 150.

⁵⁷ Frolov, S. – Orel, V.: *Rizpah on the Rock*, s. 149. They also point to the phenomenon of hamsin in Israel which may accompany drought. Indeed, during hamsin not only sky looks like a sackcloth, but one even feels like closed in a sack.

⁵⁸ Frolov, S. – Orel, V.: *Rizpah on the Rock*, s. 150. However, it is not clear from the text when the rain came; whether miraculously during the time of the dry season or regularly at the end of the dry season. Maybe the former is more plausible since it would take at least six months to wait for the wet season from the beginning of the barley harvest.

⁵⁹ The topic of women in the Bible continues to attract scholarly attention, as evidenced in a steady flow of recent studies. Among them, note, e.g., Feník, J. – Lapko, R.: *Annunciations to Mary in Luke 1–2*. In *Biblica*, 2015, r. 96, č. 4, s. 498-524; Feník, J.: *Dočasne neplodná: Alžbeta a premena žien v Lukášovom evanjeliu*. In *Studia Biblica Slovaca*, 2015, r. 7, č. 2, s. 220-247.

The analysis developed here could be perhaps supported by invoking other biblical passages in which the theme of mourning appears less overtly. Besides focusing on the role of women in morning rituals in ancient Israel, this study has identified the complexity of mourning terminology in the Hebrew Bible that must be recognized in future translation projects into Slavic languages.

Smútočné obrady žien v starovekom Izraeli a ich význam

Matúš Imrich – Róbert Lapko

Podľa rozšírených interpretácií medzi odborníkmi na staroveký Blízky východ nemali ženy v starovekom Izraeli veľký priestor v oficiálnej verejnej sfére. Biblické texty však svedčia o ich špecifickej úlohe oplakávačiek. V tomto článku predstavujeme niekoľko terminologických postrehov vzhľadom na žialiace ženy tak, ako sú prezentované v hebrejskej Biblii (Jer 9,16-21), rituály, ktoré sprevádzajú oplakávanie a čo tie ženy znamenali pre spoločnosť. Následne sa zaoberáme úlohou oplakávajúcich žien v kultovom živote (Ez 8,14). V poslednej časti je zvláštna pozornosť venovaná Rizpe, jednému špecifickému prípadu oplakavajúcej ženy v Biblii (2 Sam 21,1-14).