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The Politics of the Royal Harem and the Case of Bat-Sheba

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Abstract

The title *g^{e}bîrâ* in the Hebrew Bible has been discussed in terms of a cultic role, a political role, and as a title accorded to royal women who influenced the politics of Israel and Judah through their strong personalities. This article reviews the ancient Near Eastern documents that refer to the political influence of the queen or queen mother in the royal court. It then reviews documentation from the households of the royal family of the Ottoman Empire as a means of further supporting the argument that the title *g^{e}bîrâ* in the Hebrew Bible refers to a woman who is fulfilling a particular role in the polygynous royal harem. With the role of the *g^{e}bîrâ* defined, it is then argued that in 1 Kings 1–2, Bat-Sheba fulfills the role of the ancient Near Eastern *g^{e}bîrâ.*

Biblical scholars have puzzled over the meaning of the term גְּבִירָה (*g^{e}bîrâ*) as a title for royal women in the Hebrew Bible. The word occurs with reference to four royal women: Tahpenes, wife of Haddad the Egyptian Pharaoh (1 Kgs 11.19); Maacah, mother of Kings Abijah and Asa of Judah (1 Kgs 15.13; 2 Chron. 15.16); Jezebel of Israel (2 Kgs 10.13); and Nehusta, the mother of King Jehoiachin (Jer. 13.18; 29.2). In each case, the term appears without explanation, suggesting that it was readily recognized by the audience.

Traditionally, the designation of *g^{e}bîrâ* was understood as a personal epithet referring to a royal woman who was notable for her strong character, personal influence, and ambitions. Zafira Ben-Barak argues that this woman may have been the wife, sister, or mother of the reigning king, but that she held no official role within the court structure (Ben-Barak 1991: 34).

This traditional view is challenged by Gösta Ahlström, Samuel Terrien, and Susan Ackerman. They suggest that the word *g^{e}bîrâ* is the title given to the queen mother in her role in the worship of the goddess Asherah in the royal cult (Ahlström 1963: 57-88; Terrien 1970: 330-31; Ackerman 1993: 400-401).

Based on texts from Ebla, Ur-III, Ugarit, Mari, Assyria, and pre-Islamic Arabia, George Molin claims that in the cases of Maacah, Jezebel, and Nehushta the term *g^{e}bîrâ* refers specifically to the political role of the reigning monarch's mother, the 'queen mother'. Herbert Donner (1959), Tomoo Ishida (1977), and Ktziah Spanier agree that the title designates the independent political role for the queen mother. Carol Smith (1998) argues that women received political power and status in the royal court from their relationship to the king or the crown prince. Yet the source and nature of this power remain unspecified.

Thus, the power and status of the *g^{e}bîrâ* has been attributed to the woman's role either in the royal cult or to her relationship to the king. In this article, I consider another social and political reality of Near Eastern societies, the royal polygynous harem, as the source of the power of the *g^{e}bîrâ*. The Near East is characterized by traditional societies that exhibit a continuity of practice over time. These traditional societies are characterized by the practices of patrilineality and polygyny (Abu-Lughod 1993: 19). It is on the basis of such continuity that I argue that the position of the *g^{e}bîrâ* in the biblical text can be clarified with reference to the royal households of Near Eastern societies including the royal courts of the Ottoman Empire. This continuity of Near Eastern social practice over time is demonstrated by the social coherence between the royal households of the Ottoman Sultans and those of modern Bedouin sheiks.

Furthermore, I argue that the *g^{e}bîrâ*'s power allowed a royal woman to influence the royal succession. To make this case, I explore the role of women in the royal household of the ancient Near East and consider their influence on dynastic succession as recorded in various ancient Near Eastern documents. Then, using documentary evidence from the Ottoman Empire, I offer a discussion of the role of women in the Ottoman royal court.

Finally, after briefly relating these conclusions to the four women who are explicitly called *g^{e}bîrâ* in the Hebrew Bible, I focus on the case of Bat-Sheba in 1 Kings 1–2. Although the Deuteronomistic Historian does not call Bat-Sheba a *g^{e}bîrâ*, the question as to whether she functioned as such has been raised by several authors. G. Molin (1954: 161-64), Niels-Eric Andreasen (1983: 189), Carol Smith (1998: 152-53), and Lillian Klein (2000) note that Bat-Sheba exerted political influence because of her association with the king but fail to define the source of her influence. I argue that Bat-Sheba did indeed function in the reigns of both David and Solomon as the *g^{e}bîrâ* and, furthermore, that her power specifically derived from her position in the royal polygynous household. Bat-Sheba's circumstances and actions in 1 Kings 1–2 reveal the clearest parallel in the Hebrew Bible with the circumstances and power of royal women of polygynous households described in the ancient Near Eastern and Ottoman documents.

The Harem in the Near Eastern Royal Court

In the ancient Near East and in the Ottoman Empire, the royal household functioned patrimonially as a symbol for the kingdom. According to J. David Schloen,

> In a patrimonial regime, the entire social order is viewed as an extension of the ruler's household—and ultimately of the god's household. The social order consists of a hierarchy of sub-households linked by personal ties at each level… There is no global distinction between the 'private' and 'public' sectors of society because governmental administration is effected through personal relationship on the household model rather than through an impersonal bureaucracy. (2001: 51)

A major component of this household model was the women's quarters or Harem. In both Hebrew and Arabic, the root *hrm* means 'to ban, to devote, consecrate or to exterminate', and is used to identify that which has been set aside for the use of the deity (BDB: 355-56). In the ancient Near Eastern ideology of sacral kingship, the power to rule was granted to a chosen family by the deity. The king chosen to rule by the deity was *herem*, consecrated to the deity. The space around the king's person was sacred space, visibly set apart by physical and social boundaries and with access to his person bound by strict protocol. The inner precinct of the palace was *herem* because the king lived there. Therefore, the women of the royal household were also *herem.*

Although their physical access to the outer courts of royal power was greatly limited, outsiders were anxious to form ties with potential patrons within the palace walls, and the women were ideal candidates because of their access to the king. Most of these relationships were based on familial ties and alliances. The marriages of daughters gave harem mothers important links to the centers of power outside the palace. These married princesses often served their mothers as confidants, informants, and couriers.

Women of status and wealth within the harem community also used their resources to command large numbers of personal slaves and servants. Former slaves, as clients, continued to serve as agents for their former mistresses. Thus, the structure of the harem society enabled royal women to participate in the political life of the country (Pierce 1993: 143-49). The Ottoman records indicate that her role included control of access to the inner palace. Apart from the king, the one person who had access to both the inner and the outer palace precincts was the Great Lady of the harem.[1] This source of power and influence in the politics of the royal court developed over a period of time, as seen in a variety of ancient Near Eastern texts.

The Great Lady in Near Eastern Courts

The few texts that mention royal women in the ancient Near East provide some clues about the operation of the royal polygynous harem in these courts. The earliest reference to the role of the Great Lady of the royal court is found in the correspondence of King Zimri-Lim of Mari (1779–1745 BCE). The king indicates that his wife Šibtu, as the mother of the designated heir, is to maintain the power of the dynasty when war and diplomacy take the king from the court (Batto 1974: 8-21). Šibtu's power is based on two elements: she is the administrator of the palace household with particular authority in regard to the royal harem; and she is the mother of the son designated as the heir. In particular, her oversight of the palace household helps her to protect her son's claim to the throne.[2]

1. Given the question of whether the role under discussion refers specifically to a queen or to the queen mother, I use the more neutral translation 'Great Lady' in the discussion of ancient Near Eastern and Ottoman texts.

2. Zimri-Lim refers to the 'house of the queen' (*bît bēltim*) as a separate section within the harem. This same spatial and architectural distinction is noted in the construction of Solomon's palace (1 Kgs 7.8) as well as in floor plans of the royal palaces of the Ottoman

Other documents indicate that royal mothers had a role to play in the designation of sons as heirs to the throne. In his last will and testament, Ammitaqum, prince of Alalakh (c. 1700 BCE), states that both his mother and father appointed him as king (Wiseman 1953: 9-10). Abdi-heba, ruler of Jerusalem (c.1400 BCE), notes that the Egyptian Pharaoh overturned the decision made by his father *and* his mother, and placed him on the throne (EA §286 9-13; EA §287 25-28; *ANET*: 269-71).

Texts from the royal palace at Ras Shamra (Ugarit) specifically state that Ahat-milku, Niqmepa's wife, placed her son Ammistamru II on the throne despite the efforts of the mothers of his older brothers (Drower 1973: 139-40; Donner 1959: 155). The ninth-century BCE inscription of Kilamuawa, an Aramean king of *yʾdy-Śamʾal* in northern Syria, explains Kilamuawa's usurpation of the throne. In most inscriptions of this type, the usurpation of the throne is attributed to divine election. However, at the point where it would be expected that Kilamuwa would acknowledge his deity Rakkabel, the inscription instead provides the name of his mother *Tm*. It is through her influence or action that Kilamuwa claims the throne (Ishida 1985: 151).

The records of Sassanian Iran prior to the arrival of the Arab Muslims (224–651 CE) show that the king's senior wife served as 'mistress over the persons in the harem'. As the 'Queen of Queens' she was charged with the protection of the 'King of Kings' and the regulation of the female palace (Rose 1998: 41). Here it also appears that the royal polygynous harem was the source for women's authority within the royal court.

The custom of the polygynous harem continued in Muslim courts. Again, we find a number of cases where a woman of the harem, either concubine, queen, or queen mother, used her position within the harem to assure her son's accession to the throne. For example, Subh, wife of the Ummayyad Caliph al-Hakam II (961–76 CE), used her position as the favorite to outwit and outmaneuver the powerful vizier al Mansûr to establish her son Hishâm II on the throne (Hambly 1998: 10).

In Delhi, the successor to the Indian Mughal al-Dīn Mahmīd bin Iltutmish (d. 1236 CE) was determined by one of his lesser wives, Shāh-Terken. She attempted to poison the eldest child, a daughter, and sent her into exile. Shāh-Terken then had the older half brother of her son blinded and put to death, thus placing her own son Rukn al-Dīn Fīrūz Shāh upon the throne (Jackson 1998: 184).

Empire. This architecture is also significant in the narratives concerning Bat-Sheba (1 Kgs 1.13, 15; 3.18, 19).

In at least some of these cases the influence of the mother on succession appears to have been made possible from a disruption of the practice of primogeniture. Primogeniture left younger sons with no rank with regard to the throne. If the eldest son was removed, the reigning king was free to declare which of his younger sons would become king after him. As in the cases of Subh and Shāh-Terken, royal women of any rank competed to have their son crowned. This competition between royal women within the harem community is further seen in the texts of the Ottoman Empire.

The *Valide Sultan* in the Ottoman Royal Household

The Ottoman Empire emerged from the Turco-Mongol traditions of pre-Islamic Central Asia and had its roots in the pre-Islamic ancient Near East. The geographical and cultural continuity of the Turkish Empire with the peoples of the ancient Near East suggests that the practices of the Ottomans reflected the survival of ancient cultural norms. Thus, private letters, political decrees, and histories written by the royal women of the Ottoman Empire can be used to infer the political realities of the polygynous harem and the particular role of the Great Lady in earlier periods.

The mother of the Ottoman sultan was known as the *valide sultan.* She maintained the critical boundary between the public and private realms of the court (Lasine 2001: 103). All access to the inner palace, the sultan, and the women's quarters was through her apartments. Within the harem community, she manipulated the relative status and power of the royal women. In the matter of dynastic procreation, the *valide sultan* managed both personal resources and political power for the benefit of the dynasty. Not only did she determine the sultan's access to his wives and concubines, she also upheld the policy that a royal woman might bear no more than one son to a sultan or a prince. Once a royal woman had borne a son, the focal point of her life was her son's future within the royal household (Pierce 1993: 3, 7, 23; Andreasen 1983: 183, 186).

All royal children grew up in the women's quarters, where they received their first training in manners, morality, and politics.[3] Royal mothers

3. Niels-Eric Andreasen's cross-cultural study of the present-day African tribal cultures of the Swazi and Ashanti indicates that it is usually an older wife, no longer bearing children, who maintains the court protocols, oversees the raising of the princes and princesses of the court, and is responsible for the royal wives (Andreasen 1983: 188, 193-94).

prepared princesses for diplomatic marriages and for the management of their own harems. Princes were raised in the harem until political tutors began the princes' training in statecraft. The sultan appointed the *lala* or *atabeg* to supervise the prince's military and practical education. This tutor often continued as *vizier* to the prince in his maturity (Soucek 1998; de Vaux 1961: I, 48-49; Pierce 1993: 3, 7, 20).[4]

When a royal son achieved political maturity, he was allowed to establish a separate household as the representative of the power of the Ottoman Empire in a particular geographical area. The establishment of his own palace marked not only the beginning of the prince's public career, but also that of his mother. Within the prince's household, the mother of the prince was the *valide sultan* of her son's court, providing the authoritative link between the dynastic generations. The assumption of the prince's political career around the age of sixteen usually marked the beginning of his reproductive career as well. It was the task of the *valide sultan* of the prince's court to choose and prepare his sexual partners for their role in the preservation of the dynasty.

As the *valide sultan* for her son, the mother of the prince served as regent when her son was absent from his court. International treaties and public correspondence show that the prince's mother was an active participant in the political, military, economic, and social concerns of her son. If her son became unable or unfit to rule, the *valide sultan* had the authority to exercise royal power in that area of the kingdom (Pierce 1993: 17).

When the sultan named a prince as heir, the prince's household was moved to the sultan's palace. If the sultan's own mother was deceased, the mother of the heir took up the role of the *valide sultan* in the palace in Istanbul. When the sultan died and her son was established on the throne, she, as the new imperial *valide sultan*, represented the power of the dynasty in the harem in the dangerous days of transition.

In the early years of the empire, when the sultan died all the sons competed for the throne in wars of succession. Around 1451 CE, Mehmed the Conqueror murdered all his brothers and institutionalized the practice of fratricide to protect Ottoman society from the internecine conflict. The deaths of rival sons were often orchestrated by the mothers of the dynasty from their positions of relative power within the harem. For example, Hurrem Sultān, Süleyman's most famous concubine and wife, ensured the

4. It was common practice in the ancient Near East, as well as in the Ottoman Empire, that a senior administrator would serve as tutor to the princes (Westermann 1960: 82, 115; Gray 1963: 80-81).

succession of her son, Selim II, by having his half brothers poisoned after the death of Süleyman in 1566 CE (Hambly 1998: 10; Pierce 1993: 58-65).

According to the history of the empire written by Selaniki, when Selim II died in 1574 CE, his favorite wife, Nurbanu, had his body preserved in ice until her son, Murad, arrived from his post at Manisa. When Murad arrived in Istanbul, he first went to the harem to confer with his mother. There he was apprised of the whereabouts of his half-brothers and other contenders for the throne. His first duty was to oversee their execution so that they might be buried alongside his father (Selaniki 1864: 124-25). Nurbanu had the power to silence the news of Selim II's death and to recall her son to the palace in order to deal with his rivals.

If it became necessary to remove an unfit or unpopular sultan, the *valide sultan* saw to it that the proper protocol for the enthronement of a new sultan was upheld. Her permission and cooperation were necessary for the removal of the deposed sultan from his quarters within the inner palace and the welcome of the new sultan into the royal precinct. She alone had the required status and authority to cross the sacred boundary between the inner and outer courts of the palace (Pierce 1993: 263-65).

The role of the *valide sultan* evolved as a way of controlling the dynastic power of the empire. She guarded the family's sovereignty in the administrative control of the household and the management of the succession. She served as the principal intermediary among the viziers of the court, family members, and the sultan. Although the sultan was the final political authority in the empire, the *valide sultan* was the ultimate authority in the royal household.

It can be seen that for both the *valide sultan* and the Great Lady of the ancient Near East the source of her power stemmed from her status within the royal polygynous household. As head of the household she had both access to the king and the authority to act on behalf of the dynasty. This role also allowed her to influence the succession.

The *g^{e}bîrâ* in the Bible

Although four women are called *g^{e}bîrâ* in the Hebrew Bible, details are available for only Maacah and Jezebel. Based on the texts associated with these two women, Gösta Ahlström (1963: 57-88) claims that the influence of foreign women led not only to the importation of foreign gods, but also to the institution of the sacral role of the *g^{e}bîrâ*. He interprets the removal of King Asa's mother, Maacah, from the role of *g^{e}bîrâ* as evidence of her

activity in the cult of Asherah (1 Kgs 15.1-15). This claim is not supported by the biblical and Ottoman texts.

The biblical text does demonstrate that foreign women within the royal household were able to influence the worship practices in both Israel and Judah. But their influence appears to have been in the establishment of shrines and the support of priesthoods rather than in active participation within the cultic ritual itself. This is also true of the women of the Ottoman Empire, who often established mosques, libraries, tombs, and charities as ways of expressing their piety and generosity (Pierce 1993: 206-10). It is quite likely that Maacah's establishment of the מִפְלֶצֶת ('thing to be shuddered at', BDB: 814) at the shrine of Asherah served as a declaration of her faithfulness to the goddess, rather than as an indication of her role as *g^{e}bîrâ*.

Ahlström further speculates that, although Athaliah is not called by the title *g^{e}bîrâ*, she, like her grandmother, Jezebel of Israel, supported the worship of Baal and Asherah in the royal cult of Judah and therefore functioned as a *g^{e}bîrâ*. Yet there is no reference to such a role during the reigns of her husband, Jehoram, or son, Jehu, or during her own six-year reign. Rather, the narrative of Athaliah's usurpation of the throne points to the rivalry between women within the royal household. Jehosheba, daughter of King Jehoram by a royal wife other than Athaliah, saves Joash, the son of Zibiah of Beer-Sheba, from being killed. These texts do not support the claim that the term *g^{e}bîrâ* reflects a role in the cult of Asherah.

The other woman given the title of *g^{e}bîrâ* is Jezebel. Her involvement in the worship of Baʿal and Asherah in Israel included killing off the prophets of the Lord (1 Kgs 18.4) and establishing priesthoods of Baʿal and Asherah at her royal table.[5] Yet, Jezebel's political influence as the wife of Ahab and head of the royal household is more notable. As princess of Tyre, educated in the politics of royal households, she acts boldly in the conflict between the power of the monarchy and the power of the prophets (Brenner 2000: 101). She sends messengers to Elijah, threatening his life (1 Kgs 19.2). That Elijah takes this seriously is evidence of her political power.

5. Brenner suggests that she also functioned as priestess (Brenner 1985: 26). However, Jezebel's actions on behalf of the priests of Baʿal and Asherah seem more in line with the kind of patronage demonstrated by Ottoman royal women in the establishment of shrines and donations to priests, and so on, than with a cultic role.

In the case of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kgs 21.5-16), Jezebel chastises her husband for not behaving as a king, she writes letters in Ahab's name using his seal, and she has Naboth murdered. When Naboth was executed, she receives the report and gives the news to Ahab herself (Brenner 1985: 27; 2000: 101).

After the death of Ahab, Jezebel meets with Jehu to deal with the future of the Omride dynasty (2 Kgs 9.30-37). They do not meet face-to-face, but converse through the palace window, in keeping with her *herem* status. As the text notes, it is three eunuchs, being guardians of the royal harem and having access to her person, who throw her down to her death.

Jezebel's story shows the influence that royal women had upon the royal cult, but does not indicate that she herself had any particular role within that cult. Rather, Jezebel's importance is in her wielding of political power as the head of the royal household. She acts for the maintenance and survival of the Omride dynasty. In this way, she behaves like an Ottoman Great Lady. It is on this basis that I define the biblical *g^{e}bîrâ* as the wife or mother who held the position of the Great Lady in the royal household. This position of power within the royal harem is most clearly demonstrated in Bat-Sheba's actions in 1 Kings 1–2.

Bat-Sheba and the Politics of the Harem (1 Kings 1–2)

Bat-Sheba is introduced as the daughter of Eliam of Giloh, a Canaanite settlement near Jerusalem controlled by the Jebusites.[6] The Canaanite culture of the Jebusites was greatly influenced by their trade with Northern Syria, which remained under Hittite and Hurrian influence into the first millennium BCE.[7] The names of Araunah, the king of Jebus, and of Uriah, Bat-Sheba's first husband, attest to the influence of the Hittite/Hurrian elite in Jebusite Jerusalem. Given the Hurrian influence, the name Bat-Sheba may have meant 'daughter of Hebat', referring to the Hurrian goddess and consort of Tessub (Wyatt 1985: 39-42; Hoffner 1998: 41, 110).

6. The pottery remains excavated and published by Amihai Mazar are transitional Late Bronze II to Iron I. Like Bethlehem, it is possible that Giloh was an outpost of the Jebusite kingdom (Mazar 1981: 14). See Ahlström 1993: 356-57 for a further discussion of this possibility.

7. The Hurrians are a people of unknown origin who appear to have come originally from the area of Lake Urmia. They spread across northern Mesopotamia toward the Mediterranean Sea, achieving some political supremacy in the area of the Upper Tigris and Euphrates and in the hills of south-east Anatolia (Macqueen 1996: 20).

If Bat-Sheba was brought up and married in the Jebusite culture of pre-Davidic Jerusalem, she would have been familiar with the context of a polygynous royal household. Both Hittite and Canaanite kings had extensive harems (Bin-Nun 1975: 104-109). As David's first Jerusalemite wife, Bat-Sheba functioned as the Great Lady of the royal household in Jerusalem.[8] As such, she was in a position to structure the Davidic royal household according to her Jebusite traditions. In this she was supported by the presence of Nathan and Zadok, both of whom may have entered David's court from the administration of the former Jebusite king.[9] When David established his capital in Jerusalem, the urban and international ambiance of the city came into conflict with the rural and tribal ethos of the Israelites and with the claims of those Judahites who remained based in David's original capital of Hebron (Ishida 1982: 17). In his need to pacify the resident Jebusites, David integrated Jebusite bureaucrats and customs into his evolving government. Together, Bat-Sheba, Nathan, and Zadok challenged the power previously held by the Judahites. This conflict is seen in the narratives of David's Judahite sons, Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah.

All three of these sons displayed the politically ambitious and semi-independent status of the mature prince. Amnon's rape of Tamar (2 Sam. 13), and Absalom's revenge (13.20, 23) and attempted usurpation of the throne (14.27, 28) took place in the context of their own separate courts. David's apparent inaction in these matters is more understandable if these sons were filling independent political roles far from David's palace in Jerusalem.

Following the deaths of his older brothers, Adonijah, the eldest surviving son from David's court in Hebron, assumed that he would succeed to his father's throne. Haggith, his mother, served as the Great Lady of his

8. David's mother is not named, but is mentioned in 1 Sam. 22.3-4. She and his father were left with the King of Moab. She is not mentioned as being in the royal household either in Hebron or in Jerusalem.

9. Nathan as court prophet first appears in 2 Sam. 7.2 following the establishment of the Ark in the Tent Shrine in Jerusalem. He is introduced without patronymic, without lineage to any of the tribes, and without any of the characteristics that would tie him to Israel or YHWH. It is quite possible that Nathan served as court prophet in the former Jebusite administration. The Deuteronomistic Historian does not provide genealogy or patronymic for Zadok, either. He, too, may have served the Jebusite king as chief priest in the temple of El Elyon associated with Mt Zion. Politically, the incorporation of these two senior officials in David's administration in the 'city of David' assured a smooth transition between governments.

palace at En-Rogel (1 Kgs 1.9, 53) where he gathered his supporters from the conservative Judahite party leaders, including Joab, David's powerful army commander, and Abiathar, the last of the Shilonite priests.

However, Adonijah's assumptions conflicted with the plans of the organized army and bureaucracy of Jerusalem. Solomon, the first of David's sons born in Jerusalem and the son of Bat-Sheba, had been raised in the city. Solomon had been tutored by Nathan, his *atabeg*, and taught the religious practices of the court by Zadok. He was the ideal candidate to maintain and enhance their power and control. For Nathan, Adonijah's banquet at En-Rogel represented the Judahite opposition to the both the policies and personnel of the Jerusalem court.

At this critical moment, Nathan sought Bat-Sheba as the head of the royal household. She had access to the king and the power to protect Jerusalemite interests (Polzin 1996: 177). Such access is consistent with the position of Great Lady. Nathan approaches Bat-Sheba saying, 'Have you not heard that Adonijah, son of Haggith, has become king and our lord David does not know it? Now let me advise you how you can save your own life and the life of your son Solomon' (1 Kgs 1.11-12). The mention of Haggith insured that Bat-Sheba understood that Adonijah's claims were as much a threat to herself as to her son.

In the following scene in David's chambers, court etiquette defines the relative status of the participants. David, the king, rests in his room attended by Abishag the Shunammite. This young woman had been brought in to test David's potency and his ability to reign. In terms of the power structure of the harem, Abishag had no children and therefore had neither status nor power. In contrast to Abishag, Bat-Sheba, mother of a son of the royal household, is a powerful figure.

Bat-Sheba enters unannounced. According to Ottoman documents the only person allowed to enter into the king's presence unannounced was the Great Lady. Although Bat-Sheba demonstrates the proper physical obeisance expected in the presence of a monarch in the ancient Near East, she does not bow to the ground, but remains standing. She states her claim, 'Solomon your son shall be king'. The statement is introduced by the Hebrew conjunction כִּי, which before direct speech has the force of the strong asseverative, 'indeed' (Williams 1976: 73 §449; BDB: 869, 1005). Bat-Sheba's unannounced entry, physical position, and the very fact that she makes the claim (and does so with verbal force) are all consistent with the power of a Great Lady with regard to the king.

In contrast, Nathan as court prophet must be formally announced and received into the king's presence. The Deuteronomistic Narrator notes that, unlike Bat-Sheba, Nathan bowed with 'his face to the ground' (v. 23). Only after the king has formally recognized him does Nathan stand before the king to give his report.

When King David speaks, he addresses Bat-Sheba, not Nathan. With the words 'Your son Solomon shall succeed me as the king and he shall sit on my throne in my place' (1 Kgs 1.30), David not only declares his heir, but bestows on Bat-Sheba the new role of queen mother.

1 Kings 2 gives further evidence of Bat-Sheba's status as the Great Lady of the royal household. Adonijah wished to marry Abishag the Shunammite. This would have been, however, a threat to the establishment of Solomon's reign. In the ancient Near East, marriage to the former king's wife or concubine was deemed to bestow legitimacy on one who aspired to the throne but who had an insufficient claim (see 2 Sam. 16.21-22; Tsevat 1958: 243). In addition, Abishag had witnessed the conversation between Bat-Sheba, Nathan, and King David. If Abishag became his wife, he would have access to what she heard and could use this information to undermine the newly established government (Fewell and Gunn 1993: 163). Unfortunately for Adonijah, if he was to communicate with King Solomon, court protocol required him to do so through Bat-Sheba. Just as Nathan had to approach Bat-Sheba to gain an audience with David, so Adonijah must now deal with the queen mother, to bring his request before Solomon. Furthermore, because Abishag was a female member of the inner palace, she was under the authority of the Great Lady of the harem. No decision concerning Abishag could be made without Bat-Sheba's acquiescence.

As in the earlier scene, the details of the throne room actions are consistent with Bat-Sheba's power and status as the Great Lady of a royal household. Again Bat-Sheba enters the throne room unheralded. She neither bows nor kneels before Solomon.[10] Rather, when she enters Solomon stands up from his throne, the symbol of his royal power, and bows to his mother in an act of homage.[11] Solomon provides her with a

10. As Baudier notes, the queen mother was the only person who did not have to bow before her son the king. Bat-Sheba bowed before David because she was not the queen mother (Baudier 1635: 61).

11. In Ugarit, it was customary to bow seven times before the *adt*, which refers either to a goddess or a high born lady (Donner 1959: 121). According to *The Turkish Secretary*, the sultan did not sit in front of the *valide sultan* until she had asked him to at least three times (Du Vignau 1688: 59).

throne at his right side. Bat-Sheba does not merely repeat the message given to her, but belittles it, stating that Adonijah's request is but 'one small request'. She also points out the implicit threat contained in the request by reminding Solomon that Adonijah is his brother (1 Kgs 2.21).

Solomon responds, 'Why do you ask Abishag the Shunammite for Adonijah? Ask for him the kingdom also'. When he orders Adonijah's death, Bat-Sheba does not protest. As the Great Lady of Israel's royal household, the integrity of the royal household and the maintenance of her son's claim to the throne are her primary concern.

Conclusion

Documentary evidence from ancient Near Eastern and the Ottoman Empire demonstrates that the role of the Great Lady was related to the oversight of the polygynous royal harem. First, as mother to a son, the royal wife or concubine served as the Great Lady in the prince's household. There she was responsible for guiding her son's political career and choosing wives and concubines for him in accordance with the needs of the dynasty. If her son was named the heir, she became the Great Lady for the entire kingdom. The Great Lady's task was to maintain the integrity of the royal household by overseeing access to the king, managing the flow of information in and out of the inner palace, and protecting the dynasty from the internal intrigues of the royal household. In all these activities, she wielded great power. The documentary evidence also suggests that there is continuity in the role of the Great Lady from Šibtu of Mari through the wives of the Ottoman Emperors.

In this article, I have argued that, in the Hebrew Bible, the role of the Great Lady within the royal household is designated by the term *g^{e}bîrâ*. This definition of the *g^{e}bîrâ* allows us to appreciate more fully Bat-Sheba's role in the narrative of the succession and establishment of Solomon on the throne of David. Bat-Sheba commands the respect of Nathan, David, Adonijah, and Solomon. She uses her position to receive and pass on critical information and to ensure the accession of her own son and the elimination of a rival. Thus, although she is not called *g^{e}bîrâ* by the Deuteronomistic Historian, Bat-Sheba fulfills the role of the Great Lady in the royal households of both David and Solomon.

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