

RBL 02/2009



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The Mystery of the House of Royal Women: Royal Pīlagšīm as Secondary Wives in the Old Testament

Studia Semitica Upsalensia 23

Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2007. Pp. 214. Paper.
\$43.50. ISBN 9155468829.

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This volume, based on the author's dissertation and published by the Uppsala University Press, is a bold attempt to shed light on a group of women who have to date been ignored in the literature: the royal *pīlagšīm* of the Bible, a group that is secondary in two ways—not only as women but also as second-class royal women, royal *pīlagšīm*, not royal wives. The author asserts, however, that the status of the royal *pīlagšīm* was higher than has customarily been thought and that they were part of the royal household.

The word *pīlegeš* appears in various periods and literary genres in the Bible, except for the legal sections. The term “royal *pīlegeš*” never occurs, although the status undoubtedly existed. As Davidovich notes, she does not aspire to reach firm conclusions, only to advance new proposals concerning the status of the royal *pīlagšīm* (33). She does this by a combination of research methods: a linguistic approach, a literary approach, narrative analysis, and intertextuality.

Davidovich observes that one reason for the dearth of research on *pīlagšīm* is the paucity of material on the subject. This is understandable. This stumbling block also confronted her, which may be why the book is repetitious and given to digressions on matters that are not directly related to her topic (e.g., 73, with its excessive detail about David's reaction to the death of Absalom; 105, about the relations between Abner and Ish-

bosheth). She also engages in extensive speculation. We are left with many open questions about royal *pīlagšīm* but without satisfactory answers to many of them.

The first chapter, the introduction, offers a brief and useful survey of the literature on the role and status of royal women in the ancient East and Israel. The author adduces various theories of the etymology of the word *pīlagšīm* in the ancient East and Israel.

Chapter 2, “Review on Royal Secondary Women in the Ancient Near East and Egypt,” relies mainly on previous research and provides a background for the study of the royal *pīlagšīm* in the Bible. As Davidovich notes, royal houses are typified by polygamy, which in turn produces a hierarchy of wives. The main role of women—both wives and *pīlagšīm*—is to produce children who will strengthen the dynasty and ensure its continuation. Despite the title, the chapter also deals with primary royal women, including those designated “queen.” It cites interesting cases of strong queens in the ancient East, such as Shibtu, the wife of Zimri-Lim of Mari. The chapter considers the royal women’s status, rights, and diverse roles.

The third chapter, “Royal *Pīlagšīm* as a Group,” focuses on the only two loci where the Bible refers to royal *pīlagšīm* as a group: the story of Absalom’s rebellion and the book of Esther. Here too the chapter title is misleading, because royal *pīlagšīm* who are not mentioned as part of a group are also discussed. The main argument here, in the discussion of David’s *pīlagšīm*, left to look after the palace when he flees Jerusalem, is persuasive. Ahithophel’s advice that Absalom sleep with his father’s *pīlagšīm*, and David’s harsh reaction to this *lèse-majesté*, do indicate that the *pīlagšīm* were considered to be the king’s wives. But the argument that David left them in the status of “living in widowhood of livingness [*sic*]” as permanent evidence of Absalom’s revolt (72–73) is not persuasive, nor can I accept that this was a punishment of the *pīlagšīm* (75). On page 77 Davidovich herself proposes a different explanation: the *pīlagšīm* are forbidden to David pursuant to the law in the Deut 24:1–4. As additional proof that royal *pīlagšīm* were not of lowly status, Davidovich cites the genealogy of David’s sons born in Jerusalem (2 Sam 5:13–16). In the verse that introduces this list (which, she maintains, includes the sons of the *pīlagšīm*), the word *pīlagšīm* comes before *nāšīm*. But a more plausible explanation of the word order is that only the sons of the royal wives are listed (as in the genealogy in 1 Chr 3:5–9); thus, to link the reference to the *nāšīm* to the list of their sons, the Bible first mentions the *pīlagšīm*, whose sons are skipped over, and only then his wives, whose sons are enumerated. The fact that the list in 2 Sam 5 is almost identical with that in 1 Chr 3, which explicitly contains only the sons of the wives (v. 9), tends to support this hypothesis. The second group of royal *pīlagšīm* addressed by chapter 3 is mentioned in Esth 2. The chapter also considers all biblical passages that refer to royal *pīlagšīm*. The author notes that they are mentioned only in the annals of the united kingdom and of the

kingdom of Judah, but not the kingdom of Israel, although she justifiably assumes that the phenomenon existed there as well.

Chapter 4, “An Individual Royal *Pīlegeš*,” focuses on Rizpah, daughter of Aiah. Davidovich rightly emphasizes that the Gibeonites accepted Saul’s sons by this *pīlegeš* as his legitimate offspring. Toward the end of the chapter she speculates that Rizpah had the special status, reflected by the very mention of her name and the names of her sons, as well as the independent action she took, of “chief *pīlegeš*” (a hypothesis raised again, with greater vigor, in the last chapter). To this we can reply that Rizpah’s prominence had nothing to do with her social status but with the heroic and extraordinary action she took to protect her sons’ corpses; we must not confound literary status with social status.

The fifth chapter, “Children of Royal *Pīlagšim*,” repeats the assertion that the sons of royal *pīlagšim* were considered to be the king’s legitimate offspring and were an integral part of the royal household. According to Davidovich, the elevated status of the sons of the *pīlagšim* indicates their mothers’ status as well. In general, I believe that she goes too far when she minimizes the difference in status of the sons of royal *pīlagšim* and the sons of royal wives. In fact, the last sentence of the genealogy in 1 Chr 3:9—“All [these were] David’s sons, besides the sons of the concubines”—demonstrates that the Bible most assuredly distinguishes the sons of royal wives from the sons of royal *pīlagšim*. Davidovich’s alternative proposal, that their names were deleted because Absalom slept with their mothers (2 Sam 16:22), does not strike me as persuasive.

The next two chapters, 6 and 7, strike me as the weakest and least persuasive in the book. Chapter 6, “Royal Women with Secondary Status,” begins by considering nine different women: it begins with Saul’s wife, Ahinoam daughter of Ahimaaz (who, the author conjectures, became a *pīlegeš* in David’s house after Saul’s death); Abigail; Maacah daughter of King Talmai of Geshur; Avishag; Naamah the Ammonite, the mother of Rehoboam; and Maacah the daughter of Absalom and wife of Rehoboam. Davidovich proposes that all of them had inferior status. The second part of the chapter deals with three women mentioned in the list of the sons born to David in Hebron: Haggith, Abital, and Eglah, whom she assigns to the same category. Her argument is that the biblical narrator does not refer to all women of inferior status as *pīlagšim*, for several reasons: because they were not *pīlagšim* but secondary wives (Abigail); to avoid harming relations with another state (Maacah the mother of Absalom, the daughter of the king of Geshur); or so as not to detract from the status of the son of a *pīlegeš*, the heir to the throne (Maacah the wife of Rehoboam, the mother of his heir, Abijah).

I find the discussion in this chapter extremely unpersuasive. First, the author does not clarify the distinction between a *pīlegeš* and a “secondary wife.” Second, she frequently

infers that a particular woman was not the dominant wife in the royal household and on that basis relegates her to a subordinate status, generally as a *pīlegeš* (thus for Abigail, whom she views as a wife of secondary status, and for Maacah daughter of Absalom and wife of Rehoboam, whom she considers to have been a *pīlegeš*). But why couldn't a king have several primary wives? As an example of the weakness of the arguments in this chapter, consider Davidovich's proofs that Maacah the daughter of the king of Geshur had the status of a *pīlegeš*: her son is not the heir, from which we are supposed to infer that she was not a primary wife or favorite wife; Absalom's receiving political asylum in Geshur may reflect the anger of its royal house at David's treatment of their princess; unlike Bathsheba, Maacah has no influence on the fate of her children (Tamar and Absalom): she "never speaks directly to the king. ... She never comes to plea for his mercy" (150). According to Davidovich, these points prove Maacah's secondary status as a royal *pīlegeš* (150–51). But as I have already noted with regard to Rizpah, we must distinguish literary representation from social status. In the present case we must also distinguish a historical event from the literary account thereof. That is, as a matter of historical fact, Maacah may indeed have stood fearlessly before the king to discuss her son's fate, but the author of the book of Samuel saw no need to mention this, because her exchange with David had no political repercussions, unlike the case of Bathsheba. As for the assertion that Absalom was not the heir to the throne, the rejoinder is that Absalom was not the firstborn. Were all of David's wives who bore him sons who were not deemed the heir presumptive *pīlagšim* or secondary wives? Yet Davidovich believes that Haggith, the mother of Adonijah, who was the heir presumptive, was a *pīlegeš*!

In chapter 7, "Chief of Concubines—Some Thoughts," Davidovich notes the existence of the expression "chief concubines" in Egypt, where it refers to "status and role in the cult of various gods, as well as to the position of some women in the royal house" (183). She suggests that, even though the term is not found in the Bible, the lofty status referred to existed in biblical society as well. She mentions two women who may have borne this title: Rizpah and Maacah the wife of Rehoboam. As in the previous chapter, here also everything is speculation. In addition, the points of similarity the author finds between Rizpah and Maacah (180–81) are forced. Davidovich's sensible warning about the danger of comparing biblical texts with other texts of the ancient East, belonging to different eras, different societies, and different literary genres (39), applies equally to this chapter.

The eighth and last chapter summarizes Davidovich's research and stresses that the status of royal *pīlagšim* was higher than we are accustomed to thinking.

The book is readable and its thesis very clear, but the editing is poor. For example, note 131 contains a cross-reference to note 127, supposedly about the argument that a royal *pīlegeš* could become a chief wife, but note 127 deals with something quite different. Note

132 mentions the argument that the children of *pīlagšim* could inherit and refers to page 35, but on page 35 the author merely poses the question of whether that situation was possible without providing an answer. On page 31 we read that Saul gave his firstborn daughter Merab to David. It is not clear to me whether this is an error, and the intention was his younger daughter Michal, or whether the author accepts the thesis that Merab, too, was married to David. If the latter is the case, I would have expected a statement to this effect, at least in a note. Sometimes various conjectures are offered, only to be presented later in the book as facts. For example, the hypothesis that Maacah the wife of Rehoboam was a royal *pīlegeš* (137 and 160–64) turns into solid fact in the conclusion (188). In chapter 7 the author surmises that the title “chief of concubines” may have existed in biblical society, but by the conclusion this, too, has metamorphosed into fact (189).

Despite these flaws, one must praise the author’s bold attempt to achieve a better understanding of the phenomenon of royal *pīlagšim*, despite the poverty of material about them. Despite the plethora of speculative assumptions, some of which I have mentioned, many of the book’s conclusions are plausible, such as that royal *pīlagšim* enjoyed a high position, quite different from that of concubines and their offspring after the biblical era, that royal *pīlagšim* were part of the royal household (unlike concubines in monogamous societies), as well as the hierarchy among royal wives, the treatment of their children as legitimate offspring of the king (again unlike the status of concubines’ children in postbiblical monogamous societies), and the fact that some royal *pīlagšim* could sway the king in political matters.