

2. The Great Lady

On the other hand, at the court of Judah, official rank was accorded to the *g'birah*. In ordinary speech the word means 'mistress' as opposed to servant, and corresponds to 'adôn, 'lord', the feminine of which is not used in Hebrew (2 K 5: 3; Is 24: 2; Ps 123: 2; Pr 30: 23). In 1 K 11: 19 it is applied to the Pharaoh's wife and consort, but it is never used of the wife of a king of Judah; under Asa, the *g'birah* is his grandmother Maakah (1 K 15: 13; 2 Ch 15: 16). The *g'birah* carried into captivity in Jr 29: 2 is the king's mother, according to the parallel in 2 K 24: 15. The sons of the *g'birah* mentioned in 2 K 10: 13 along with the sons of the king must be distinct from them: they are the sons of the queen-mother (and therefore the king's brothers). In Jr 13: 18 the king and the *g'birah* are Joiakin and his mother. Etymology and usage suggest that the title should be rendered as Great Lady.

This title implied a certain dignity and special powers. Bathsheba was certainly *g'birah* under Solomon; he receives her with great honour and seats her on his right hand (1 K 2: 19). The power of the Great Lady did not proceed merely from the influence of a mother over her son, as with Bathsheba; it was much more extensive, and for abusing it, Maakah was deprived by Asa of her dignity of Great Lady (1 K 15: 13). This authority of the queen-mother explains how Athaliah could so easily seize power on the death of Ochozias (2 K 11: 1f.); the queen-mother had an official position in the kingdom, and hence the Books of Kings always mention the name of the king's

mother in the introduction to each reign in Judah—except in the cases of Joram and Achaz, where no woman is named, and of Asa, where his grandmother's name takes the place of his mother's. It is possible that the Great Lady was accorded her rank on the accession of her son, which would explain the career of Hamital, wife of Josias, who was queen-mother under Joachaz, was set aside under Joiachim and Joiakin, and returned under Sedecias, the brother of Joachaz (2 K 23: 31, 36; 24: 8, 18). It is also possible that the mother became *g'birah* as soon as her son was designated heir to the throne, as is suggested by 2 Ch 11: 21-22. The story of Bathsheba does not enable us to decide this point, since Solomon's sacring took place immediately after his nomination; but it does at least prove that before this nomination Solomon's mother had not the dignity which she subsequently enjoyed (cf. 1 K 1: 15-16, 31 and 2: 13-19). Bathsheba was the first Great Lady in Israel. On the other hand it seems that the Great Lady could keep her position after her son's death: Maakah, wife of Roboam, was still *g'birah* under her grandson Asa, after the short reign of her son Abiyyam (1 K 15: 13). From the same passage we see that the *g'birah* could be dismissed by the king: Maakah had favoured the cult of Asherah.

Hittite parallels may help to elucidate this rather complicated question. The *tavannana* was the lawful queen, the mother of the heir-apparent, and played an important part in policy and religion. If she survived the king she retained the same position during the reign of her son (or sons, if two brothers succeeded to the throne); and only on her death did the dignity pass to her daughter-in-law, the wife of the reigning king. Like Maakah, she could be dismissed for a serious offence against the king or the state; but, as in Judah, this seems to have been exceptional. The queen-mother must have held a similar position in Ugarit, where several official letters are addressed to the king's mother, also called the *'adath*, which is the feminine of *'adôn*, and therefore the equivalent of *g'birah*. The Akkadian texts of Ras Shamra indicate that this queen-mother intervened in political affairs, and they also mention a Great Lady of Amurru. For Assyria the evidence is less clear, but we should remember the part played by the queens Sammuramat and Naqi'a during the reigns of their husbands and then of their sons. This tradition is preserved in the Greek legends of Semiramis and Nitokris. One may also point to the influence of Adad-guppi', the mother of Nabonidus.

There is no direct evidence of the existence of a Great Lady in the northern kingdom. In the introductions to the reigns of Israel, the name of the king's mother is never given. 2 K 10: 13 mentions a *g'birah* who can only be Jezebel, but the word is put in the mouth of the princes of Judah. The institution, moreover, presupposes a dynastic stability which was not usually found in the kingdom of Israel. But we must draw attention to a rare term, which is perhaps the Israelitic equivalent of the *g'birah* of Judah. In Ps 45: 10, the *shegal* is mentioned as standing on the right hand of the king; she is not classed with

the other women of the harem, for she is the queen consort. Now Ps 45 has been interpreted as a wedding-hymn composed for a king of Israel. It is also very tempting to restore the word *shegal* at the end of Jg 5: 30 in the Hymn of Deborah, in place of the impossible *shalal*, 'booty'. The word is parallel to Sisera, and would denote the queen or queen-mother, cf. v. 28. Once again, the Hymn of Deborah is a composition of northern Israel. The only other examples of the term in the Old Testament, Ne 2: 6 (the queen of Persia) and Dn 5: 2, 3, 23 (the Aramaic plural form: the wives of Balthazar) do not prove that the word was an official term in Judah before the Exile.