

WOMEN'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

Revised and Updated

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WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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HEBREW BIBLE/OLD TESTAMENT

GENESIS

SUSAN NIDITCH

INTRODUCTION

Contents, Composition, and Context

The group of narrative and genealogical traditions called the book of Genesis describes the origin of the cosmos and its first inhabitants and unfolds the life stories of the earliest ancestors of ancient Israel. In this way the creation of the people Israel is set within the context of the very creation of the universe itself.

To read Genesis is to immerse oneself in the worldview and values of a distant and foreign culture, of a people who believed in a deity, YHWH God, imagined as parent, river spirit, traveling man, and warrior, communicating with the ancestors through dream visions and waking revelations. To read Genesis is to encounter a people who considered the land of Canaan an eternally promised possession, a people who regularly petitioned and appeased their God with the blood sacrifice of animals and who could imagine this God demanding as sacrificial offering a mother's only son (Gen. 22) and the father's submitting to the demand.

Genesis portrays a people whose women do not appear to exercise power in the public realm but who hold considerable power in the private realm of household and children. Theirs is a different world and a different way of imagining and ordering reality from our own; yet they too love spouses and children, resent siblings, mourn the loss of kin, fear and face deprivation in the form of famine and infertility, attempt to take stock of the comprehensible and make sense of the incomprehensible features of their existence. All of these very human concerns and emotions emerge in the Israelite literature

of Genesis; but in approaching this material with special interest in passages pertaining to women and gender, one must ask, Whose stories are these?

Questions of History and Historicity

The culture of Israel was never monolithic. The history of Israel spans thousands of years and can be divided into three periods: the time before the monarchy (pre-1000 BCE); the time when kings ruled (1000 BCE–586 BCE); and postmonarchic times (586 BCE on). Given the major changes that took place in social structure over this long expanse of time, one must be careful not to generalize about "Israelite culture" or "the life of the Israelite woman" or "Israelite attitudes to women." Biblical texts reveal considerable variation in the ways Israelites lived and expressed their beliefs. Nevertheless, it is not easy to track changing Israelite attitudes via apparent differences in the texts of the Bible.

The Bible's own story provides a chronology that seems to match the historical periods sketched broadly above. In premonarchic times are the matriarchs (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah) and patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph), the exodus (the time of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam), and the age of the judges (including the warrior heroines Deborah and Jael). In monarchic times are Saul, David and Bathsheba, Solomon, the building of the great temple in Jerusalem, the eventual establishment of the northern and southern kingdoms, the so-called Josianic reform of the seventh century, and the age of classical prophecy. This period

ends with the Babylonian conquest and the destruction of the temple. The postmonarchic period includes the rebuilding of the temple, the last of the biblical prophets, and the work of Ezra and Nehemiah. Within the Bible's own chronology Genesis is clearly set in premonarchic times, but "real" history and biblical narration are not as neatly matched as they may seem at first reading. The stories now found in Genesis do not necessarily stem from premonarchic authors, nor do they necessarily contain information about the way of life of Israelites who lived before 1000 BCE.

Questions about the Genesis of Genesis

Many of the stories in Genesis are very old, perhaps as old as storytelling itself. The essential pattern of world creation in Genesis 6–9, for example, is represented in the lore of many cultures and times: from a watery flood emerge or reemerge a world and its inhabitants. Long before the existence of the people Israel, ancient Near Eastern narrators preserved several versions of a tale about the great flood with its favored human survivor(s), very much like the biblical tale of Noah. The story of Noah was no doubt a popular tale in ancient Israel, told by various tellers with their own nuances and variations long before it was first set down in writing. Nor did this writer have the last word, for the biblical tale has been transmitted, elaborated, and edited by subsequent writers until it reached the form in which we now read it. In exploring the text of Genesis one must be aware that the ancient stories were once told in a variety of ways, oral and written.

Theories about the Sources behind Genesis

Over the last hundred years, biblical scholarship has spoken of separable "sources" or "documents" out of which the whole cloth of Genesis has been woven. The sources are called J (the Yahwist, or Jahwist, source), E (the Elohist source), and P (the Priestly source). J is characterized by the use of the name YHWH for God, by a down-to-earth style, and by a theology that allows God a certain closeness to the human realm; for example, God walks in the garden (Gen. 3:8). The Elohist source calls God the more generic Elohim (Hebrew for "god"), supposedly reserving the special name YHWH until the revelation to Moses in Exodus 3; in E, God communicates more indirectly, through mediating dreams and angels. The P source employs the divine epithet

El Shaddai (often translated "God Almighty") in Genesis; God emerges in this source as an even more transcendent being. The interests of P are genealogy, ritual matters, and laws of purity. J, E, and P sources are said to be layered throughout the first four books of the Bible. J is dated by scholars to the tenth or ninth century BCE of the southern or Judahite monarchy, E to the ninth or eighth century BCE of the northern or Israelite monarchy, and P to the sixth century BCE, the exilic period. Thus Yahwist (J) tales in Genesis should be expected to reflect the worldview of a Davidic courtly writer, and so on.

This theory has been modified over the years and recently has been strongly criticized, though in some form it still reigns supreme among theories about the composition of Genesis. The often too neat, line-by-line assignments of verses and larger literary units of Genesis to J, E, and P are not convincing, though variations in style, content, literary form, and message do confirm that various authors, worldviews, and life settings lie behind Genesis. Some of these differences may point to sources of different date, while others may point to authors from different sectors of Israelite society: aristocratic versus popular authors, urban versus rural ones, men versus women. To distinguish the various authors and origins of biblical texts is a complex matter, but one especially important for a feminist enterprise asking whether the Hebrew Bible reveals something about attitudes toward women in ancient Israel and/or about their actual lives.

The Patriarchal Age

Do the stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs actually tell us about life in pre-1000-BCE Israel, even if the final form of the tales is from a later date? The tales of Genesis portray specific marriage practices; customs of inheritance and the rights of the firstborn; work roles of men and women; and attitudes toward male and female children, toward family and sexual ethics, and toward widows, barren wives, and other marginal females such as prostitutes. Can one connect such information with the considerable extrabiblical information about life in the non-Israelite ancient Near East of the second millennium BCE (e.g., from the ancient Mesopotamian cities of Mari or Nuzi), as some scholars have done, in order to reconstruct a world of early Israelite women? Can one connect the view of the workaday roles of men and women implied in God's punishing words to man and

woman in Genesis 3 with archaeological and ethnographic reconstructions of life in the pioneer highland culture of premonarchic Israel, as Carol Meyers attempts to do? Or should one assume that if the texts were written down and shaped during the tenth to sixth centuries BCE, they do not contain reliable information about the lives of women from an earlier, premonarchic period? Some scholars think that the evidence to reconstruct any history of Israel before 1250 BCE is lacking and refuse to speak of this so-called patriarchal age. Others remain confident that even though Genesis was written down in the first millennium BCE, it nevertheless does reflect the lives and attitudes of the second millennium BCE, of a people who lived by farming and herding, without kings or elaborate forms of government, whose lives and work centered on family and flocks.

Given these debates and difficulties, how should one read and understand the tales of the lives of the women of Genesis? Rather than beginning with assumptions about the historical reliability of a text and the date when it was written down, one should ask: What sort of literature is this in terms of its style, structure, content, and messages? What sort of audience is this meaningful to? What are its authors' apparent worldview and concerns, especially those pertaining to women's issues broadly defined? A range of authors and worldviews should emerge, providing a reflection of the richness and complexity of the tradition in its relationship to women.

Traditional Literature, Genesis, and Women's Tales

Much of biblical literature is traditional literature. Recurring patterns in language, imagery, plot, and theme resonate in the ancient Israelite literary tradition. In the Hebrew Scriptures there are certain ways to describe God's victories,

recurring reasons for a patriarch's initial lack of children, ways in which the long-awaited conceptions are announced, favorite plots about the success of the underdog or the escape from seemingly powerful enemies. There are ways to frame a genealogy, to compose a lament, to describe a receiving of divine revelation. When Israelite authors set about presenting a piece of the tradition, they were at home in these conventions and creatively adapted them in accordance with their own perception of aesthetics and their understanding of political and theological verity. Through time, from author to author and editor to editor, various sorts of traditional patterns recur, giving the biblical tradition a certain unity even within its great variety. In exploring the women of Genesis and issues of gender, one must pay attention to the book's traditional style. Recurrences in language and literary form also imply recurrences in essential messages and meanings; changes in form may mark varying messages. Out of these patterns emerge symbolic maps in which woman is a key feature.

Paying attention to these similarities and differences gives rise to questions: Why does the creation myth of Genesis 1, which echoes the basic plot of creation found in the Mesopotamian myth *Enuma Elish*, not depict the watery chaos as female, even though Isaiah 51:9–11 does preserve this motif? Why are so many tales of women in Genesis tales about tricksters who employ deception to improve their marginal status? Why are wives regularly found by wells? Why are the important mothers barren? Many of the tales in Genesis deal with matters of home, family, and children. These are issues typical of tales from other cultures considered by ethnographers to be women's stories. Is it possible that many of the Genesis tales were popularly told among women? Can we speak of qualities of male voice and female voice in biblical portrayals? Finally, in what ways are men and women gendered by biblical authors?

COMMENT

Creating and Ordering the World (Gen. 1–11)

Creation is not merely the initial coming into being of the universe and its life forms; it includes also the ordering and continuous

unfolding of the world. All of Genesis 1–11 is about the creation of the cosmos, including the more obvious creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2, the Eden narrative in chapter 3, the tale of fratricide in chapter 4, the flood story of chapters 6–9, the story of the tower of Babel in

chapter 11, and the genealogies in chapters 5, 10, and 11, which help to weave together Genesis 1–11 and form the transition to the stories of the mothers and fathers of Israel in Genesis 12–50.

The Creation of Woman in Genesis 1

Woman first appears in the elegant creation account of Genesis 1. Repeating frame language neatly reveals the origins and ordering of the universe with its topography, its solar system, and its rich variety of plant and animal life. God creates by the word—“God said, ‘Let there be . . . and it was so’—building day by day—“there was evening and there was morning, the xth day”—until the sixth and final day, on which God makes humankind, a mirror of the divine image itself. And of this creation “in the image of God,” it is said “male and female he created them.” Without establishing relative rank or worth of the genders, the spinner of this creation tale indicates that humankind is found in two varieties, the male and the female, and this humanity in its complementarity is a reflection of the Deity. For feminist readers of Scriptures, no more interesting and telegraphic comment exists on the nature of being human and on the nature of God. The male aspect and the female aspect implicitly are part of the first human and a reflection of the Creator.

Scholars often attribute Genesis 1 to a Priestly writer (P) because of its image of a transcendent, all-powerful deity, its almost genealogical style, and its explanation of the origin of the Sabbath. If so, this Priestly writer’s views of men and women differ from the much more male-centered Priestly writers of Leviticus, for whom a woman’s menstruation and childbearing are sources of pollution, separating her from the sacred realm. She regularly lacks the pure status necessary to participate fully in Israelite ritual life. In reading the Hebrew Scriptures as a narrative whole, including both Genesis 1:27 and Leviticus, one may receive the message that the genders were meant to be equal at the beginning.

In Genesis 1 the Hebrew term for “deep waters” (*tehom*) is related to the name of the mother goddess Tiamat in the Mesopotamian creation myth *Enuma Elish*. Tiamat, the salt waters of chaos, is killed and split like a mussel by the young god Marduk, who builds the world out of her carcass. The Israelite author who has provided the opening chapter of the Bible wants

none of the uncertainty of this battle motif. His account of creation by God’s word is as solid and inevitable as his style. If his account lacks a matriarchal goddess, it also does not present the creation of the world as dependent on her death.

The Becoming of Woman in Genesis 2–3

Written in an earthier style than Genesis 1, the tale of Genesis 2–3, with its less-than-complete outline of God’s creations (2:4b–25), its homespun reflections on marriage (2:23–24), and its God who walks in the garden (3:8) and fears humans’ potential divinity (3:22), has been more influential than Genesis 1:27 in shaping and justifying attitudes toward and the treatment of women in Western tradition.

This tale of creation has two parts: the emergence of the cosmos out of the mist of chaos and the emergence of “real life” from the ideal of paradise. Man is the first of God’s creations in Genesis 2 (2:7). His formation is from the dust of the earth (*’adamah*). He is thus Adam/Earthling. The creation of other living beings (2:18) is motivated by God’s concern that “it is not good that the man should be alone.” But none of the birds or beasts is deemed a suitable counterpart for the man (2:20). So, out of man’s own rib, God forms woman. The sayings in 2:23 and 2:24 comment positively on the closeness of the conjugal bond. Man and woman are parts of a whole, anticipating the genealogical patterning of Genesis. Men and women will unite and have children, the male children leaving to join wives and form new families. The conjugal couple is the foundation of social and cultural relationships for the writers of Genesis. Even when the world is temporarily subsumed by the renewed chaos of the flood in the tale of Noah (Gen. 6–9), social order remains afloat on the ark in the form of Noah and his wife, his sons and their wives (6:18). This generative, culture-affirming process, however, does not actually begin until Genesis 4:1, for 2:25 declares that man and woman are naked and not ashamed. That is, they are not aware of their sexual differences; their sexuality is yet to be discovered and expressed.

Jewish and Christian traditions postdating the Hebrew Bible and a long history of Western scholarship have viewed woman’s creation in Genesis 2 as secondary and derivative—evidence of her lower status. The tale explaining the departure from Eden into a real world of

work, birth, and death in Genesis 3 is taken to be an even stronger indictment of woman as the gullible, unworthy partner who let loose sin and death. Her biological function as conceiver and bearer of children is perceived as confirmation of her fall, a punishment shared by all women who come after her.

In fact, Genesis 3 has been misunderstood. Certainly, like Pandora in the comparable Greek cosmogonic tradition, the curious woman is a linchpin in the ongoing process of world ordering. She, like Lot's wife, dares to disobey a command not to use all her sensory capacities in a particular situation—to taste or to look—and this curiosity about forbidden fruit is often in Mediterranean tradition associated with the female. On the other hand, in the lore of all cultures interdictions such as Genesis 2:17 (“But of the tree . . .”) exist to be disobeyed by the tales' protagonists. That is what makes the story. Eve, as she is named in 3:20, is the protagonist, not her husband. This is an important point, as is the realization that to be the curious one, the seeker of knowledge, the tester of limits, is to be quintessentially human—to evidence traits of many of the culture-bringing heroes and heroines of Genesis (see Tribble 1978).

Reading Genesis 3

Like Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, Genesis 3 is about a movement from a fixed and unchanging world to a new, nonstatic order. Genesis 1 and 2 describe the way in which a sterile world is replaced by one teeming with life. In Genesis 3 the change is from a well-provisioned, closely controlled world lacking discernment, social roles, and sexual status to a world in which man and woman relate to each other sexually and according to social roles, a world in which they work hard and know the difference between good and evil. The world after Eden is clearly one of birth and death, whereas the garden had been an in-between world, in which no human had eaten from the tree of life but in which no one had yet given birth. In a wonderful tale about a trickster snake, a woman who believes it, and a rather passive, even comical man, biblical writers comment on the inevitability of reality as they perceived it, wistfully presenting an image of an easier, smoother life. Woman, the one who will house life within her, helps to generate this new, active, challenging life beyond Eden.

All too often readers come to Genesis weighed down by Augustine's or Milton's inter-

pretation of the story. What if one notices that the snake does not lie to the woman but speaks the truth when it says that the consequence of eating from the forbidden tree is gaining the capacity to distinguish good from evil, a god-like power that the divinity jealously guards (compare the snake's words at 3:5 with God's words at 3:22)? The snake, like the Greek giant Prometheus, who was said to have given fire to humankind, is a trickster, a character having the capacity to transform situations and overturn the status quo. The trickster has less power than the great gods but enough mischief and nerve to shake up the cosmos and alter it forever. The woman believes the snake and, in an important pun on a root meaning “to see” and “to comprehend,” the narrator says that she sees the tree is good to look at/good for making one wise (3:6).

She is no easy prey for a seducing demon, as later tradition represents her, but a conscious actor choosing knowledge. Together with the snake, she is a bringer of culture. The man, on the other hand, is utterly passive. The woman gives him the fruit, and he eats as if he were a baby (3:6). With the eating come the marks of social life and culture: knowledge of good and evil, clothing that defines and conceals, and gender roles. The woman is to be the bearer of children, the Mother of all life. The husband is to work the ground, which will now only grudgingly yield its fruits. A clear hierarchy is established: woman and her offspring over the clever snake, who is now reduced to a mere dust-eating reptile, and man over woman. The status-establishing punishments meted out to man and woman and the social roles they are assigned do reflect the author's male-oriented worldview, but no weighty accusation of “original sin” brought about by woman is found in the text. That is a later interpretation from authors with different theologies and worldviews.

What the author of Genesis does reveal is that man and woman share responsibility for the alteration of their status. The man's self-defense, like his passive act of disobedience, portrays him in a childlike manner. When accused by God of defying his order, the man says comically, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate” (3:12). Whose fault is it? The woman's? God's? And yet the woman initiates the act. It is she who first dares to eat of God's tree, to consume the fruit of the Divine, thereby becoming, as the rabbis say of human beings, like the angels

in having the capacity to discriminate and like the animals who eat, fornicate, defecate, and die. The woman herself comes to have the most earthy and the most divine of roles, conceiving, containing, and nurturing new life. She is an especially appropriate link between life in God's garden and life in the thornier world to which all of us are consigned.

“The Daughters of Men” (Gen. 6:1–4)

Women—“the daughters of men”—are also involved in another, briefer creation tale in Genesis 6:1–4 that marks the passage from ideal to reality. Here the women themselves are the fruit attracting the divine “sons of God,” members of God's entourage in ancient Israelite tradition. In this story, sexual intercourse rather than eating is the way that the border between God's realm and the realm of human beings is breached. Surely the two actions are symbolic equivalents in a pattern that leads to limits on the quality of human existence, in this case to the length of life allowed mortals (Gen. 6:3). In this brief mythological snippet, as in the fuller tale of Genesis 3, the female is integral to the passage to reality, to the onset of historical time and human culture, the days of the “heroes that were of old, warriors of renown” (6:4).

Women in the Genealogies

One of the markers of time in the creation account of Genesis 1–11 is the genealogy. Women are absent from the lists of begetters and begotten in Genesis 4:17–26; 5:1–32; and 10:1–32, with one interesting exception. In 4:19, a descendant of Cain named Lamech takes two wives, Adah and Zillah. The women are each given credit for birthing sons who found groups responsible for some aspect of human civilization (e.g., dwelling in tents, raising cattle, playing music, forging instruments of bronze and iron). By giving birth, the women further the march of human culture. One daughter is also mentioned by name: Naamah (4:22). In 4:23 Lamech addresses to his wives what appears to be a war boast about his defeat of an enemy. Why does he address this enigmatic, taunting victory cry to his wives? Does he want to impress them with his prowess? Does he wish to encourage them to compose a woman's victory song of their own for him (see Judg. 5; Exod. 15:20–21)?

Unnamed daughters are mentioned along with sons in the list of Genesis 11:10–32. Two women who are important in the genealogy

of Israel's ancestors are mentioned by name. Sarai (Sarah; see 17:15), the wife of Abram (Abraham; see 17:5), is introduced in 11:29, along with the comment that she was barren. The genealogist of chapter 11 also mentions the name of Abram's brother's wife, Milcah. Her children, and notably her granddaughter Rebekah who will be Isaac's wife, are listed in Genesis 22:20–23.

The Mothers and Fathers of Israel (Gen. 12–50)

Commentaries on Genesis 12–50 generally focus on Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, ancestral heroes of Israel. Their life stories are built from traditional elements such as the hero's unusual birth, his stormy relationship with his brothers, youthful adventures often including marriage, the constant presence of a divine helper, and the hero's aging and finally his death. Theologically, Genesis 12–50 is treated as the foundation story of the patriarchal religion of Israel. It includes important scenes of covenant making with God, altar building, divine promises of land and descendants, and tests of the patriarchs' faith.

Genesis 12–36 and 38 differ significantly from the Joseph tale in chapters 37, 39–50 in style, setting, and orientation. The former's popular, down-to-earth style contrasts with the latter's more elaborate style. The context of the former is family, flocks, and sojourning in flight from famine. The characters are socially marginal and often confront authorities via trickery and deception. Joseph, on the other hand, sold into slavery by his jealous, scheming brothers, leaves this pastoral world, eventually rising to become the leading bureaucrat of Egypt, a member of the establishment itself. He and his brothers, all sons of Israel, are later reunited in Egypt, setting the stage for the next book in the Bible, Exodus. Often ignored, the patterns of women's lives in Genesis are every bit as interesting and important as those of the men, for the women both reflect and help to create Israel. Tales in Genesis 12–15, moreover, reveal attitudes to masculinities and femininities and raise questions about gendered voices behind the narratives.

The Matriarchs (Gen. 12–36; 38)

Like the tales of Genesis 1–11, with their recurring patterns of world ordering, the tales

of the matriarchs have recurring narrative patterns typical of traditional literature. In Genesis 12–36 and 38, certain motifs mark the life history of the women at the turning points of youth, marriage, and parenthood. The women often appear by wells or springs and are often soon to become wives (Rebekah, Rachel) or mothers (Hagar); they are often barren women soon to become mothers (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel). If not barren, the women have other problems associated with sexuality (Dinah, Leah) or fertility (Tamar) that render them marginal unless or until the problem is solved. For those who are to have children, predictions about the birth and lives of their children are received in divinely sent annunciations. Finally, many of the women engage in acts of trickery or deception in order to further the careers of their sons or husbands (Sarah: 12:10–20; Rebekah: chap. 27; Rachel: 31:19, 33–35; Tamar: chap. 38). These recurring motifs or combinations of them tend to emphasize certain themes: (1) the role of the woman as wife and mother in the private rather than the public realm; (2) the frequent position of women intermediaries who link groups of men through marriage alliances; (3) the marginal status of women who are prevented from fulfilling the roles defined for women in Genesis 3 (e.g., the barren women, the raped Dinah, the abandoned Hagar, the childless widow Tamar, and the unloved Leah). On one level, much of this defining appears to be done from men's perspectives. The tales of marriage, for example, really have to do with relationships between the men, be it Abraham and his kinfolk in Mesopotamia, or Jacob and Rebekah's brother Laban, or Abraham and Pharaoh. So in Genesis 34, a tale of would-be marital relations gone awry, the central issue is less the victimization of Dinah, who had been the potential link between the sons of Hamor and the sons of Jacob, than the relationships between the men. These relationships have to do with face-saving, feuding, and vengeance, all causes of warfare in prestate, decentralized societies. It is also a male point of view that regards woman with her potent sources of "uncleanliness" (see Gen. 31:34–35) as a danger, and a male point of view that places her under man's control after eating from the tree in Genesis 3. It is logical to assume that men—male priests and a lengthy scribal tradition—are responsible for incorporating into law and custom notions of what the "proper" place of women is, namely,

to be a young virgin in the father's home or a child-producing, sexually faithful wife in her husband's. Thus, all women who do not—or who do not appear to—fulfill these roles fall between the cracks of the social structure. They are either rehabilitated by other laws preserved by men or by the male God's intervention, or they fade away.

On the other hand, the God of Genesis, with whom the important value judgment lies, is partial to marginal people of both genders. On some level that God is the god of the tricksters who use deception to deal with the power establishment, whether the establishment is the elders of one's family or non-Israelites. Although their positions are circumscribed by the men around them, Sarah, Rebekah, Tamar, Rachel, and Leah exercise great power over husbands, father-in-law, and father in situations involving the family, children, and sexuality. It is, moreover, the women who are the critical ancestors for the proper continuation of the Israelites. Isaac must come from Sarah and no other woman. Abraham's seed is not enough to guarantee his status. Similarly, Joseph must be Rachel's son. The blessing and the inheritance go to Jacob, Rebekah's favorite son, not Esau, her husband's favorite. The women's wishes and God's wishes are one in this respect. Finally, a number of the women are portrayed as active tricksters who, like Eve, alter the rules, men's rules. Would not women authors and audiences take special pleasure in Rebekah's fooling her dotty old husband or in Rachel's using men's attitudes to menstruation to deceive her father Laban, or in Tamar's more directly and daringly using her sexuality to obtain sons through Judah? Like Adam, the men in many of the women's stories of Genesis are bumbling, passive, and ineffectual. By the same token, the very effective and smooth founding hero Jacob might well be described as womanish (see Gen. 27 below), hinting at another of the ways in which femininity or a kind of female voice finds status and empowerment.

Wives at Wells and Water (Gen. 16; 24; 29). The associations in literature between fertility and water are ancient intuitive acknowledgments of our watery origins on earth and in our mothers' wombs, and of the source of life upon which we continue to depend. Four scenes involving water, women, and marriage or childbirth are found in Genesis: 16:7–14;

21:8–21 (Hagar); 24:10–27 (Rebekah); and 29:1–12 (Rachel). In the latter two scenes, men from Abraham's kin come to Mesopotamia to seek a wife from among his kin. In Genesis 24, Abraham's senior servant is sent to seek a wife for Abraham's son Isaac. In Genesis 29:1–12, Jacob seeks a wife for himself from his mother's family (see 24:15) after fleeing from the brother whose birthright he has stolen (see below on Rebekah and Gen. 27). The man meets the wife-to-be at the watering hole, is welcomed by her family, and negotiates terms for the marriage. In each case wives are found by wells, but there are important differences. The appearance of Rebekah and her hospitable words are a sign requested of God by the emissary so that he might recognize the right wife for Abraham's son. God's control is certain and appears in the repetitious language of traditional literature. Rebekah herself is described as a beautiful, untouched young woman quick to serve and nurture and quick to agree to fulfilling her role in the divine plan (24:58). In a thematic echo of Genesis 2:24, Isaac loves her as soon as he sees her, for she is said to be an emotional replacement for his mother, Sarah, who had died (24:67). In Genesis 29:1–12, Jacob meets the woman, his cousin Rachel, at the well and shows his physical strength by rolling the heavy stone from the well and watering his uncle Laban's flock (cf. Exod. 2:15–17). Jacob weeps when he greets Rachel, in ritualized behavior typical of kinship reunions in tribal cultures. The woman is acquired in exchange for seven years' work, but her elder and less attractive sister Leah is substituted on the wedding night by their father, Laban, himself a trickster. Jacob ends up with two wives, indentured to his father-in-law for seven more years. Jacob's tale of acquiring a wife is the more humorous of the two, as trickster confronts trickster. In both accounts, however, the emphasis on marriage within the kinship group is very strong. The central issue is relationships between male kin, mediated by the women, who are in effect items of exchange, extremely valuable commodities, as precious as the water with which they are associated, but commodities nevertheless.

From a literary perspective, the themes of marriage within the group and of woman as mediator are emphasized, issues that were important to the stories' authors and audiences. Can more be learned, however, from these scenes about real-life social behavior in ancient Israel?

It has been suggested that Rebekah's interaction with her family in 24:57–58 indicates that the Israelite woman was asked her permission before marriage agreements were concluded. The story indicates, however, that Rebekah is merely agreeing to leave quickly rather than spend ten days with her family (24:55). No formal law involving the woman's permission appears to be involved here. The mention of a ten-day good-bye period is a reminder that the young woman's family and she might never see one another again. Provision of bride-price certainly seems customary in 24:53 and in 29:18, as it is in countless cultures. Was it customary, as Laban claims in his defense of the substitution of Leah for Rachel, to marry off the elder daughter before the younger, or is he, as a trickster, good at finding excuses for acts of deception? It has also been suggested that the tale of Jacob gives evidence of matrilineal customs among Israel's ancestors, that is, living with the wife's family. Jacob's living in Laban's household is, however, considered irregular by the tradition as we now have it. Things are put right only when he returns to Israel. What does seem clear from the accounts about Rebekah and Rachel is that marriage within the group is an important means of safeguarding group identity and that cross-cousin marriage, a means of maintaining in-group marriage relations in many traditional cultures, may well have been an actual custom in some period in ancient Israel.

Hagar: Mothering a Hero (Gen. 16; 21).

The story of Hagar leads to a wider discussion of the major themes of this study: the barrenness of the patriarch's wives, the annunciation scenes, and the wives' positions as mother of the patriarch of the next generation. Hagar's status is contingent on that of her mistress, Sarah, the wife of Abraham. Sarah bears no children and gives Hagar, her Egyptian maid, to Abraham as a wife (16:3), hoping she will become a surrogate mother for Sarah (16:2). The custom of having children through another woman (note the expression "that she may bear upon my knees," 30:3) is found also in the tale of barren Rachel. It is probably safe to assume that surrogate motherhood was an actual custom in the ancient Near East and would have been eminently possible in a world in which slavery was practiced and persons' sexual services could be donated by their masters or mistresses. Surrogate motherhood allowed a barren woman

to regularize her status in a world in which children were a woman's status and in which childlessness was regarded as a virtual sign of divine disfavor (see 16:2; 30:1–2; and below also on Gen. 38). Childless wives were humiliated and taunted by co-wives (Gen. 16:4). The tension in the scene between Jacob and Rachel in 30:1–2 is fraught with desperate realism, as she cries, "Give me children, or I shall die!" And he responds bitterly, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" It is always the woman in this culture who is perceived as the cause of infertility—so Sarah, so Rebekah, so Rachel.

By the same token, virtually no hero worth his salt in Genesis is born under circumstances that are ordinary for his mother. It is the unusual and often initially infertile women who have special births. It is their sons who count in the ongoing tradition. These women mother nations and receive special communications about the child to be born. They often engineer the births, thereby showing considerable power in matters related to fertility and sexuality. Hagar is not a barren woman, but a victim sensing a new power on conceiving Abraham's child. She now finds her mistress "to be of less worth [literally, "lighter-weight"] in her eyes" (16:4). Sarah knows she has lost status and complains to her husband, who tells her that the maid is hers to do with as she wishes, for this is a woman's world of competition concerning children.

It is in this light that we understand the scene involving Jacob and Leah in 30:14–16. One of the sons of Leah, the fertile wife of trickery whom Jacob had never loved, finds some mandrakes, plants that were believed to have the capacity to produce fertility. Rachel, desperate for children, begs Leah for the plants, and she grudgingly agrees, in exchange for a night with their husband Jacob. Upon returning from the fields, Jacob is told by Leah that he is with her that night, having been "hired" with her son's mandrakes. Without a comment he goes to her. He obeys in this world of women, as Abraham defers to Sarah in the matter of Hagar.

Sarah afflicts Hagar, who flees to the wilderness. There by a spring of water God appears to her in the first of the annunciation scenes in Genesis. She is told about the son to be born and, like Abraham, is promised a multitude of descendants and declares that she has seen God. After the son Ishmael ("God will hear") is born, Abraham and Sarah are visited by three

men, manifestations of God, who announce that a son will be born to them. Sarah has the nerve to laugh at the unlikely news (18:12), for she and her husband are old and past childbearing. In these scenes the women see God and confront God; they demand and receive some answers. Similarly, when Rebekah, who finally becomes pregnant after her husband petitions God, feels the children moving around violently (literally, "crushing one another") within her, she inquires of God and is told about the feuding twins, Jacob and Esau. She is made the keeper of the information that the elder, Esau, will serve Jacob, the younger, and she actively sets out to fulfill God's prediction (25:21–23).

Hagar receives a second prediction from God about her son Ishmael in a setting of wilderness and water. Sarah sees Ishmael playing with Isaac (21:9) and demands that Abraham banish Hagar and her son. "The son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac" (21:10). Her words shiver with contempt for the upstarts, the upstarts that she herself had created. Abraham greatly disapproves, for his son Ishmael's sake, but again the voice of Sarah, the matriarch, and the voice of God are one. Abraham's wishes in the matter of inheritance are unimportant and misguided, as Isaac's wishes will be once he has sons.

This passage is a difficult one in biblical ethics. Abraham cares not at all about the maid he has bedded, and Sarah is contemptuous of mother and child and would expose them to death. The author works hard to rationalize and justify the emotions and actions of Abraham and Sarah (21:12–13). Yet while reading this story, one has the distinct feeling it is being told from Hagar and Ishmael's point of view. One is moved by the portrait of the mother who places the child apart because she cannot bear to watch him die; the weeping mother (21:16) and the divinely protected boy ultimately rescued by God and promised a great future; the blessed child and mother, for whom God opens a well of water in the wilderness so that they might drink and live.

The motif of the exposed, endangered, and delivered child is as common in the stories of great heroes as that of their mothers' unusual, difficult conceptions. Compare Moses' origins (Exod. 2:1–10) and the tale of the binding of Isaac (Gen. 22), anticipated and paralleled by the child Ishmael's experience. The motif occurs also in Greek narratives about Oedipus and about the Persian king Cyrus. Embedded

in the Israelite tale of origins is thus another related people's story of its hero's youth, and on some level Abraham and Sarah are its necessary villains. God is the god of those deserted in the wilderness, of those on the fringes, who are usually in the Hebrew Scriptures not Ishmaelites but Israelites, whose tales are those of the tricksters to follow.

Tricksters, Israelites, and Women and Gender

One of the biblical authors' favorite narrative patterns is that of the trickster. Israelites tend to portray their ancestors, and thereby to imagine themselves, as underdogs, as people outside the establishment who achieve success in roundabout, irregular ways. One of the ways marginals confront those in power and achieve their goals is through deception or trickery. The improvement in their status may be only temporary, for to be a trickster is to be of unstable status, to be involved in transformation and change. In Genesis, tricksters are found among Israelites sojourning in foreign lands, among younger sons who would inherit, and among women.

The Wife/Sister Tales (Gen. 12:10–20; 20:1–18; 26:1–17). Three times in Genesis, when the patriarch and his wife are “sojourning”—traveling as resident aliens—in a foreign land, the ruler of that country is told that the wife is a sister of the patriarch. In two versions he takes her to be his own woman, and each time the couple is eventually found out. Despite their similarities, the three stories possess quite different nuances and voices. It is assumed in all three versions that a brother has more power to exchange his sister than a husband his wife. The patriarchs are portrayed as assuming that the foreigners would not hesitate to kill a husband in order to get a woman, but that they would engage in normal marital exchanges with a brother. The story that makes the most sense in a crass, male-centered way is the version in 12:10–20, where it is clear that Abram has more to gain as the brother of an unattached, protected woman than as the husband of a “used” one.

In Genesis 12:10–20, Sarai and Abram are cotricksters. Abram asks Sarai to participate with him in the deception that she is his sister, praising her beauty and using coaxing language (12:13 begins “Please say you are . . .”; my trans.). She is actually taken as wife by the

dupe, Pharaoh, who showers wealth on the supposed brother-in-law. God, who has other plans, interrupts the trickery with a plague, and Pharaoh, now alerted, dismisses the con artists, who nevertheless leave with their new-found goods intact. This is no woman-affirming tale. Sarai is an exchange item to be traded for wealth. She is shown as accepting this role, as are all the women in Genesis. She and Abram play out their roles in a particular social structure, but do so as marginals. Facing famine in their own land, they flee to Egypt, where they have insecure status. There they use deception to improve their situation at the expense of those who have authority over them.

In Genesis 20 and 26 the gender roles are as clearly marked. These tales are again about underdogs but not necessarily about tricksters. In the version in chapter 20 the author apparently worries about the ethics of the situation. He reveals that Sarah is Abraham's half sister. As in some ancient Near Eastern dynasties, marriage between half siblings is not taboo. The deception is not really a deception after all. Authority is not duped but respected, for the ruler, Abimelech, never actually has relations with Sarah and is portrayed as morally outraged at the thought of taking another man's wife. Sarah's role is more sedate in this version, as perhaps befits a more aristocratic but still male-oriented tale. In Genesis 26, the role of the wife Rebekah is even more circumscribed. Isaac, out of fear that the ruler will take Rebekah and kill him, says without consulting her that Rebekah is his sister. But before anything happens, Abimelech observes them “sporting” as man and wife and forgoes any interest in the woman. The three stories differ in their concern for piety and propriety. In Genesis 26, God tightly controls the action and protects the patriarch and his wife so that a good story never develops. Neither Isaac nor Rebekah plays an interesting role. In Genesis 20, a morally upright patriarch and equally blameless ruler relate on a somewhat more equal footing, the woman being a passive character. Only Genesis 12 reveals earthy tricksters who use the woman's sexuality as a resource to dupe a monarch. It belongs, in this way, to a fund of comparable male-centered folk literature.

Rebekah the Trickster (Gen. 27). In Genesis 27, the woman herself is the trickster who formulates the plan and succeeds, moving the men around her like chess pieces. Lest the

reader think that here one finally encounters a more liberated woman, beware that again success is gained through the symbolic counterpart of sex—food. Moreover, the status in question is not that of the woman but of her son. Nevertheless, within the confines and assumptions of her male-dominated world, Rebekah is very good at what she does. Indeed, she determines and directs the course of the clan and in doing so is the one who knows and fulfills what God wants.

Genesis 27 begins with a father's intimate words to his elder and favorite son. Isaac, now blind and elderly, tells Esau that he may die at any time. He asks Esau, the hunter, to catch game and make him the food he loves that he may bless him before his death. Someone has overheard the father's request and his promise. Rebekah, the wife and mother, who has received special information from God that her younger son Jacob, and not Esau, is meant to receive the eldest's rights and blessing, prepares to actualize that revelation. The theological message gains power from the inevitable pattern of the traditional tale. God's choice, like love itself, is often serendipitous and inscrutable. The youngest son in folktales inherits even though the patterns of custom and social structure would have it otherwise. Why, as in the case of Sarah and Isaac, is it the woman who knows he is the chosen one? And why are the husbands and fathers left out of the inner circle in the matter of their children? Why are they passive or blind—literally as well as figuratively?

One explanation is that children have to do with the private realm of home and hearth, woman's world. Rebekah's role as Jacob's mother is strongly emphasized by repetitions in language in 27:6, 8, 11, 13, 14. It is equally true, as in the creation literature, that women are sources of culture. Here they become the means by which a particular Israelite tradition is established and continued, not merely by giving birth but, in the case of Rebekah, by furthering the career of one of her sons, who does indeed become Israel. From a feminist perspective, one might take pleasure in the fact that Rebekah is so important and in the realization that God's preference for underdogs here extends to women and to the man who is more his mother's son than his father's.

Rebekah thoroughly controls the action in Genesis 27. After overhearing her husband's words to Esau, she repeats them to Jacob and instructs him very much like the wisdom figure

of Proverbs, "Now therefore, my son, obey my word as I command you" (27:8; cf. Prov. 8:32). She tells Jacob to bring her kids from the flock so she can prepare delicacies for Isaac. Jacob is to bring them to Isaac so he can eat and bless his son. The repetitious language of bringing, eating food, and blessing is economical in the traditional literary style. The repeated words or phrases are used to emphasize key themes. Through deception and disguise, Rebekah and Jacob will be Isaac's providers, so that Jacob obtains from Isaac the reciprocal blessing of fullness, fertility, and security (27:27–29).

Jacob hesitates, but not out of ethical compunction, for he is as good a trickster as his mother. Had he not earlier tricked Esau to sell his birthright for a bowl of red food (25:29–34)? He hesitates out of fear that he might be found out and receive a curse at Isaac's hands rather than a blessing. If the old man should touch him, Jacob's smoothness would give him away (27:11). Rebekah boldly offers to take the curse upon herself should things go awry, for curses are real, as are blessings. They can be stolen or transferred. His mother prepares a disguise for Jacob, using Esau's clothes, which smell of the fields, and the woolly skin of the kids to cover his smooth hands and neck (27:15–16). The trickery works and Jacob receives his father's blessing. Finally Rebekah, again alert to the plans of all the men in her household, engineers Jacob's safe passage away from the vengeance of Esau (27:41–28:5).

Rebekah's wisdom is a wisdom of women that involves listening closely (recall Sarah in 18:10) and working behind the scenes to accomplish goals. It is a vicarious power that achieves success for oneself through the success of male children, a power symbolically grounded in the preparation and serving of food. It involves as well a willingness to sacrifice oneself ("Let your curse be on me," 27:13) if necessary for the sake of the son. Such is woman's power in a man's world, and it is not the sort of empowerment to which most modern women aspire. It is the power of those not in authority. The woman in ancient Israelite literature who would succeed almost must be a trickster, must follow the path typical of the marginalized. Yet so clever is this trickster, so strong and sure, so completely superior in wisdom to the men around her, that she seems to be the creation of a woman storyteller, one who is part of a male-centered world and is not in open rebellion against it, but

who nevertheless subverts its rules indirectly by making Rebekah a trickster heroine, for this is also a woman's power in a man's world, a power of mockery, humor, and deception. One might even go further and suggest that the biblical writer grapples with masculinities and femininities and reveals in the tales of Rebecca, Isaac, Jacob and Esau a distinct preference for the archetypally feminine.

“My Brother Esau Is a Hairy Man and I Am a Smooth Man.” The ancestor hero of Israel, Jacob, father of the Israelites, is smooth, whereas the founding father of the neighboring, related, Semitic-speaking people, the Edomites, is hairy. Particular cultural messages are encoded in such images. Esau emerges first from the womb, and his hair is an immediate issue: And “emerge did the first red/all of him like a garment of hair” (Gen. 25:25, my trans.). The concept of Esau's chronological primacy is critical as are images of “redness” and “hair.” To be the firstborn within the social structure of a patrilineal society implies inheriting the father's status, lands, and clan leadership. This implicit leadership is accompanied by an appearance of ruddiness. The term for “red” is related to the term for the earth, a ruddy substance. Redness thus suggests earthiness, fecundity, and humanity. It is positive for a young man to be called ruddy, as is the young hero David.

When we add to these considerations the generally positive views of having lots of hair in the tales of the Hebrew Bible—for example, Absalom's pride in his hair and others' initial impression of him, and especially the heroic, manly dimensions implied by tales of Samson and other hairy men such as Elijah—we must conclude that at the outset Esau looks like a promising patriarch. This view is reinforced by the description of Jacob's birth and the way the boys are as they grow up. Jacob emerges grasping the heel of his younger brother; he is second born. The older brother grows to be “a man knowledgeable in the hunt, a man of the open spaces” (25:27, my trans.). Imagery of nature, skill, and manly endeavors dominate. Jacob grows up to be what the Hebrew calls *'ish tam*, one who dwells in tents. The term *tam* comes from a root meaning “perfect” or “complete” and has been translated with a range of adjectives including “well-behaved,” “quiet,” and “upright/honest.” We might suggest “acculturated” or “domesticated.” Instead of hunting,

Jacob is pictured at the homestead making stew. The he-man Esau returns from the wilds hungry. Bigger than life, speaking in the language of heroic exaggeration, he declares he will die without food, and the younger brother sells him stew in exchange for the elder's birthright, a deal that the elder certainly does not take seriously. The serious, grasping younger brother does.

Esau is Isaac's son. The storyteller declares that the father loves him because he provides him with game to eat (25:28). Like son, like father. He likes his food, his wild caught food, and thinks in terms of immediate bodily rewards. He is a man of appetites, even when old and blind. Jacob, however, is his mother's favorite (25:28). Jacob is “her son” (27:6, 17), whereas Esau is Isaac's son (27:5). “Isaac loved Esau because he was food in his mouth, but Rebekah loved Jacob” (25:28, my trans.). It is the mother who loves her favorite boy, she who masterminds the plan whereby the younger takes Esau's blessing, a significant act of trickery in a world in which blessings and curses have the power to bring about what they predict. Mother and son are tricksters and underdogs, the woman and the second-born, dare we say effeminate, son, who use deception and roundabout means to further their goals. The son is ambitious; both he and his mother think of the future rather than of near-term gain; they are wily. And Jacob, the trickster, the younger, his mother's son, the domesticated man, is “a smooth man” who needs to be disguised in animal skins to pass as his brother. It is all about hair. Hair is identity or assumed identity, animal-like, thick, smelling of the fields. Strong contrasts in gender and gender bending are created by the imagery of hair, and all kinds of interesting stereotypes are at play.

The manly son is hairy, of the wild, makes food from the hunt, and is loved by his father. The second son is smooth, soft, lives in tents, cooks, and is beloved of his mother. He and she plan clever tricks together in secret, while the father and son interact in a direct, up-front way. And yet, it is not the manly, firstborn who succeeds his father in this patrilineal and patriarchal world. In the tradition, the smooth son, Jacob/Israel, is father of the people Israel; the Edomites, sons of Esau, the manly elder son, are relegated to lower status. The biblical writer is rooting for Jacob, not Esau, for he describes a verbal theophany in which the Deity reveals to Rebekah that Jacob is his choice (25:23).

The tales of Jacob and Esau partake of a particular biblical symbol system that associates manliness with hair. That the smooth, more effeminate hero is the one who obtains the status and the power implies the influence of a female voice, whether produced by a woman or assumed by a man. The empowerment of smooth Jacob is an empowerment of women, albeit within the contours of an androcentric world. No woman warrior breaks free, no amazon overthrows the patriarchal system. Within that system, however, women and their surrogates succeed in behind-the-scenes ways through deception and trickery. Such stories portraying a loss of power to those who really hold the power in actual everyday life would certainly amuse women, as all such stories amuse and psychologically liberate those without the power.

In its own way, Genesis 25–27 uses the equation between hair and identity quite subversively. Even if such stories and such a use of symbols may be rooted in women's stories and have to do with gender, something bigger is going on, for these stories are now part of the history of the people Israel, and generations of male copyists, preservers, and composers saw them as fundamental expressions of Israelite origins and self-definition. The writers of the Hebrew Bible, in various ways, portray the success of the disempowered, who are aided by their ever present divine ally, the all-powerful YHWH. God loves the weak because their success is testimony to the realization that all power comes from him. Who is weaker than women in the views of androcentric writers? So Israel becomes the female in a relationship with her protector God. The disempowered use deception to improve their lot throughout Genesis.

Rachel: Stealing Laban's Teraphim (Gen. 31:19, 30–35). In an interesting scene leading up to the departure of Jacob and his household from Laban's land (31:4–16), Jacob speaks to the feuding wives/sisters. He reviews all that has happened to them, tells of a vision he had promising him much of Laban's flocks, and of God's message that the time had come to return to his own land. The women, Rachel and Leah, answer as one, making clear that their allegiance is to their husband and not to their father. They say they are thought of as "stranger women" by their father, who has "sold" them and proceeded to "eat up" all their money.

The language of 31:15 is very strong. Though men are said to acquire wives with the verb that often means "to buy," nowhere else in the Hebrew Scriptures is a proper marriage described as a father's selling (*makar*) his daughters. In the closely related languages of Aramaic and Syriac, *mekar* means "to buy" and is used for "to marry." In rabbinic texts *moker* is a bride-price, but in the Hebrew Scriptures one only sells humans into slavery (e.g., Gen. 37:27, 28, 36; 45:4, 5, about the selling of Joseph; Exod. 21:7–8, laws about selling one's daughter into slavery). Thus, bitterly and poignantly, the daughters of Laban describe themselves in their relationship to their father as exploited and dispossessed slaves, treated as foreign women unrelated to him. The author of this text assumes that women are economic objects, but implies that at least a man's own daughters should be treated as more than property. The sisters' complaint is a remarkably critical statement by women about their treatment and status. Although they do not directly condemn the whole system of which Laban is a part, they state that their rights have not been upheld, even within the requirements of that exploitative system. Indirectly they call attention to a world in which people are bought and sold.

Playing the role of mother-wife whose voice is synonymous with the voice of God, the women encourage Jacob to go. It is only at this point that the wives have been fully exchanged from father to husband and that the sisters themselves set aside their own feud to unify with their husband and children as one family. At this point they depart for the husband's homeland, and at this point of transition Rachel plays the trickster. She steals her father's *teraphim* while he is off shearing his sheep. Scholars have long debated what these objects were. NRSV translates "household gods," implying that they are minor, personal deities represented in statuettes that Rachel might easily carry and conceal. Some have suggested that the *teraphim* are representations of ancestors, testifying to some sort of ancestor worship among the Israelites. In any event, the role of these objects in the story provides some insight, however murky, into aspects of Israelite popular religion.

Laban chases after Jacob and his household, seeming more upset about the *teraphim* than anything else (31:30). The story receives added tension from Jacob's declaration that anyone with whom the gods are found shall not live

(31:32). Jacob emerges as a full-fledged patriarch having the power of life and death over members of his household.

Laban searches in Jacob's tent, in Leah's, and in the two maidservants' but finds nothing. Finally he comes to Rachel's tent. Rachel has hidden the *teraphim* in the camel saddle and sits on them. She says to Laban, "Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me," that is, "I am in a menstruous condition" (31:35). Laban does not throw her off the saddle. Is this in gentlemanly deference? This interpretation seems inconsistent with the larger portrayal of Laban. He does not discover the *teraphim*. Is this because in such stories those being tricked have to be tricked—at least for a while? He does not pursue the matter more carefully. Is this because he fears the potent and visceral power issuing forth from the unclean woman, whose capacity to house life links her with the sacred, whose monthly bleeding sets her apart from what is ordinary and normal in a male world, that is, from what is physiologically male? (See Lev. 15:19–24.)

If uncleanness is the reason why Laban avoids examining the area close to Rachel, rather than respect for her feigned discomfort, then it provides an instance of a female trickster's employing woman's physical source of femininity, the dangerous and polluting power of menstruation, to deter her father from discovering her theft. Laban's paternal and therefore male authority—an authority related to his ownership of his own household gods—is undermined by his female offspring's clever exploitation of that which makes her most markedly female. Covert woman's power in this one brief scene dominates man's overt authority.

Manning Up Jacob: The Scene at Jabbok (Gen. 32:25–32). In contrast to the trickster tales explored above, the scene at the River Jabbok is dominated by a male voice. Much has been written about this scene in which Jacob wrestles with "a man" who turns out to be a mysterious and unnamed manifestation of the Divine. Scholars have explored its psychoanalytical dimensions and the ways in which it provides a transformation of the hero Jacob, a rite of passage whereby he becomes Israel, returns to the land, and reconciles with his brother Esau. Some have interpreted this scene of painful transformation as recompense or necessary penance for Jacob's having cheated his brother.

It is above all a manly and heroic scene. Jacob fights with beings, divine and human, and has prevailed (32:28). Could this manly passage, in fact, compensate for the all-too-smooth and effeminate trickster, the son of his mother? Victory is described in the male voice as a matter of physical combat, wounding, and respect between the two male combatants who recognize one another's power in direct physical terms. Comparisons might be drawn with the way in which relationships are established between heroes such as Gilgamesh and Enkidu, who emerge from their one-on-one combat as beloved brothers and constant companions.

Trickery as Vengeance in Men's Literature (Gen. 34). Genesis 34 is a tale of trickery involving female sexuality. Dinah, daughter of Leah and Jacob, is raped by Shechem, the son of Hamor. The question of status that is addressed through trickery is not *her* status, however, but that of her brothers, whose rightful territory—that is, one of their women—has been breached by an outsider. The narrative not only is about women's status and rape but also deals with the relation between generations and with questions of marriage outside the kinship group.

The rape occurs when Dinah goes out to visit the women of the land. A strong impression is conveyed of insider versus outsider, us versus them. Within one's family is safety; among the people of the land lies danger. The Hebrew word for rape is from a root meaning "to be bowed down, afflicted." So the Israelites' oppression in Egypt is described. Yet the assumption in 34:3 is that such affliction is not incompatible with love. Verse 3 says that Shechem's soul is drawn to Dinah, that he loves her and speaks tenderly to her. He asks his father, Hamor, to obtain her for him as a wife.

One of the most striking aspects of the narrative is the degree to which Dinah is absent and present. She is, on the one hand, central to the action, the focus of Shechem's desire, the object of negotiations between Jacob and Hamor, the reason for her brothers' trickery, and the cause of tension between Jacob and his sons. On the other hand, she has no dialogue, no voice. How does she react to Shechem's speaking "tenderly," or to Jacob and Hamor's arrangements for her marriage to the rapist? What, for that matter, happens to her at the end of the story? She seems to fade out after her brothers retrieve her (34:26).

Does a thread in this tale, as in the story of the Benjaminites in Judges 21, condone wife stealing as one way in which new peoples are created? Jacob does not condemn the whole affair but “keeps silent” (34:5) and prepares to do business with Hamor. Two of Dinah’s brothers, Simeon and Levi, however, consider Shechem’s rape of Dinah a shocking outrage. How dare he take the daughter of Jacob without permission! And what of their feelings for Dinah, or the narrator’s? She is described as having been made unclean (34:5, 27). Like a prostitute, she has become a person of outsider status, unfit to be a bride. The brothers describe Shechem as having treated their sister like a harlot and condemn him and his kin to death. Once raped, however, Dinah is so consigned to the background of the story that the issue that emerges is less her status as a sufferer than the status of the men who control her sexuality. Shechem has raped Dinah, but in the point of view of the narrator, by doing so he shows lack of respect for the persons of Jacob and the brothers, lack of respect for the proper way of establishing kinship relations. Hamor attempts to mend matters after the fact with promises of trade (34:21) and proper marriage relations. Simeon and Levi reject his offer but not directly. They are, after all, sojourners in what is still the land of the Canaanites, God’s promises for the future notwithstanding. Their position is a precarious one, as Jacob himself indicates (34:30), and so they take their vengeance through trickery.

In contrast to Genesis 31:30–35 and Genesis 38, the trickster is not the wronged woman. In contrast to Genesis 27, the point of view is clearly male. Genesis 34, not unlike the tale of Samson and the Timnites in Judges 14–15, is about a feud between two groups of men over ownership of one group’s woman. Whereas Jacob is willing to make accommodation with the Canaanites for the sake of peace and to gain, in exchange for Dinah, permission to stay in the land and trade there, the brothers, more hotheaded and concerned about matters of face than the old man, prepare a deception using Dinah’s sexuality as bait. They lie to Hamor, stating that if he and all males among his people will circumcise themselves, then they will let Shechem have Dinah and engage in further exchanges with them. Hamor agrees, and while his warriors are incapacitated, uncomfortable from the surgery, Jacob’s sons attack. They kill all the men, “slaying them with the sword,”

taking all the enemies’ possessions, their children, and their wives as booty. It is an act that evens the score but also serves as a reminder that wife stealing and rape were regularly associated with war in ancient Israel, even when the reason for war had nothing to do with ownership of the women.

Genesis 34 shares with the other trickster tales about women the pattern of a problem in status, deception to improve status, and success of the plan. The rape lowers Dinah’s status but also that of her father and brothers, and it is their status that most occupies the author. Dinah herself does not engineer a deception that will restore her status; rather, she becomes a motif in the artful deception by her brothers. Their status is raised in turn by the success of their plan and the theft of other women, while Dinah’s lowered status remains. Genesis 34 confirms that tales in which women are important to the action are most often about relations between men, at least in narratives as strongly marked by the male voice as this one. Men are the protagonists of the trickster pattern; the woman Dinah serves as an occasion for their contest, as the wives and daughters of Hamor mark its closure. The women are thus on the turning points and borders of narrative action in this tale, echoing the patterns of actual women’s economic and socio-structural roles in all traditional cultures, as those who go between the men of marrying groups and between generations of men within their own families.

Tamar: Trickster Would-be Mother (Gen. 38). Genesis 38 begins as a story of Judah, who is left in the land of Canaan during Joseph’s ordeal in Egypt. In the Joseph narrative, Judah is one of the villain brothers. He does not actually want to kill the boy Joseph but suggests he be sold to a passing band of Ishmaelites (37:26–27). Of course, being sold into slavery is not unlike a death sentence. At the very least, Judah is subjecting Joseph to social death, separating him from kin and culture and from his place as favorite of Jacob, son of the beloved Rachel, who would surely inherit. Judah wishes to keep his own hands free from blood, but is portrayed as guilty by proxy. Some scholars have suggested that the tale in Genesis 38 balances the misdeed to Joseph. As Joseph was taken in ambush, so Judah is taken by deception and forced to do his duty by Tamar. The larger stories of Jacob and Joseph are structured along such patterns

of trickery and countertrickery, misdeed, and vengeance.

The opening section of Genesis 38 tells of Judah's marriage to Shua's daughter and of the birth of his three sons (Er, Onan, and Shelah) in the genealogical orientation typical of family foundation narratives. Then, as in tales of Abraham's sons and Isaac's, we are told of marriage arrangements made for the eldest son Er. In one verse (38:6) this brief account introduces Er's wife Tamar, the heroine of the story.

The genealogical orientation continues in 38:7 but with a twist. Er is a wicked man and is slain by God, leaving no offspring. Judah tells his middle son Onan to go in to Tamar ("go in" being a biblical euphemism for sexual intercourse) to "perform the duty of a brother-in-law." As discussed in Deuteronomy 25:5–10, the brother of a deceased man who has died without leaving children is to marry the widow. The children born from such a union are to be considered the dead brother's children and thereby "perpetuate his brother's name in Israel." On the one hand, this law might be interpreted as a male-preserving, male-protecting law, and Tamar's actions in 38:13–19 would be a wife's act of devotion to her dead spouse. The man's reproductive powers extend in this way even beyond the grave. In a symbol system like that of ancient Israel, without belief in bodily resurrection, offspring are one's afterlife. In a world in which the souls of the dead are confined to a dismal place much like Hades, called Sheol, it is especially important to have one's name preserved among the living. Within the confines of this male-centered world, however, the law of the levirate (brother-in-law) is also important to the widow herself. Under her father's protection and control as a virgin, she is, like Rebekah, transferred to the care and keeping of her husband and his family. Once married into her husband's family, she is to be a faithful and fruitful wife, providing children, especially sons. The barren wife is an anomaly, for she is no longer a virgin in her father's home, but she does not produce children in her husband's. Even more anomalous is the young childless widow who has no hope of becoming a fruitful member of her husband's clan once the husband is dead. Indeed, she has altogether lost her tie with that clan. Yet she, like the barren wife, no longer belongs in her father's household. The law of the levirate suits a male-centered symbol system in that it neatens up that which has

become anomalous according to the categories of that system. But the law must have also saved young childless widows from economic deprivation and from a sort of social wilderness, no longer under father, but having no husband or son to secure their place in the patriarchal clan.

Onan takes Tamar as his wife, but instead of helping her to conceive Er's children, he practices a primitive form of birth control and spills his semen on the ground. Onan's refusal to help create another man's children, to become a surrogate father for the dead brother, can be explained in economic terms. Onan might prefer to divide his inheritance with the one remaining brother than to divide it among Er's descendants, his own, and Shelah's. God, whose voice and opinion are also the author's, condemns this selfishness and kills Onan. God's displeasure with Onan is not to be interpreted as an author's condemnation of birth control, but as a condemnation of Onan's refusal to raise up children in his brother's name and in the process to regularize Tamar's place in the social structure.

Judah's next step should be to wed Tamar to his youngest son Shelah, but he hesitates, fearing that Shelah will die also (38:11). Perhaps Judah fears Tamar as a witch of sorts who kills her lovers or as the lover of a demon who will not share her with any human man (cf. the book of Tobit). He puts Tamar off, telling her to return to her father's home until Shelah grows up, but as 38:11 indicates, Judah has no intention of giving the woman to his only remaining son. Tamar returns to her father's house, neither a virgin nor a wife nor a mother. She is on the fringes of the Israelite social structure, for nowhere does she properly belong. Tamar, the person of uncertain status, is thus the perfect candidate to become a trickster. Through deception she is able to confront those with the power to improve her status and to gain what she desires.

Tamar hears that Judah, whose wife has recently died, has gone to Timnah to shear his sheep (38:12–13). Tamar takes off her widow's clothing and assumes the disguise of a prostitute. Veiled, she waits for Judah at the entrance to Enaim. This trickster's disguise is an excellent symbolization of her status. As she is at a geographic border, so she is at a transition point in the course of her life. She is dressed as a prostitute, a woman whose sexual role is neither virgin nor wife. So is the real Tamar, though in a different way. Deception through sexual allure

is a favorite motif in traditional trickster tales. As in Genesis 12, the attractive woman is not who she appears to be.

Judah sees her, thinks she is a prostitute, and asks her for sex (38:15–16). She demands to know what he will pay her, playing her role beautifully (38:16), and finally takes as a pledge his signet seal, the cord from which the seal hung, and his staff, which was probably marked with his seal. He promises to exchange a kid for them later as payment. As in the case of Laban's gods, Judah's possessions are a sign of his identity, his authority, and his self. Like a signet ring, the seal bore in relief the man's sign and would be used to make impressions on objects or documents to indicate ownership or origin. Only a man would carry a staff, whether for support or defense. Tamar thus takes symbols of the very personhood of Judah.

He has intercourse with her and she conceives (38:18). She resumes her widow's garb, and when Judah sends his friend to exchange the kid for his things, the prostitute has disappeared. He tells his sidekick to let the matter drop "lest we become objects of contempt," having been fooled by the prostitute. Little does he realize how much the fool he has been.

When it is discovered that Tamar is pregnant, it is Judah, patriarch of the family into which she had married, not her own father, who is in charge of her fate. Again one sees law and custom enforced by the patriarch and not by some external group of elders or priests. The family headed by the patriarch is a self-contained microcosm of the larger community and its customs. Judah's decision is swift, unconsidered, and cruel. Tension in the story is heightened. "Bring her out and let her be burned" (38:24). Is he happy finally to be rid of the woman he holds responsible for the death of his wicked sons? But Tamar, the trickster, sends to him the tokens of signet, cord, and staff with the message, "It was the owner of these who made me pregnant" (38:25). Judah recognizes his possessions. How could he deny his own seal? He acknowledges them and accepts responsibility, saying that Tamar is more righteous than he, because he had not given her to Shelah.

Genesis 38:26 ends on an interesting note: Not again did he know her (sexually). Is this a later editorial comment by a writer anxious to minimize Judah's having sex with his daughter-in-law, in light of the prohibition against incest in Leviticus 18:15? The comment might also be

read as a more integral part of the story. Judah, now more fearful than ever of the woman who survived two husbands and boldly bettered him, keeps his distance from her. Tamar, like Rebekah, gives birth to twin heroes, the mark of a special matriarch. From the younger, Perez, will be descended Boaz, the husband of Ruth, whose tale is very much like that of Tamar. Both women contribute to the genealogical line leading to Israel's greatest hero, David. Tamar's rise in status is to be understood within a particular symbol system. She is now under the protection of the patriarch and has produced sons for the line. The tale does not criticize the rules of the social structure overtly, but like the scene in Genesis 31:14–16 insists on a man's maintaining the status and rights allowed the woman within the system. Like the prelude to the story of the stolen *teraphim* (31:15–16), Genesis 38 provides an implicit critique, for one sees how easily even these rights can be abrogated.

Women in the Joseph Tales (Gen. 37; 39–50)

The Comparative Absence of Women in the Joseph Tales. The Joseph narrative has no heroes who are tricksters, and its women are only two: Asenath, daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, mentioned in one line (41:45) as part of the reward given to Joseph for successfully interpreting Pharaoh's dream, and Potiphar's wife, a stock character portrayed as one of the challenges in life faced by the wise hero. Whereas women find many places in the stories about marginals who enjoy temporary success but remain at odds with the establishment, they are virtually absent from the Joseph tales of Genesis, which are more confirming of authority and the status quo.

Potiphar's Wife (Gen. 39). The story of Potiphar's wife's attempted seduction of Joseph is often compared to the ancient Egyptian "Tale of Two Brothers." In each, the upright and trustworthy person who works for a superior (Potiphar in the case of Joseph and the elder brother in the Egyptian tale) is propositioned by the superior's wife. The younger man rejects her and remains loyal to his superior, whereupon the scorned woman accuses the young man of attempted rape. This plot is found in a wide range of traditional tales and in many popular works of modern fiction.

The tale of Potiphar's wife emphasizes themes found throughout the biography of Joseph. Recurring language indicates that everything touched by Joseph prospers because God is with him (see 39:2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9). Seemingly misfortunes in Joseph's life inevitably turn to Joseph's benefit and to that of Israel (45:7, 8). Thus the serious charge that Joseph attempted to cuckold his master does not lead to his death but to the royal prison. There Joseph interprets the dreams of fellow prisoners, one of whom later recommends Joseph to the Pharaoh as one who can interpret his troubling dreams of cows and sheaves. The incident of Potiphar's wife is one more link in a chain leading inevitably to Joseph's becoming vizier of all Egypt. Finally, the tale contributes to the portrayal of Joseph's character. This is the same almost-too-honest Joseph who reports to his parents the dreams that predict that he will come to dominate them, the same Joseph who reports to his father about his brothers' indiscretions. The characterization of the almost-too-good-to-be-true Joseph is consistent throughout the narrative. He is a wisdom hero, a type represented in the biblical court narratives of Daniel and the book of Esther and in ancient Near Eastern works such as the story of Ahikar.

As has been noted, the wisdom hero lives by the sort of advice offered in wisdom collections such as the biblical book of Proverbs. One of the dominant themes in Proverbs is to keep one's distance from the loose woman, the adulteress (Prov. 2:16–19; 5:1–23; 7:6–27). Joseph exemplifies the wise man: hardworking, sober, God-fearing, and able to resist forbidden fruit. Potiphar's wife exemplifies the female personification of antiwisdom: disloyal to her husband, quick to seek satisfaction in forbidden places, strongly sexual, and duplicitous. In vengeance she uses the garment she has ripped from Joseph to accuse him of her own misdeed. Her accusation to the servants (39:14–15), repeated to her husband (39:17), echoes the accurate description of what had happened in 39:12–13, but now recasts the information in a lie. Wisdom and antiwisdom, truth and lies, are thus reverse images.

What sort of view of women is found in this tale and what sort of narrator's voice? The image of the vengeful and conniving woman scorned is an archetype more meaningful to men than to women, a means of asserting the male's desirability and innocence, projecting all sexual desire onto the woman, who is a manifestation of the

feminine frightening to men. She is aggressive, independent, and sexually demanding. Such women never prosper in the Hebrew Scriptures. In this scene Joseph is the marginal character, a foreign exile and a slave, while Potiphar's wife is his superior; and yet Joseph is no trickster. He is a different sort of hero, and his is a different sort of literature from that found in the tales of the matriarchs and patriarchs. Whereas the latter repeatedly describe the trickster's challenge to authority and include many women tricksters who make their way as marginals within a male-oriented system, the stories of Joseph suggest that if a man has God's favor and lives wisely, he can succeed in becoming a part of the ruling establishment itself.

Conclusions

The women of Genesis are markers and creators of transition and transformation. In some sense their narrative roles parallel social positions of and attitudes toward women in male-dominated cultures in which women are marginal in terms of economic or political authority. Yet paradoxically their roles as the people "in between" can be powerful and critical for the development of the stories and for the progress of human civilization and Israelite culture as perceived by biblical writers. Without Eve, the present world would not exist. Without Rebekah, Jacob would not have fathered the people of Israel.

The women succeed in behind-the-scenes ways, through the medium of trickery, and their power is in the private rather than the public realm. They evoke sympathy as those whose rights are unstable and always at risk, for the line between successful tricksters such as Rebekah, Rachel, and Tamar and victims such as Dinah and Hagar is easily crossed. The tale of Potiphar's wife implies a culture in which powerful women are regarded with suspicion, as unnatural and evil. The voice that lies behind the tales of the matriarchs and patriarchs is markedly different from the voice underlying the tales of Joseph. Only the former are imbued with attitudes of those outside the establishment and in some instances speak with the voice of the feminine. The voices behind tales of Genesis might also be explored from the perspective of masculinities and femininities, as seen, for example, in the tales of Rebekah, Tamar, Jacob, and Dinah.

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EVE AND HER INTERPRETERS

ANNE W. STEWART

“She took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her” (Gen. 3:6).

The esteem, worth, and role of women is at stake in the interpretation of this verse. The significance of Eve’s act is perhaps one of the most disputed points in the history of biblical interpretation. Did this first woman cause all humanity to descend into a sinful state, or should one place ultimate blame at the feet of her husband? Is she a paragon of feminine beauty, power, and creativity, or a paradigm of vice, condemning all her descendants to hold a place of inferiority to men? Commentators, theologians, artists, poets, and readers alike have advanced various interpretations of the first woman in Genesis, often promoting certain assumptions about womankind as a whole. Consequently, Eve has garnered more attention than almost any other female biblical character.

The discrepancies between the two creation stories in Genesis, as well as the significant ambiguities within each of them, provide plenty of room for contradictory opinions. In the first creation account, male and female are created simultaneously (1:26–27). They are equally in the image of God, charged to populate and care for the earth. In the second creation account, however, God forms the male Adam from the dust of the earth and later creates woman from Adam’s rib as a mate for him, only after all other creatures have been eliminated as adequate companions (2:20).

Reconciling these two strikingly different accounts and their competing implications for the nature of male-female relations is a significant locus of dispute in the interpretative tradition. Many interpreters place more emphasis on the second account than the first, causing them to suggest that Eve, having been created from Adam, was inferior to him. The Jewish historian Philo, for example, posited a typology of women’s inferiority to men from the second account. Philo interpreted Eve allegorically as representative of sense perception, a faculty inferior to

the mind, which was symbolized by Adam (*On the Creation of the World*, 165).

Other Jews and Christians, on the other hand, did not find that Eve’s secondary creation necessarily implied her inferiority. Christian theologian John Chrysostom insisted that because Eve was created from Adam’s rib, she was equal to him in every respect: “So, from man’s rib God creates this rational being, and in his inventive wisdom he makes it complete and perfect, like man in every detail” (Kvam, 143). The Talmud even argues that God gave greater mental powers to Eve than to Adam. It explains that the phrase “God *built* (from Heb. *banah*) her from his side” (2:22) means that God gave more understanding (Heb. *binah*) to Eve (*b. Niddah* 45b).

Other Jewish traditions tried to reconcile the two different creation accounts. Some medieval interpretations suggest that Eve, the woman created in the second account, was actually Adam’s second wife. The first creation account then refers to Adam’s first wife, who left Adam, prompting God to create another wife for him. The medieval text *Alphabet of Ben Sira* explains that Lilith, the first woman, and Adam began fighting when Adam told her to lie down below him. She refused, insisting that the two were equal because they were both created from the earth. Lilith flew away, and even God’s angels could not bring her back. In the rabbinic tradition at large, Lilith is known as a menacing demon, and this particular tradition accounts for her behavior by claiming that she wandered the earth after leaving Adam, terrorizing men who slept alone and afflicting babies with disease (Kvam, 204).

The significance of the woman’s encounter with the serpent in Genesis 3 has drawn even more attention among biblical interpreters, and the text itself sparks numerous questions. Why does the serpent engage the woman and not the man? Why does the woman state that God forbid them not only from eating the fruit but from touching the tree in the middle of the garden (3:3)? God forbade only *eating* the fruit;

God said nothing about touching it (2:17). Furthermore, the woman had not yet been created when God issued the injunction, so from whom did she get her information? The circumstances of the man and his wife change dramatically after they eat of the fruit, know their nakedness, and are expelled from the garden. But was there a larger existential change in their condition

and, by extension, the condition of humanity? If so, who is to blame?

The story of Adam and Eve in the garden was retold and interpreted in many versions in early Jewish apocryphal texts. Sirach, for example, a second-century-BCE wisdom text, warns about the danger of women, insisting that “from a woman sin had its beginning, and because of



In *Creation of Eve*, an engraving by Gustave Doré (1832–1883), a faint image of the Creator is visible behind Eve and the sleeping Adam. This illustration was published in *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments, according to the authorised version* (London: Cassell, 1866).

her we all die” (Sir. 25:24). This text was the first to ascribe culpability to woman for all subsequent human sin and death, but it was certainly not the last to view her in negative light. In *The Life of Adam and Eve*, a first-century-CE text that elaborates various adventures of the first couple, Eve is a weak character, ridden with guilt for their expulsion from the garden. Adam, on the other hand, is a heroic figure who secures forgiveness for Eve so that the human race can endure. In the Greek version of the text, also called the *Apocalypse of Moses*, Eve tells in her own words the story of her encounter with the serpent. She describes the world before meeting the serpent, when she and Adam were equal caretakers, each charged with half of the garden and creation. This text alludes to the serpent’s encounter with Eve as an act of sexual seduction, for Eve recounts that the serpent poured on the fruit his poison of lust, “the origin of every sin” (*Apoc. Mos.* 19.3). Lust thus taints human sexuality from that point forward, and Eve holds herself responsible, proclaiming “all sin in creation has come about through me” (*Apoc. Mos.* 32.3).

Early Christian texts contained different views about who is ultimately responsible for human sin. Like these Jewish apocryphal texts,

the New Testament epistle 1 Timothy indicates that Eve, not Adam, bears the blame for eating the fruit. The text also depends on the second creation account to undergird its claim that women ought to be subordinate to men: “For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor” (1 Tim. 2:13–14). On the other hand, Romans 5 attributes blame solely to Adam, for “just as sin came into the world through one man . . . so death spread to all because all have sinned” (Rom. 5:12). The gnostic *Gospel of Philip*, however, suggests that death came into the world not when Adam ate the apple but when Eve was created from Adam’s side. It suggests that the first human was an androgynous being, and when Eve and Adam were separated from a single body, death entered (*Gospel of Philip*, 63).

The negative view of Eve in 1 Timothy had an inordinate influence on subsequent interpretations of Genesis by the church fathers. Tertullian, for example, advanced prescriptive advice for female modesty in dress, in order that each woman “might the more fully expiate that which she derives from Eve . . . the odium (attaching to her as the cause) of human



Fall of Adam and Eve, a woodcut by Virgil Solis (1514–1562), shows both the serpent offering the fruit and, at left, Adam and Eve being driven from the lush garden (Gen. 3:24). This illustration was published in *Summaria uber die gantze Biblia*, by Veit Dietrich, Philipp Melanchthon, and Johannes Brenz (Frankfurt am Main, 1562).

perdition" (*The Apparel of Women*, i.1). Tertullian goes even further, alleging that all women are culpable with Eve for sin and conspirators with the devil in leading men astray. He thus condemns his female audience, saying, "You are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert—that is, death—even the Son of God had to die" (*The Apparel of Women*, i.1). On the other hand, Ambrose, bishop of Milan in the fourth century, used the 1 Timothy text to different ends. While he too held that woman was inferior to man, he nonetheless noted that Christ was born of a woman. He thus interprets the phrase "she will be saved by childbearing" (1 Tim. 2:15) to mean that Eve brings forth human redemption (*Paradise*, x.47).

Romans 5 shaped the Christian theological doctrine of the fall and original sin, the idea that after Adam and Eve's disobedience, all humanity was thereafter tainted by sin. For this reason, Genesis 3 acquired weightier overtones as the origin of the human condition, and Eve herself was often held responsible for this plight. Augustine, and many theologians following him, associated the consequences of the first sin with shame and sexual lust and held that such effects passed from the first couple to all subsequent humans. He held together 1 Timothy and Romans, insisting that Eve and Adam together bore blame, for even though Eve was deceived, Adam also sinned (*City of God*, 14.11).

The association of the first sin with sexual activity colored interpretations of Eve, and she was frequently associated with seduction and danger. For this reason, many viewed her as the antithesis of the pure Virgin Mary, who redeemed Eve's disgrace by obeying God and giving birth to Christ. The notion of Mary as a second Eve who rectified the error of the first was introduced by Justin Martyr in the second century, yet it grew in importance after Augustine, as virginity became an ideal of discipleship (Phillips, 135).

Although the notion of a "fall" does not hold a central theological position in Judaism, as in Christianity, Jewish tradition also suggests that Eve's sin had repercussions for contemporary humans. The Talmud reports that God punished her with ten curses that now befall all women, including pain in conception, childbirth, menstruation, and the angst of raising children (*b. Eruvin* 100b), though another

opinion suggests that such curses do not pertain to righteous women (*b. Sotah* 12a).

Other rabbinic sources take different approaches to the question of who should bear the blame for eating the fruit. Some traditions suggest that it was Adam's fault, for in an attempt to prevent either of them from transgressing the divine command not to eat the fruit, Adam told Eve that she should not even touch the tree. This discrepancy between the divine command and Adam's injunction left just the opportunity that the serpent needed to deceive Eve, for when he showed her that she would not die for touching the tree, she ate the fruit. Other traditions, however, place the blame squarely on Eve. One tradition suggests that once Eve ate the fruit, the Angel of Death appeared to her, and she quickly forced Adam to eat the fruit as well, lest he take another wife after she died (*Avot of Rabbi Nathan* 1.6).

Muslim interpretations also consider similar questions. Although the Qur'an does not refer to the creation story, there are several accounts of the first disobedience. One indicates that both man and woman were equally culpable (Q. 7:19–24), but in another, man was the one tempted by Satan (Q. 20:120–21). Later interpreters had much more to say about Eve and her role in the first sin. Muslim commentator al-Tabari (839–923 CE) notes one interpretation in which Adam was tempted out of sexual desire for Eve, since Satan had made her beautiful in his sight, and another that Adam was not in his rational mind, because Eve had made him drunk with wine (Kvam, 189; cf. the rabbinic interpretation that Adam was drunk, *Num. Rab.* 10.4). In either case, there is an element of feminine danger in accounting for the first sin.

Eve has also figured prominently in art and literature in ways that cohere with and diverge from interpretations in the religious traditions. In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, for example, Adam willingly eats the fruit after Eve because he cannot bear the thought of being separated from her should she die, an inverse interpretation from that of the rabbinic tradition cited above, though similar to Augustine's approach (cf. *City of God*, 14.11). Milton also suggested that Eve had more beauty than intellect and was inferior to her male mate, even claiming that she was less in the image of God than Adam (*Paradise Lost*, viii.538–46).

Paul Gauguin produced several striking renditions of Eve throughout his career. *Breton Eve*

(1889) depicted a frightened Eve with blue hair, crouching under the tree, a serpent hovering in the background, while in *Exotic Eve* (1890) she stands taller than the tree itself and unabashedly grasps its fruit. Gauguin also painted several works presenting Eve as a Tahitian woman in a jungle setting. In *Te nave nave fenua* (*The Land of Sensuous Pleasure*, 1892), she stands naked next to a lizard, not a serpent, while picking a flower. Gauguin wrote about this figure that she represented Eve after the fall, serious and not at all self-conscious, a deliberate antithesis to the wanton, seductive Eve found in much of Western art (Maurer, 149).

Eve's influence has not waned throughout the centuries. More recently, she has become a heroine to contemporary feminists who have offered their own readings of the Genesis story. Judith Plaskow, for example, reenvisioned the rabbinic legend of Lilith as Adam's first wife. In her version of the tale, Eve, curious about this other woman who possessed so much strength and gumption, climbed an apple tree to scale the walls of the garden and meet Lilith on the other side. The two became fast friends, but their friendship was threatening to both Adam and God, for the "bond of sisterhood" between the two women promised to change the nature of the male-female relationship. Indeed, "God and Adam were expectant and afraid the day Eve and Lilith returned to the garden, bursting with possibilities, ready to rebuild it together" (Plaskow, 207). Plaskow's essay became a touchstone for feminist theology and a rallying cry for those who found a model in Lilith as strong and independent, in Eve as curious and intelligent, and in their mutual friendship as emblematic of the support and camaraderie of the feminist community.

Biblical scholar Phyllis Trible has perhaps done the most work to recover Genesis from patriarchal interpretations. Trible saw Eve, the final of God's creations, not as secondary to Adam, but as the culmination of all creation. She emphasized Eve's intelligence, sensitivity, and initiative, in contrast to Adam, who remains silent and passive throughout the encounter with the serpent. She viewed Genesis 2-3 not as a mandate for the inferiority of woman to man, but as an affirmation of the equality and mutuality of male-female relations at creation

and, consequently, a strong judgment against the oppressive structures that soured them, a result of disobedience (Trible, 128). Some feminists have found the story of Eve and its reception so troubling that they see little redeeming value in it, but Trible and other feminist scholars have refused to relinquish Eve's interpretation to those who doubt her equality with Adam or her worth as a woman.

Although Eve has been much maligned by some interpreters as inferior to her husband, solely responsible for humanity's broken condition, and even a gateway for the devil, not all have seen her in such a negative light. Interpreters that emphasize her equality with Adam and her role as "mother of all living" (3:20) draw attention to important aspects of the biblical text, which figures Eve as a dynamic character and fails to cast blame on either Adam or Eve alone. Indeed, such positive interpretations may allow contemporary women to reclaim Eve as a pivotal biblical character of curiosity and intelligence, formed in the image of God.

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SARAH, HAGAR, AND THEIR INTERPRETERS

ELAINE JAMES

The stories of Sarah and her Egyptian slave Hagar (Gen. 16, 21) are intimately intertwined and desperately conflicted. Sarah, to compensate for her barrenness, offers Hagar to Abraham as a surrogate womb. But when Hagar bears Ishmael, the dynamics between the women become embittered, and Hagar flees, to return again by an angel's command. After Sarah finally gives birth to Isaac, she convinces Abraham to cast Hagar back out into the desert, where she is saved by a theophanic intervention. The conflict between the two women is never resolved, and Sarah's final words in the story are charged with spite: "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac" (21:10).

The shadow of their conflict lingers in the history of interpretation, which has typically chosen sides between Sarah and Hagar, favoring one and neglecting or condemning the other. Theological and aesthetic representations alike tend to polarize the two characters and to understand them as symbols for other things. Philo's comment might be taken as a kind of banner statement: "It is not women that are spoken of here" (*Congr.*, 180). The discerned meaning of the women's story varies widely (for Philo, they represent "minds" on a journey to the attainment of virtue), and their complex moral relationship continues to prompt reflection on broader conflicts of all kinds.

Early on in other biblical and Christian traditions, attention focuses on the symbolism of Sarah. She is the foremother (Isa. 51:2), the fulfillment of God's elective power (Rom. 9:9), and a symbol of obedience (1 Pet. 3:6). Philo allegorizes Sarah as virtue, which brings forth happiness represented in Isaac (*Legum allegoria*, 2.82). *Jubilees*, in summarizing the Genesis stories, omits many of the details of Sarah's treatment of Hagar, and the latter's arrogance, thereby avoiding some of the moral dilemmas of the biblical text (*Jub.* 14:21–24; 17).

Most significant among these is Paul's Christian typological interpretation in Galatians

4:22–31. He describes their story as an allegory in which the women symbolize sides in his argument against Jewish Christians or Judaizing Gentiles: "these women are two covenants." He traces the promise through Sarah's son Isaac, who represents birth in the Spirit, and Hagar and her son are condemned "according to the flesh" and driven out. For Christians, this reading strategy legitimized their ascendancy over Jews and later over Muslims, as is evident in Pope Urban II's reported invocation of Sarah and Paul's phrase, "Cast out the slave woman and her son!" (Gal. 4:30) to galvanize Christendom for the First Crusade (Urban II, Council of Clermont, 1095).

Patristic readings were heavily influenced by Paul. In *City of God*, Augustine likewise dichotomizes the women: Hagar is in the earthly city, which symbolizes sin and wrath, and only prefigures the superiority of Sarah, who, in the heavenly city, denotes grace and divine mercy (*De civitate Dei*, 15.2). Origen's seventh homily suggests that Hagar turned away from the letter of the law (represented by the bottle of water given her by Abraham) and drinks fully at the well of living water, which is Jesus Christ (*Hom. Gen.*, 7.5–6). At the same time, he lifts up Sarah as an example of an upright wife who virtuously submits to her husband. This latter move is indicative of a broader patristic interest in the proper ordering of marriage, which reveals a concern for the rectitude of the forebears despite the sexual intrigue of their story (especially the wife-sister episodes and the problem of polygamy). The resultant emphasis on Sarah and Abraham's virtue minimizes the harm done to Hagar, who remains a foil for their integrity.

Early readers, though, are not entirely without sympathy for Hagar. For John Chrysostom, she exemplifies God's compassion and care for the lowly, and the angel's visitation dignifies her abject situation (*Hom. Gen.*, 38.5–7). Hilary of Poitiers compares Hagar's theophany to Abraham's, which elevates her experience of divine revelation to the level of the patriarch's (*De trinitate*, 4.23–27).

Rabbinic discussions tend to highlight the ethics of the story itself, albeit with characteristically diverse evaluations. In the Babylonian Talmud, Sarah's fertility is a cipher for divine blessing, and the matriarch's breasts are described as fountains flowing with abundant milk (*Bava Metzia* 87a). Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai (Rashbi) argues that Hagar was Pharaoh's daughter (*Gen. Rab.* 45:1), which both elevates Hagar's status and is occasionally taken as a sign of Hagar's idolatry (*Pirque d'Rabbi Eliezer*, "Horeb," 29). *Genesis Rabbah* portrays Sarah very positively: "The Holy One, blessed be He, never condescended to hold converse with any woman save with that righteous woman" (45:10), yet offers various speculations about the kind of terrible mistreatment she inflicted on Hagar (45:6). Famously, Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman (Nachmanides, Ramban) accuses both Sarah and Abraham of sinning in their mistreatment of Hagar. The midrashic sensibility turns readerly attention back to the thorny story line and, in overtly critiquing Sarah's behavior, anticipates modern feminist concerns.

In Muslim tradition, Hagar has an esteemed position as the mother of Ishmael and the foremother of the Arab followers of Muhammad. The Qur'an mentions neither woman by name, but "Abraham's wife" receives the promise of a son from the heavenly messengers (Surah 51: *Adh-Dhariyat*). Hagar's story is included in the *hadith* (the oral traditions of the prophet Muhammad), book 15:9, called *The Anbiya* (Prophets). Here, Hagar's tireless pursuit of water for Ishmael, and the angelic promise that Allah's people will come from herself, ennoble her character. She represents the tradition of *hijrah*, or experiencing exile for the sake of God, and is accorded high esteem at 'Eid al-Adha (the Feast of Sacrifice). Sarah too has a place of esteem: in stories narrated by Bukhari and Muslim, she successfully defends her sexual purity when Abraham gives her to other men by pious invocation of the name of Allah.

During the Protestant Reformation, interest in the literal sense of the text increasingly attends to the dynamics of the story, although this leads most Reformers to lift up Abraham and to chastise the womanly pettiness of both Sarah and Hagar. Luther condemns Hagar, but also zeroes in on her pathos, seeing her plight as an example of patience in suffering. She becomes a figure of repentance, modeling faithful confession when she names God (*Comm.*

Gen., 21:15–16). At the same time, he takes her as a symbol of Islam, and uses her haughtiness to condemn Turks (Muslims) of his own day. Another notable reader is Wolfgang Musculus, who observes that Hagar's willing acceptance of her exile is more restrained even than Christ's on the cross (*Comm. Gen.*, 21:14–16). He thereby creates a moment of empathy that nearly compares Hagar to Christ.

This theme of sympathy for Hagar is reiterated in the visual arts during this period. Georg Pencz's *Abraham Casting Out Hagar*, for example, is a sixteenth-century German engraving that depicts Hagar wiping a tear from her eye as Abraham presses a skin of water to her back. Sarah stands in the doorframe, a hand raised in a gesture of angry expulsion. While aesthetic representations are relatively scarce until the sixteenth century, from this time forward depictions of Hagar's suffering and Sarah's spite become increasingly popular.

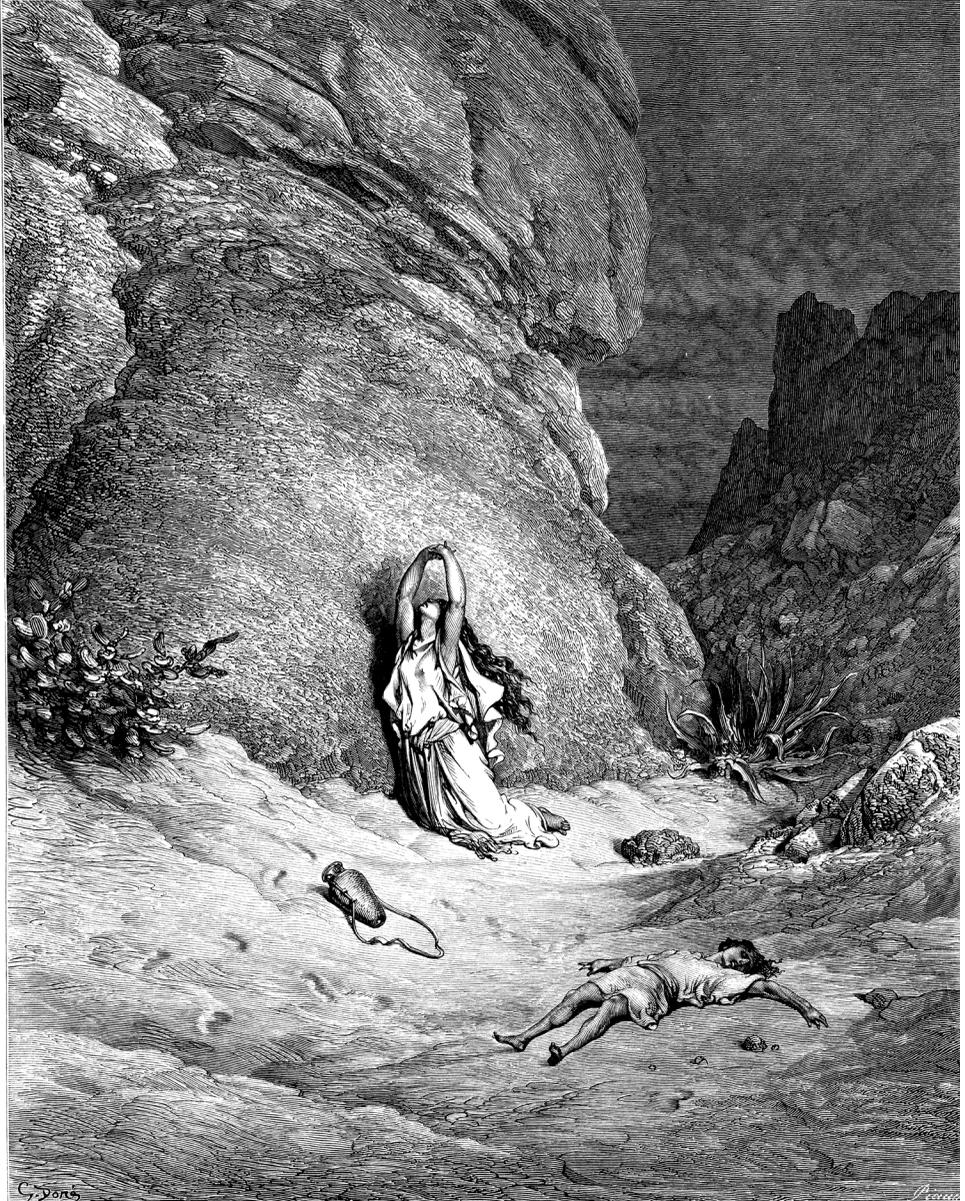
In literary works during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Hagar and Sarah appear mostly as stock characters: Hagar as the figure of an outcast, Sarah as a figure of wifely virtue. So, in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, Launcelot, a Gentile, is pejoratively referred to as a "fool of Hagar's offspring" (2.5.44). In *Paradise Regained*, John Milton compares Jesus in the desert to Hagar and Ishmael, which would seem to honor their status (2.308), but in *Psalms LXXXIII*, he lists them among God's "furious foes" against whom the speaker appeals for God's vengeance. In Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale*, Sarah is held up as an example of wifely virtue for May, the young bride-to-be (*CT*, 4.1703–5). Such uses suggest the reduction of these complex characters to standard types. One interesting counterexample is Theodore Beza's *Tragedie of Abraham's Sacrifice* (1577), in which Sarah shows some robustness of character in challenging Abraham's discernment. She is portrayed here with motherly pathos and bids Isaac farewell with a tender kiss and the hope that God will save him.

During the seventeenth-century Dutch Golden Age, Hagar becomes a significant preoccupation in painting and prints. Over one hundred extant paintings represent aspects of her story, the majority of which depict the expulsion or the wilderness rescue. Influenced perhaps by a confluence of theological pietism, increasing interest in the Hebrew Bible, and their own political upheaval, the Dutch

represent Hagar with uncanny empathy and transform her story into one of redemption. In Jan Steen's *The Expulsion of Hagar* (ca. 1660), for instance, Hagar holds a white cloth to her weeping face as Abraham stands on the doorstep between the two women. Ishmael gazes out at the viewer, inviting our sympathetic consideration of their fate. Rembrandt van Rijn

creates two versions of the expulsion scene, both of which place Abraham in a position of dubious mediation between the women. Italian painters are similarly interested in Hagar: Il Guercino produces several depictions in the 1650s, as does Francesco Cozza a decade later.

The dependency of Hagar continues to be highlighted over the ensuing centuries. For



Hagar's desperation and isolation are evident in *Hagar's Despair*, an engraving by Gustave Doré (1832–1883), which was published in *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments, according to the authorised version* (London: Cassell, 1866).

example, Camille Corot's *Hagar in the Wilderness* (1835) depicts Hagar wailing for her son while an angel soars in from high above. Similarly, Gustav Doré's woodcut illustration of Genesis 21, entitled *Hagar's Despair*, romanticizes Hagar's desperation and isolation. Simultaneously, Sarah receives decreasing attention. Except as an ancillary figure in depictions of Abraham or Hagar, she tends to be the explicit subject only in scenes of her burial (as in a 1703 Bible illustration by Nicolas Fontaine). As interest in and sympathy for Hagar increases, Sarah slips out of her traditional role as a symbol of virtue and becomes a less honored foil for her maidservant.

In the modern era, readers focus increasingly on the injustice of Hagar's rejection, and she becomes a representative of oppressed peoples. Perhaps the best example of this is her adoption as a representative figure by African Americans, who note her position as a racial outsider, her slave status, and her theophanic wilderness experience. Paul Lawrence Dunbar, for example, wrote about "the members of the Afro-American Sons of Hagar Social Club" ("The Defection of Maria Ann Gibbs," 1903). And anthropologist John Langston Gwaltney describes "Aunt Hagar" as "the mythical apical figure of the core black American nation" (*Drylongso*, 1980, p. xv). African American artists also have shown an interest



California artist Wayne A. Forte's *Hagar* (1996), drawn with charcoal on paper, focuses on the maternal bond between Hagar and Ishmael. The boy's visible ribs reflect their perilous situation.

in Hagar. Edmonia Lewis, a nineteenth-century sculptor, carved *Hagar in the Wilderness* (1868), a large white marble statue showing Hagar with a torn dress and her hands pressed together in supplication. Hagar also appears as a literary character, often as an oppressed or violated woman, as for instance in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977).

Contemporary feminist and womanist theologians too have been keen to rehabilitate Hagar. Phyllis Trible (*Texts of Terror*, 1984), and Delores Williams (*Sisters in the Wilderness*, 1993), and many subsequent others, have explored the story's potential to illustrate women caught in malignant distortions of power, especially with respect to patriarchy and race. This discussion often emphasizes Hagar's suffering and her final achievement of liberation and divine recognition.

The contemporary visual arts also manifest an ennobling of Hagar. Depictions of Ishmael in Hagar's arms portray her as a tenderhearted maternal figure. Jacques Lipchitz's abstract sculpture *Hagar in the Desert* (bronze, 1969) captures a sense of dynamic power and protectiveness. Wayne Forte's charcoal *Haggar* (1996) suggests a maternal intimacy between mother and child, and Hagar's upraised arms echo Ishmael's childlike resignation, perhaps even praise. In exonerating Hagar, sometimes blame is placed on Sarah. Marc Chagall, for instance, features Sarah positively in several works, including as a major figure in the angelic visitation, in which Abraham is noticeably absent (*Sarah and the Angels*, lithograph, 1960). Nevertheless when treating the two women together (as in *Sarah and Hagar*, colored chalks and ink, 1956), the sinister power of Sarah over her maidservant is striking, as Sarah towers over her with an upraised arm.

The rift that lingers between Sarah and Hagar continues to speak powerfully to unhealed wounds of all kinds. Poet Alicia Suskin Ostriker

imagines each woman articulating a yearning for solidarity that remains unfulfilled, perhaps impossible: Sarah grieves, "We should be allies / we are both exiles, all women are exiles," and Hagar wonders, "She threw me away / Like garbage. . . . But I still wonder / Why could she not love me / We were women together" (*The Nakedness of the Fathers*, 1995). Throughout the history of interpretation, readers have keyed into this unfulfilled longing and have represented the women as symbols for tragic breaches of all kinds. The story thus continues to prompt ethical reflection on broken relationships, both interpersonal and political.

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