

**The *Ideal* Israelite Woman: A Model From Early Antiquity  
With Reflections For Modernity**

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion

2007

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*This thesis is dedicated  
to my loving parents,  
Bobbie and Burt Jacowitz*

## **Contents**

Acknowledgements	4
Abbreviations	5
1. Introduction	9
2. The <i>Ideal</i> Woman as Portrayed in the Wisdom Literature	12
The Various Women of Proverbs	
אשת-חיל	
3. The <i>Ideal</i> Woman as Portrayed in the Narratives of Genesis	43
Sarah	
Rebekah	
Rachel	
Leah	
4. The <i>Ideal</i> Woman as Portrayed in the Book of Ruth	90
Ruth	
Naomi	
5. Conclusion with Reflections for Modernity	110
Appendix	118
Bibliography	121

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

It is an exhilarating feeling to know that with the completion of this thesis, nothing stands in the way of my receiving rabbinic ordination. I know, with certainty, that I have not reached this point on my own. I am filled with much gratitude and love for those who have supported and encouraged me during this long journey: G-d, my Rock and my Redeemer; my loving family and friends, who believed in and encouraged me, even when I didn't believe in myself; my wonderful thesis advisor, Dr. Nili Sacher Fox, a true אשת חיל; and my amazing, loving, and supportive husband, Lee Irwin Chottiner, who has been the greatest gift that I have received from G-d.

## ABBREVIATIONS

- ABD      *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 1-6, David Noel Freedman, ed. N.Y.: Doubleday, 1992.
- ABG      *The Anchor Bible: Genesis*, E. A. Speiser. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964.
- ABR      *The Anchor Bible: Ruth*, Edward F. Campbell Jr. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975.
- ABP      *The Anchor Bible: Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Michael V. Fox. N.Y.: Doubleday, 2000.
- ABPE     *The Anchor Bible: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, R. B. Y. Scott. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965.
- BOP      *Book of Proverbs: A Commentary*, W. G. Plaut. N.Y.: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1961.
- BOR      *The Book of Ruth*, Hubbard, Robert L., Jr. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988.
- CEC      *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Book of Proverbs*, Crawford H. Toy. The International Critical Commentary, C.A. Briggs, S.R. Driver, and A. Plummer, eds. N.Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899.
- COP      *A Commentary on Proverbs*, Peter A. Stevenson. Greenville, S.C.: BJU Press, 2001.
- COT      *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, vol 6, C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch. James Martin, trans. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1973.
- EH        *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*, David L. Lieber and Chaim Potok, eds. N.Y.: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2001.
- EPG      *Every Person's Guide to the Book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, Ronald H. Isaacs. Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 2000.
- EVE      *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, Carol Meyers. N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1988.

- FAI "The Family in Early Israel" in *Families in Ancient Israel*, Carol Meyers. Leo G. Perdue, et al., eds. Louisville, Ky., Westminster John Knox, 1997.
- FBM *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*, Robert Alter. N.Y.: W. W. Norton, 2004.
- FM *The Five Megilloth: Hebrew Text, English Translation and Commentary*, A. Cohen. London: Soncino, 1952.
- FRD *Commentary on the Torah with a New English Translation*, Richard Elliott Friedman. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.
- GEN *Genesis: A Modern Commentary*, W. Gunther Plaut. N.Y.: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1974.
- HAL *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., and M.E.J. Richardson, trans. Boston: Brill, 2001.
- HH *Households and Holiness: The Religious Culture of Israelite Women*, Carol Meyers. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005.
- JPSG *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, Nachum M. Sarna. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989.
- JSB *The Jewish Study Bible*, Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- JSBG *The Jewish Study Bible: Genesis*, Jon D. Levenson. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- JSBP *The Jewish Study Bible: Proverbs*, Michael V. Fox. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- JSBR *The Jewish Study Bible: Ruth*, Adele Reinhartz, Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- JWCS *The Jewish Woman in Contemporary Society: Transitions and Traditions*, Adrienne Baker. N.Y.: New York University Press, 1993.
- LBI *Life in Biblical Israel*, Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001.
- MM "The Marriageable Maiden of Prov. 31:10-31," M. B. Crook. *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 13 (1954): 137-40.

- MRSR "Material Remains and Social Relations: Women's Culture in Agrarian Households of the Iron Age" in *Symbiosis, Symbolism, and the Power of the Past*, Carole Meyers. W. G. Dever and S. Gitin, eds. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003.
- NJPS *The National Jewish Population Study 2000-01: Strength, Challenge and Diversity in the American Jewish Population*. A United Jewish Communities Report in Cooperation with The Mandell L. Berman Institute—North American Jewish Data Bank. Online: [http://www.ujc.org/local\\_includes/downloads/temp/njps2000-01\\_revised\\_1.06.04.pdf](http://www.ujc.org/local_includes/downloads/temp/njps2000-01_revised_1.06.04.pdf).
- NS "Needlework and Sewing in Israel from Prehistoric Times to the Roman Period" in *Fortunate the Eyes that See: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Seventieth Birthday*. Avigail Sheffer. Astrid B. Beck et al., eds. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995.
- OWJ *On Women and Judaism: A View From Tradition*, Blu Greenberg. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981.
- PNA *Proverbs: A New Approach*, William McKane. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970.
- PROV *Proverbs*, Kenneth T. Aitken. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1986.
- PROVAC *Proverbs: Hebrew Text & English Translation with an Introduction and Commentary*, A. Cohen. Surrey: Soncino, 1945.
- RH "Returning Home: Ruth 1.8 and the Gendering of the Book of Ruth" in *A Feminist Companion to Ruth*. Carol Meyers. Athalya Brenner, ed. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993.
- RU *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, Jack M. Sasson. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.
- STF *Surely There is a Future: A Commentary on the Book of Ruth*, Hamlin, E. John. International Theological Commentary. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996.
- SVW *The Song of the Valiant Woman: Studies in the Interpretation of Proverbs 31:10-31*, Al Wolters. Waynesboro, Ga.: Paternoster, 2001.
- TBOP *The Book of Proverbs*, W. O. E. Oesterley. London: Methuen, 1929.

- TBOR      *A Translator's Handbook on The Book of Ruth*, Jan de Waard and Eugene A. Nida. N.Y.: United Bible Societies, 1992.
- TEX        "Textiles: Textiles of the Neolithic through Iron Ages" in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*. Miriam Peskowitz. Eric M. Meyers, ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- TW         "Two Women in a Man's World: A Reading of the Book of Ruth," Phyllis Trible. *Soundings* 59 (1976): 252-79.
- WBC        *The Women's Bible Commentary*, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1992.
- WES1       *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, Claus Westermann, John J. Scullion, trans. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984.
- WES2       *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, Claus Westermann, John J. Scullion, trans. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985.
- WFP        *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, Claudia V. Camp. Sheffield, England: Almond, 1985.
- WIS        *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*, Carol Meyers, ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
- WOM        *From the Wisdom of Mishle', Samson Raphael Hirsch*. N.Y.: Feldheim, 1976.
- WC         "Parashat Chayei Sarah" in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, Yairah Amit. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, ed. N.Y.: URJ and Women of Reform Judaism, Forthcoming.



# 1.

## INTRODUCTION

The Hebrew Bible contains many accounts of women—some named and described in detail—others unnamed with few details. Despite the central role of women in biblical society (or any society, for that matter), there is a myth that exists—even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—which says the Israelite woman played a minor role in society, had little control over her own life, and was merely a subordinate to males. While this may have been the case for some women mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, it surely was not the case for most Israelite women, at least as presented by the texts. The Hebrew Bible describes women who were loved by their husbands, respected by their children, and who possessed power and status within their marital relationship. These women made significant contributions to their households by their involvement in agrarian endeavors, manufacturing and trade, and most of all in their role as mothers. Some were respected by their community, had power over others, and even inherited and owned property. Other biblical women made decisions that affected the course of their lives as well as the lives of others, took initiative, were assertive, and showed great courage. The Hebrew Bible also depicts Israelite women who were physically strong, physically beautiful, and also exhibited great strength of character. At the same time, however, each of these women was also very real, very *human*, i.e. an imperfect human being; each had her own character flaws. Finally, several of the Israelite women to whom I am referring were noticed by Adonai and received divine help.

As a Jewish woman who is presumably a descendant of the women of the Hebrew Bible, and recognizing the strong character traits of some of these women, I undertook to study and analyze some of these women in order to attain a greater understanding of the role of women in biblical society. More specifically, I have undertaken to define and depict how the *ideal* Israelite woman is described and portrayed in the Hebrew Bible. I recognize that the *ideal* depiction of the biblical woman does not mean that all, most, or any of the women actually lived up to this ideal. It is quite possible that the description of women that is found in biblical narratives reflects the author's perception more so than the actual women, themselves. [The same can be said about today's women who are pictured in fashion magazines. One need only look around to realize that the models shown represent the ideal image of beauty determined by society, rather than the physical appearance of the majority of women.] This said, however, even if the traits and characteristics of the women who will be presented in this thesis are more ideal than real, one can still gain insight into the values that Israelite society held regarding women.

In order to accomplish this goal, I will look at three genres of biblical literature: the book of Proverbs—wisdom poetry—with a primary focus on the אשת-חַיִל described in 31:10-31; the book of Genesis—biblical narratives—focusing on the four matriarchs, Sarah Rebekah, Rachel and Leah; and the book of Ruth—a *novella*—that chronicles the lives of Ruth and Naomi. A critical reading and analysis of the Hebrew text will be presented, along with commentary. Modern biblical scholarship will be incorporated to further the discussion, in addition to my own analysis.

The concluding pages of this work will include an extrapolation between the biblical concept of the *ideal* Israelite woman and the modern day concept of the *ideal*

Jewish woman. I will discuss some of the attributes and characteristics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, American Reform woman, and draw comparisons between her and her biblical predecessors.

## 2.

### WISDOM POETRY: THE WOMEN OF PROVERBS

#### אשת-חיל AND THE

The book of Proverbs (משלי) is found in the third section of the Hebrew Bible entitled Writings (כתובים). Proverbs is one of thirteen books, and one of three books of wisdom literature, found in Writings. The wisdom contained in Proverbs is not academic knowledge, but rather, is concerned with practical wisdom, ethics, and the morality that affects personal relationships and society, in general. More than one scholar has suggested Proverbs served as a teaching manual for either the young or the old.<sup>1</sup>

The Book of Proverbs opens a window to a realm of ancient Israelite experience little seen elsewhere in the Bible: everyday life. Proverbs guides individuals (not the nation) in how to do what is wise in their day-to-day lives. It teaches the attitudes and courses of actions that are right, just and pious, and the ways of behavior that facilitate and strengthen personal relationships, the forms of communication and commerce that make the life of the community congenial and secure, and the types of prudence and industry that help one achieve financial security.<sup>2</sup>

The literary style of Proverbs varies throughout its thirty-one chapters. The Book contains parables, allegories, aphorisms, and lengthier poems or discourses. This has led to discussion and disagreement among scholars as to the actual authorship of Proverbs. Some, like K. Kitchen, believe King Solomon wrote the bulk of the corpus while others, like R. B. Y. Scott, think the connection between Solomon and Proverbs is "tenuous."<sup>3</sup> "Most attribute at least part of the book to Solomon but recognize that others also

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<sup>1</sup> See Isaacs, *EPG*, 3; Scott, *ABPE*, xix.

<sup>2</sup> Fox, "Proverbs" in *JSB*, 1447. See also Peter A. Stevenson, *COP*, xi.

<sup>3</sup> Stevenson, *COP*, xiii. See also Fox, "Proverbs" in *JSB*, 1447-48.

contributed, either by writing or editing the material.”<sup>4</sup> M. Fox supports this notion, indicating that the wisdom of Proverbs comes from both men *and* women, citing Prov 31:1: “The words of Lemuel, king of Massa, with which his mother admonished him.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps Solomon is often credited as authoring the book of Proverbs because he “. . . came to be regarded as the wise man *par excellence* and the fountain-head of Israel’s wisdom.”<sup>6</sup>

Just as scholars debate the authorship of Proverbs, they also disagree on the proper way to divide and categorize the thirty-one chapters. For example, M. Fox sees chapters one through nine as relatively long, interrelated poems; chapters thirty and thirty-one as four long poems to be read as one unit; and chapters ten through twenty-nine as short sayings with no overall organization.<sup>7</sup> Scott divides Proverbs into a preamble, introduction, Solomonic proverbs, words of wise men and four appendices.<sup>8</sup> Kitchen sees Proverbs as having a title/preamble, prologue, main text, a second collection and two appendices.<sup>9</sup> This is just a sample of the various opinions. Others exist as well.

One topic of discussion found in Proverbs is women and their attributes—those considered desirable and those deemed dangerous to society. Some verses speak negatively about women, and warn against association with them. For example, 19:13, 21:9, 21:19, 25:24, and 27:15-16 caution against living with a contentious wife. These pithy proverbs compare a nagging wife with the annoyance of a leaky roof, and indicate it

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<sup>4</sup> Stevenson, *COP*, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Fox, “Proverbs” in *JSB*, 1448.

<sup>6</sup> Aitken, *PROV*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Fox, “Proverbs” in *JSB*, 1448.

<sup>8</sup> Stevenson, *COP*, xxii.

<sup>9</sup> Stevenson, *COP*, xxii.

is better to find relief in the desert or in an upper chamber of a house, than to be subjected to an argumentative wife.

Other verses caution men to be wary of women who will purposely try to lure them into inappropriate sexual conduct (2:16-22; 5:1-23; 6:20-35; 7:1-27; 23:27). These passages admonish men that such women will use *smooth words* and *flattery* (from the Hebrew root חלק), rather than their physical beauty, to entice them.<sup>10</sup> There are various terms used to describe these women who attempt to seduce men; some are easier to define than others. The Hebrew words זונה, אשה זונה, and זנות meaning *prostitute(s)*, *harlot(s)*, or *whore(s)* are perhaps the most explicit (6:26; 7:10; 23:27; 29:3). The term אשת איש, literally defined as *the wife of a man*, refers to an *adulteress* (6:26).

There are other terms, however, used to describe the seductress whose exact definition is not agreed upon by scholars; nonetheless, scholars do concur that all are women who could entice men into sexual activity, and therefore, should be avoided. For example, the terms זרה, אשה זרה, and שפתי זרה are defined literally as *female stranger* (non-Israelite), *strange woman*, and *the lips of a female stranger* (2:16; 5:3; 5:20; 7:5). However, they are also understood as *forbidden woman*, *loose woman*, and *another man's wife*. Another such Hebrew word is נכריה, literally defined as *foreign woman* (2:16; 5:20; 6:24; 7:5; 23:27), but translated as *stranger*, *strange woman*, *alien*, *alien woman*, *forbidden woman*, and *adventuress*.

Some scholars believe the terms זרה and נכריה, as used in Proverbs, do not refer to a woman's national identity—as they do in other biblical verses—but rather, to a married woman who would be considered a *stranger* or *foreigner* to any man who is not her

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<sup>10</sup> Prov 6:25 is the only verse that mentions the physical beauty of the seductress.

husband.<sup>11</sup> McKane suggests these two terms could even refer to an Israelite woman who is an "outsider," i.e. estranged from society; this would lead her to act in both "desperate and uninhibited" ways. "As such she is particularly deadly to young men who become embroiled with her."<sup>12</sup> In this regard, "The foreign woman then becomes a type or paradigm of any woman who spurns the conventions of the society in which she lives, and is regarded generally as defiant and wanton, a *nokriya*."<sup>13</sup> Others regard the זרה not as an actual person, but as an allegorical or mythical figure.<sup>14</sup> Whether real or not, the *Strange Woman* of Proverbs, as she is often referred to in commentaries, along with the other women-types listed above, represent illicit or adulterous women whose temptations can lead to a man's demise.

C. Fontaine makes an accurate observation, when she writes, "As always in male-centered scripture, the positive and negative roles of women are viewed primarily from the perspective of what they provide for the men involved. Nowhere does one hear the sages condemn a society that forces some women into prostitution; one hears only warnings about the havoc such women can wreak on a young man's promising career."<sup>15</sup> While I agree with this sentiment, I also take comfort knowing that positive depictions of women can also be found in the book of Proverbs.

*Woman Wisdom* is one of the better-known female figures in Proverbs, although, she does not seem to refer to a real woman, but rather, to an allegorical figure that represents instructions and teachings that are wise, sound, and just. She is often seen as

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<sup>11</sup> See Fox, *ABDP*, 139; Aitken, *PROV*, 61.

<sup>12</sup> McKane, *PNA*, 285.

<sup>13</sup> McKane, *PNA*, 286.

<sup>14</sup> Contra Fox, *ABDP*, 118.

<sup>15</sup> Fontaine in *WBC*, Newsom and Ringe, 146.

the counterpart of her "evil twin," Strange Woman.<sup>16</sup> The association between woman and wisdom stems from the female gender of the Hebrew word for *wisdom*, חכמה. However, since Woman Wisdom is nothing more than a personification of woman—which is quite different than an actual human woman—it goes beyond the purview of this study, and therefore, will not be discussed further.

One of the positive portrayals of women in Proverbs that shines a favorable light on the role of the *ideal* Israelite woman is *mother as educator*. Verses 1:8 and 6:20 recognize not only the responsibility, but also the authority, of a mother to educate her children.<sup>17</sup> There is no implication that her teaching is not as valuable as that offered by her husband; in fact, just the opposite is the case: both verses indicate the instruction of the mother is to be heeded, ואל-תטש תורת אִמְךָ.

Scholars recognize the significant role of the Israelite mother with regard to educating her children in matters practical, moral and religious.<sup>18</sup> As the primary caretaker (almost exclusively until weaned and then to some extent until puberty, with males), the Israelite woman had "a sizeable proportion" of the responsibility for teaching cultural norms, social conduct, and the various skills needed to participate in the "productive and processing tasks of the family household."<sup>19</sup> While I am not suggesting that she, alone, educated her children, I am strongly suggesting that her influence, in this regard, was as significant as that of her husband, if not more so. C. Camp views the educating of children as an equalizer in the relationship between Israelite

<sup>16</sup> Fontaine in *WBC*, Newsom and Ringe, 146.

<sup>17</sup> Both of these verses are examples of "parallelism," a literary form found in Proverbs whereby the second line of the verse restates, contrasts, or amplifies the thought of the first. Fontaine in *WBC*, Newsom and Ringe, 145.

<sup>18</sup> Fox, *ABDP*, 82.

<sup>19</sup> See Meyers, *EVE*, 149.



men and women: "... we might say that the book of Proverbs provides us with our clearest picture of the authority of women and their equality to men in the instruction of children, both as youngsters and as young adults."<sup>20</sup>

Proverbs also indicates ancient Israelite mothers were entitled to equality when it came to receiving respectful treatment from their children. Proverbs 15:20, 23:22, 23:25, 28:24, and 30:17 each indicate, in its own way, the need to respect both father *and* mother.<sup>21</sup> This reflects the versions of the Decalogue found in Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16, which indicates one is to honor *both* father and mother. C. Meyers accurately notes: "It is of no little consequence that the stipulations about parental authority are not limited to male authority . . . . The inclusion of both parents in these biblical family laws diverges from other Semitic bodies of law with which pentateuchal law is frequently and legitimately compared. . . . The authority of both parents in Israelite families was supported in the oldest legal tradition in the Bible."<sup>22</sup> It is fair to conclude, then, that the Israelite woman was treated in a respectful manner by her children.

The Israelite woman is also praised in Proverbs for being an *ideal* wife (18:22; 12:4; 14:1; 19:14; 31:10-31). These verses speak to the benefit a man receives by having a wife who is competent, wise, and virtuous. Meyers posits that having such a capable wife was "... an absolute necessity for male participation in the larger community . . . . In fact, the presence of a prudent, hardworking woman as manager of the household and as contributor to the domestic economy is so important that a man who finds her is said to

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<sup>20</sup> Camp, *WFP*, 82.

<sup>21</sup> See Aitken, *PROV*, 149; Plaut, *BOP*, 32.

<sup>22</sup> Meyers, *EVE*, 157. In contrast to Ex 21:15, which speaks of punishment for striking one's father or mother, Hammurabi's Code no. 195 deals only with a son who has struck his father.

have obtained a divine blessing (18:22; 19:14).<sup>23</sup> Additionally, the character and actions of a wife are so critical to the functioning of the household that they affect the entire family. In other words, it is her wisdom and strength of character (or lack thereof) that will determine the nature and stability of the home.<sup>24</sup> Aitken summarizes this point well, saying, "To marry a wife is no light matter, for she will be the making or breaking of husband and home."<sup>25</sup> The composition of the Israelite woman's character is so critical it is valued over her external, physical beauty (11:16, 22).

While the book of Proverbs contains much female imagery (admittedly more negative than positive), the most extensive description of the *ideal* Israelite woman is found in 31:10-31, with the description of the אשת-חיל.

The twenty-two verses of Prov vv. 31:10-31 have come to be known as *A Woman of Valor*. It is customary for a Jewish man to recite this laudatory poem to his wife on Friday nights, prior to the Sabbath meal. *A Woman of Valor* is believed by some scholars to be a "separate and self-contained composition" [positioned within Proverbs] as evidenced by its construction as an alphabetical acrostic.<sup>26</sup> Some view this literary piece as a description of the *ideal* woman, i.e. the *perfect* woman, and hence one who does not, nor never did, exist. Others see this poem as the prescribed goal toward which wives are to strive: "The housewife is depicted here as she ought to be . . ."<sup>27</sup> W. A. L. Elmslie supports this view, writing, "It set a high standard of wifehood which was widely adopted, so that 'we may believe that the ideal thus pictured was a reality in many Jewish

<sup>23</sup> Fontaine in *WIS*, Meyers, 303.

<sup>24</sup> Aitken, *PROV*, 154.

<sup>25</sup> Aitken, *PROV*, 153-53.

<sup>26</sup> Cohen, *PROVAC*, 211.

<sup>27</sup> Keil and Delitzsch, *COT*, 326.

homes."<sup>28</sup> I do not agree with this statement, for I doubt that *many* Israelite women were as perfect as the woman depicted in this poem. It is more probable to assume that any given Israelite women performed *some* of the tasks mentioned in Prov 31:10-31, as she tended to her family and household.

Others, like M. B. Crook, believe this text was part of a training manual used to educate young women, regarding the proper way to conduct themselves when married.<sup>29</sup> Another thought is this poem was a eulogy, recited at the funeral of a beloved wife and mother. While it is not possible to move beyond speculation and theory and arrive at a definitive answer as to the origin and intent of this pericope, it is possible to use these biblical verses to understand the traits and attributes that were deemed desirable and admirable for women in ancient Israelite society. This is particularly true given its placement in the Tanakh, for as stated above, Proverbs is filled with advice, suggestions and guidelines for *correct* living.

One point that scholars and laity can agree upon is that this poem depicts the Israelite woman in a positive light. It clearly extols the virtues of the אשת-חיל, while enumerating the many activities in which she is engaged: it speaks of the way she tends to her family and contributes to the well being of her household; it describes her business ventures and financial gains; it also provides an insight into her relationship with her husband, children, and workers. There is no doubt that the אשת-חיל has a great deal of responsibility and keeps long hours. And through it all, she helps those in need, treats others with respect, and remains loyal to Adonai.

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<sup>28</sup> Cohen, *PROVAC*, 211; See also Oesterley, *TBOP*, 287.

<sup>29</sup> Crook, *MM*, 139.

Whether one concludes that this complimentary poem describes a woman who was real or imagined, the words of I. Abrahams are worth noting: "It has been truly said, 'Nothing in ancient literature equals this remarkable attestation to the dignity and individuality of woman.'"<sup>30</sup>

In the pages that follow, Prov 31:10-31 will be discussed verse by verse. This will include the Hebrew text, a literal translation, and an interpretation of the verses. The translation will be based greatly on the definitions found in Koehler-Baumgartner's *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*.

31:10: אשת-חיל מי ימצא ורחק מפנינים מכרה "A capable wife, who can find? Her purchase price is far above pearls of coral."

*A capable wife* can also be translated as *a woman of valor*, *a woman of strength*, *a valiant woman*, *a worthy wife*, and *a powerful wife*.<sup>31</sup> The use of the word חיל, in this verse, is notable, for in other biblical passages, it is used in a military context.<sup>32</sup> A. Wolters comments on this, writing, "*eshet chayil . . . in this context should probably be understood as the female counterpart of the gibbor hayil, the title given to the 'mighty men of valour' which are often named in David's age. The person who is celebrated in this song is a 'mighty woman of valour.'*"<sup>33</sup> I like the analysis that Wolters presents of this biblical woman, for it is positive, empowering, and helps debunk the myth that Israelite women were subservient beings subjected to their dominant male counterparts. The woman who is celebrated in this proverb is a woman of strength; this characteristic is noted elsewhere in the poem, and will be discussed below. Fox, too, comments on the

<sup>30</sup> Cohen, *PROVAC*, 211.

<sup>31</sup> The term אשת-חיל is also found in Prov 12:4: "A capable wife is a crown for her husband." The thrust of this statement is that a strong, capable and competent woman is valued, and a true treasure to her husband.

<sup>32</sup> See Deut 3:18; Josh 6:2, 8:3.

<sup>33</sup> Wolters, *SVW*, 9.

use of the word חיל: it “refers to strength of all sorts, whether in physical or military prowess, in social influence, in wealth, or in personal ethical and intellectual powers, as here. Beneath all this woman’s virtues and talents lies a deep and solid strength of character.”<sup>34</sup>

The second part of the *A clause*<sup>35</sup> מי ימצא, “Who can find her?” can be understood in two different ways: as an exclamation of value and as an indication of rarity.<sup>36</sup> Fox understands it as the former, as supported by Prov 18:22: “He who finds a wife has found happiness.”<sup>37</sup> A. Cohen agrees with this, too: “The Hebrew is incorrectly construed as a question, as though the writer’s intention was ‘a good wife is not easily found, but when she is found, she is of inestimable value.’ The sense is whoever has married such a woman knows from his experience how priceless is her worth.”<sup>38</sup> I support the ideas of these scholars, for such a reading of the text affirms that Israelite women were valued in their society; it is consistent with the other positive comments about women, found in Proverbs (as noted above); and it also dispels the idea that worthy and capable women were rarely found in antiquity.

The second half of v. 10, called the *B clause*, says: ורחק מפנינים מכרה, “Her purchase price is far above pearls of coral.” This phrase further attests to the great worth of the אשת-חיל, for she is deemed more valuable than פנינים,<sup>39</sup> the precious *pearls of coral*

<sup>34</sup> Fox, “Proverbs” in *JSB*, 1497-8.

<sup>35</sup> The *A clause* refers to the first half of a biblical verse.

<sup>36</sup> Fox, “Proverbs” in *JSB*, 1497.

<sup>37</sup> Fox, “Proverbs” in *JSB*, 1497.

<sup>38</sup> Cohen, *PROVAC*, 211. W.O.E. Oesterley writes: this is “a rhetorical way of expressing admiration.” Oesterley, *TBOP*, 283.

<sup>39</sup> Other common translations for פנינים include rubies, pearls, and jewels. Also, in Job 28:18, Prov 3:15 and 8:11, פנינים are compared with *wisdom*. Perhaps the implication is that the אשת-חיל is valued like wisdom.

that were obtained (most likely) from the Red Sea and India.<sup>40</sup> While this verse does not explicitly indicate the reasons why this woman is valued so highly, they unfold as the poem progresses.

31:11: בטח בה לב בעלה ושלל לא יחסר "The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain (i.e. property and wealth)."

Verse 11 introduces another important aspect of the אשת-חיל. To understand this verse, it is important to begin with the Hebrew word שלל, meaning *gain*. In the Hebrew Bible, this term is often associated with the spoils of war, or booty, that one obtains through combat. While this text is not implying that the אשת-חיל goes off to war, it is indicating that she, through her own efforts, provides for her husband; because of her, he does not lack materially or financially. She does this through the various business ventures in which she is involved (see below). Citing E.B. Ehrlich, Cohen writes, "Ehrlich suggests that it [שלל] connotes an increase of wealth which does not result from one's personal labours, and is therefore selected here because it is wealth which accrues to the man from his wife's enterprise."<sup>41</sup> S. R. Hirsch makes a similar comment. He writes, שלל "implies a gain to which one had no claim and which he thus never expected . . ."<sup>42</sup> The main thrust of v.11 is that the אשת-חיל is a breadwinner who is engaged in profitable endeavors that extend beyond her household. Stevenson supports this, writing, "Through her work, she earns enough so that she can materially assist her husband."<sup>43</sup>

The A clause of this verse, בטח בה לב בעלה, sheds light on character of the אשת-חיל. By indicating that her husband puts his trust in her, we learn not only that she is a

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<sup>40</sup> Cohen, *PROVAC*, 16.

<sup>41</sup> Cohen, *PROVAC*, 211.

<sup>42</sup> Samson Raphael Hirsch, *WOM* (trans. Karen Paritzky-Joshua; Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1976), 247.

<sup>43</sup> Stevenson, *COP*, 442.

trustworthy individual, but we gain insight into their personal relationship, as well. In other words, this verse strongly suggests that the husband of the אשת-חיל has faith in her judgment and trusts her decisions; he relies on her to make choices that will be in his best interest, as well as in hers. This conjures up an image of a marital partnership that includes trust and respect. McKane adds to this interpretation: "Her husband relies on her and has complete confidence in her abilities and judgement [sic], nor has he ever any reason to change his mind on these matters, for she is a model of benevolent constancy and brings him nothing but good and gain."<sup>44</sup>

31:12: גמלתו טוב ולא-רע כל ימי חייה "She does him good and not evil, all the days of her life."

This verse builds on the previous one and explains why her husband trusts in her: she treats him well, looks out for him, and does not intentionally hurt or wrong him. In other words, "She fully justifies the confidence he places in her."<sup>45</sup> The אשת-חיל does right by her husband, both in their personal relationship and in her business dealings, which have an impact upon him. This sounds like a wonderful example of the עזר כנגדו, *helpmate*, referred to in Gen 2:18.<sup>46</sup>

While some scholars say this verse refers only to the way she handles her business dealings, I do not believe there is reason to limit its reading in this way. Stevenson confirms this, saying, "The woman's husband is the object of the verb. She shows her love for him by positive actions. No specific description of these actions limits them to any one area of the husband-wife relationship. The thought is general, indicating that the

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<sup>44</sup> McKane, *PNA*, 666. See also Cohen, *PROVAC*, 211.

<sup>45</sup> Cohen, *PROVAC*, 211.

<sup>46</sup> Gen 2:18 reads, "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a helpmate for him.'"

godly wife cares for her husband in a variety of ways, all of which receive the characterization 'good.'"<sup>47</sup>

While I believe it fair to surmise that the אשת-חיל was a considerate, trustworthy, and loving wife, I think it is also reasonable to assume that at times, she acted in ways that were less than ideal. This is part of the human condition. Hirsh, however, has a different view on this, based on this verse: "A person can do another much good, and still cause him moments of chagrin and hurt by personal whims and caprices, and by the manner in which he acts toward him. But the woman to whom this hymn<sup>48</sup> is dedicated gives her husband nothing but happiness and never even a moment of grief all the days of her life."<sup>49</sup> This notion is not realistic for it is difficult to accept that a wife will *never* hurt her husband in any way, albeit unintentionally. By speaking of the אשת-חיל in this way, Hirsch reduces her to an imaginary, idyllic figure, thereby devaluing Israelite women, in general. If, however, one takes the position, as I do, that the אשת-חיל represents the idealized version of an imperfect woman who, nonetheless, possesses many fine attributes, characteristics, and skills, then the value and worth of the Israelite woman is held intact.

31:13: דרשה צמר ופשתים ותעש בחפץ כפיה "She searches for wool and flax (as material for clothing), and she actively labors with her eager hands."

One of the activities in which the אשת-חיל engages is making clothing for her household (discussed in greater detail, below). In order to do this, she must first acquire

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<sup>47</sup> Stevenson, *COP*, 442.

<sup>48</sup> Wolters argues that Prov 31:10-31 "displays most of the formal characteristics of the hymnic genre (p. 4). Wolters goes on to say "the hymnic form in Israel is not strictly tied either to the praise of God or to the temple liturgy. The acrostic poem in Proverbs, if its hymnic character is recognized, provides us with a unique perspective on the possible early history and function of the hymn in Israel—a perspective quite different from that afforded by the liturgical hymns." Wolters, *SPW*, 8.

<sup>49</sup> Hirsch, *WOM*, 247.



the needed raw materials. This is implied by the presence of the Hebrew verb *דרשה*, meaning *search* or *look for*. It is reasonable to assume, then, that wool and flax were not readily accessible. Rather, the *אשת-חיל* needed to make a concerted effort to seek them out. Cohen suggests this too: "She concerns herself to see that there is an ample supply of material from which to make the necessary clothing."<sup>50</sup> From the A clause of v. 13, I deduce that the *אשת-חיל* was concerned with her household and took the necessary steps to provide for them.

When the *אשת-חיל* works with her hands, be it to make clothing, plant a vineyard or engage in a host of other activities, she does so with enthusiasm. This is suggested by the Hebrew words *בוחפץ כפיה*, *with her eager hands*, found in the B clause of v. 13.

Others interpretations of this phrase include, "... she takes personal pleasure in her work,"<sup>51</sup> she derives pleasure "from her unfettered artistic freedom as the possessor of a pair of skillful hands . . ."<sup>52</sup> and "her hands could not bear to be idle, and even if her palms were folded at rest, they were 'willing' and anxious to work."<sup>53</sup> In other words, the *אשת-חיל* is a creative woman, a hard worker, and anything but lazy.

**31:14:** *היתה כאניות סוחר ממרחק תביא לחמה* "She is like trading vessels, bringing her bread from afar."

The hymn of the *אשת-חיל* continues by comparing her with a merchant ship. The plain meaning of this text is: she acquires food to feed her household. However, a broader reading is required, for there is more information about the *אשת-חיל* contained in this verse.

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<sup>50</sup> Cohen, *PROVAC*, 211.

<sup>51</sup> Stevenson, *COP*, 443.

<sup>52</sup> McKane, *PNA*, 667.

<sup>53</sup> Hirsch, *WOM*, 248.

This is the first indication that the אשת-חיל is a woman of means. She has the financial resources to purchase imported (and more expensive) products from traveling merchants who bring goods from afar. Wanting only the best for her family, she seeks out the choicest supplies that are available.<sup>54</sup>

Inherent in this point is the idea that the אשת-חיל, herself, traded with the traveling merchants. This might come as a surprise to one who believed that only Israelite men engaged in such activity. This verse further debunks the myth that biblical women were kept within the confines of their homes, hidden away from view. Stevenson supports this view, writing, "The wife gathers the needed household materials, both for the daily routine and for the diverse economic enterprises of the home. She trades with traveling merchants as they pass by."<sup>55</sup>

Trading with merchants implies a two-way transaction: not only does the אשת-חיל acquire goods, but she sells items, as well.<sup>56</sup> This supports the idea (noted above in the discussion of v. 11) that the אשת-חיל contributed to the economic well being of her family through her business activities. It is possible that part of her inventory included the garments she made with the wool and flax mentioned above, in v. 13. McKane adds to the idea that the אשת-חיל traded with merchants:

... the words 'she brings her bread from afar' indicate that she explores and exploits the further possibilities of producing wealth on the basis of the husbandry of her household. Her husband is a farmer and she manufactures and trades in the produce of fields and animals. In becoming a secondary producer and trader, she

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<sup>54</sup> See Cohen, *PROVAC*, 212; Aitken, *PROV*, 157.

<sup>55</sup> Stevenson, *COP*, 443.

<sup>56</sup> "Palestine was at the crossroads of the Asia-Africa-Europe trading routes of the ancient world. For most periods of antiquity, the ruined cities show clear signs of a role in international commerce." Meyers, *EVE*, 144.

can be likened to merchant ships; she explores beyond the immediate domestic, wealth-producing context to bring bread from afar.<sup>57</sup>

**31:15:** ותקם בעוד לילה ותתן טרף לביתה וחק לנערותיה "She rises while it is still night and gives food to her household, and prescribes tasks for her attendants."

Verse 15 sheds more light on activities of the אשת-חיל and her contribution to her household. She proves herself to be a concerned and loving mother/wife by rising before her household to prepare their food.<sup>58</sup> However, much more than this is implied in this verse. In antiquity, food preparation was a time-consuming and physically demanding endeavor, for it required the conversion of raw materials into consumable food.<sup>59</sup> It also required the necessary knowledge that allowed for the successful production of edible food. Since women possessed this knowledge, they were valuable, and valued members of society. Additionally, since women were largely responsible for food production, they were in control of the allocation of the resources used for making food. Thus, in a very real way, "... female control of food consumption would have contributed substantially to her domestic power and status."<sup>60</sup> Additionally, archaeological remains indicate bread making was done in households: grinding-stones for transforming grain into loaves of bread and baking ovens (called *tabuns*) were found in virtually all households of the Iron Age.<sup>61</sup>

Verse 15 also speaks to the work ethic of the אשת-חיל. She rises early, even before the sun, indicating that she is not a lazy woman. She is a woman who has

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<sup>57</sup> McKane, *PNA*, 667.

<sup>58</sup> The Hebrew word טרף, used in this verse, is commonly understood to mean torn meat, forbidden meat or animal prey. However, according to Cohen, when used in a poetic way, it refers to food that is consumable by humans; Cohen, *PROVAC*, 212; Also see Ps 111:5.

<sup>59</sup> Meyers, *EVE*, 145.

<sup>60</sup> Meyers, *EVE*, 147.

<sup>61</sup> Meyers, *MRSR*, 430-31. Biblical references to women making bread are Lev 26:26; 1 Sam 8:13, 28:24; Jer 7:18; and Gen 18:6.

responsibility, for she manages her household while overseeing and directing those who work for her. Commentators compliment the אשת-חיל, suggesting she uses her time wisely, is organized, and is the one who sets her household in motion at the start of each day.<sup>62</sup>

**31:16:** זממה שדה ותקחהו מפרי כפיה נטעה כרם “She ponders a field and acquires it, with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.”

In addition to producing food for her family, running her household, making clothing, and trading with merchants, the אשת-חיל also purchases land. This verse suggests that she makes, and acts, on her own decisions. This supports the idea that I put forth with regard to v. 11: the husband of the אשת-חיל trusts in her decision-making ability. Cohen agrees that she acts alone, writing, “She examines the value of a piece of land which is for sale and, being satisfied with it, adds it to the family estate.”<sup>63</sup> This statement implies that the אשת-חיל is bright, knowledgeable, and a savvy businesswoman.

The B clause speaks of her planting a vineyard. It is very probable that she, herself, did the planting.<sup>64</sup> Meyers supports this, writing, “Although they did not primarily work in growing field crops, women in early Israel probably did contribute substantially to the hoeing and weeding, and the planting and picking, that vegetable gardens, orchards, and vineyards required.”<sup>65</sup> Stevenson accepts this view, too, citing biblical passages as proof:

There is abundant evidence in the OT to show that women were involved with agricultural and pastoral duties. They tended the flocks (Gen. 29:6; Exod. 2:16)

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<sup>62</sup> See Stevenson, *COP*, 443; McKane, *PNA*, 668.

<sup>63</sup> Cohen, *PROVAC*, 212.

<sup>64</sup> Contra Cohen, who understands this metaphorically. He compares it with 1Kgs 8:44, suggesting that just as Solomon, himself, did not build the Temple, neither did the אשת-חיל, herself, plant the vineyard. Cohen, *PROVAC*, 212.

<sup>65</sup> Meyers, *EVE*, 146.

and watered the camels (Gen. 24:19-20). They worked with raw materials from the fields (Josh. 2:6), kept the vineyards (Song of Sol. 1:6; 8:12), and gleaned in the fields . . . They directed servants (I Sam. 2 5:18-19). The OT does not give us a complete description of the woman's role. There is enough information, however, to show that they were involved with a broad range of activities.<sup>66</sup>

Verse 16 affirms the contribution of the אשת-חיל to her household, reinforces the idea that she and her husband are truly partners, and shows that she engages in physical labor.

31:17: תגדה בעוז מתגיה ותאמץ זרעותיה "She girds herself (her hips and loins) with strength, and strengthens her arms."

This verse paints a picture of a physically strong woman—one who is accustomed to engaging in physical activities. While she has workers who assist her and do her bidding, she also labors in the field, takes care of the flocks, draws water, and the like. These are typical activities of an Israelite woman. Stevenson interprets "girds her loins" as "tying up her robe to keep it from interfering with her labors. This pictures her readiness to begin her work. Further, she 'strengtheneth her arms.' This idiom pictures her power to perform the tasks at hand."<sup>67</sup> The אשת-חיל is a diligent worker whose strength increases through her laborious efforts.<sup>68</sup>

W.G. Plaut, however, suggests this verse is speaking of spiritual strength, rather than physical prowess. He writes, "She is always ready, for her strength is spiritual (see II Kings 4:29)."<sup>69</sup> While I believe the אשת-חיל is a woman who possesses spiritual strength (see discussion of v. 30, below), I do not agree with Plaut's assessment of this verse; I think it does address her physical condition.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Stevenson, *COP*, 444.

<sup>67</sup> Stevenson, *COP*, 444.

<sup>68</sup> See Hirsch, *WOM*, 249.

<sup>69</sup> Plaut, *BOP*, 314.

<sup>70</sup> See also 2 Sam 2:8; 1 Kgs 2:5, 20:32; Jer 1:17 for other biblical references that connect girding one's loins and physical strength.

31:18: טעמה כי-טוב סחרה לא-יכבה בלילה נרה "She perceives<sup>71</sup> that her trading profit is good, her oil lamp<sup>72</sup> does not go out at night."

Two characteristics of the אשת-חיל that are brought forth in this verse are her success as a businesswoman and her strong work ethic—two attributes that often go hand-in-hand. Through her successful trading, the אשת-חיל brings income to her household and helps support her family. She is a motivated, conscientious woman who works long hours—rises early (v. 15) and does not retire until her various duties and responsibilities are complete.

According to one scholar, a lit lamp is indicative of a prosperous household.<sup>73</sup> Given that the אשת-חיל is a successful businesswoman, it makes sense to presume that her household is prosperous.

Meyers offers a different interpretation for this verse, one that suggests she keeps the lamp burning all night to protect her children ("apotropaic purposes"). Meyers supports her idea with biblical passages where "lamp imagery" is connected with protection (Prov 6:20-23; Job 18:56, 29:3; 2 Kgs 8:19).<sup>74</sup>

31:19: ידיה שלחה בכישור וכפיה תמכו פלך "Her hands are cast/placed on the spindle,<sup>75</sup> and her palms hold the spindle."

<sup>71</sup> The Hebrew word used for *perceives* is טעמה, which literally means *tastes*. See Ps 34:9 for another example where טעמה is used in this same way.

<sup>72</sup> Light, small clay lamp filled with oil, usually with only one spout for the wick. See Keil and Baumgartner, *HAL*, 723.

<sup>73</sup> McKane, *PNA*, 668.

<sup>74</sup> Meyers, *HH*, 41. See also Cohen, *PROVAC*, 213.

<sup>75</sup> My translation is based mainly on the work of Wolters, who conducted research on the history of handspinning and the literary structure of v. 19. He concludes that the translation cited by numerous scholars, for this verse, is inaccurate. Other scholars translate the disputed word, כישור, as *distaff*. Wolters informs, however, that this is not an accurate translation since "the evidence for the use of the distaff in the ancient Near East (at least until the impact of Greco-Roman culture in Hellenistic times) is non-existent." Wolters supports his theory by quoting French archeologist A.G. Barrois, who writes, "The valiant woman of Proverbs puts her hands to the *kishor*, which is not the distaff, since the spinning women of the East do

Verse 19 speaks of the handiwork performed by the אשת-חיל, and is consistent with v. 13: “She searches for wool and flax (as material for clothing), and she actively labors with her eager hands.” It is also consistent with archaeological findings that have revealed “. . . the almost ubiquitous use of needles, spindle whorls, and other clothing-related tools in domestic contexts.”<sup>76</sup>

**31:20:** כפה פרשה לעני וידיה שלחה לאביון “She opens her hand to the poor, and her hands are sent to the needy.”<sup>77</sup>

This verse reveals other attributes of the אשת-חיל—she is charitable, generous, and is concerned with the welfare of others.<sup>78</sup> In today’s world, we would liken her to one who gives צדקה, and engages in acts of תיקון עולם, repairing the world. This verse speaks to her moral and ethical nature.

**31:21:** לא-תירא לביחה משלג כי כל-ביחה לבש שנים “She is not afraid of the snow for her household, for all of her family is clothed in crimson.”<sup>79</sup>

The אשת-חיל provides for her family by making clothing. It is believed that women were responsible for the production of cloth and clothing in antiquity.<sup>80</sup> The references to snow and crimson garments might be understood in the following way: “The association [of שנים] with the king and with the tabernacle suggests that this was high-quality material. This is probably the sense in which it occurs here, clothing of such

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not use it at all.” Wolters goes on to explain that *kishor* refers to a large-sized spindle—the type used in “grasped spindle” spinning—that was held and rotated by two hands. Wolters, *SVW*, 50-55.

<sup>76</sup> Meyers, *EVE*, 147.

<sup>77</sup> It is also worth noting the grammatical structure of this verse. The A and B clauses are repetitive. כפה and ידיה are similar terms, referring to her hands; פרשה and שלחה are parallel terms that mean *to spread out* or *to cast out*; and עני and אביון are synonymous words for *poor* or *needy*. This type of parallelism is a very common feature in biblical poetry.

<sup>78</sup> See McKane, *PNA*, 668.

<sup>79</sup> שנים is often translated as *scarlet*.

<sup>80</sup> Meyers, *MRSR*, 433. Unlike the plain white Egyptian dress, Canaanite garments, as evidenced by wall paintings of the 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Egyptian dynasties, were colorful. Sheffer, *NS*, 537.

quality and weight that it warms the wearers.”<sup>81</sup> This interpretation reinforces the notion that the household of the אשת-חיל is well provided for.

Another reading of this verse is different, yet equally flattering to the אשת-חיל. Stevenson writes: “The future holds no fear for this woman, for she has wisely anticipated the needs of her household. The ‘snow’ here represents many such needs that might be set forth as examples.”<sup>82</sup> In other words, the אשת-חיל is a responsible, organized, and well thought-out woman who has the ability to look ahead to the future and plan accordingly.

31:22: מרבדים עשתה-לה שש וארגמן לבושה “She makes for herself coverings, she wears linen and purple garments.”

This verse speaks of the clothing that the אשת-חיל makes for herself. She wears garments made from expensive fabrics, befitting a woman of means. Linen was more costly than other fabrics, such as wool, for it was imported from places like Phoenicia and Egypt.<sup>83</sup> Purple clothing was also costly, and worn by those of distinction and wealth,<sup>84</sup> for the purple dye came from the secretion of mollusks and Murex snails<sup>85</sup> found in the eastern parts of the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>86</sup> This dye was in demand (as were indigo blue and kermes red dyes), yet difficult and costly to prepare.<sup>87</sup> It is reasonable to suggest that the אשת-חיל acquired her linen fabric and purple dye when she traded with traveling merchants (v. 14).

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<sup>81</sup> Stevenson, *COP*, 445-46.

<sup>82</sup> Stevenson, *COP*, 445.

<sup>83</sup> Wolters, *SVW*, 11.

<sup>84</sup> Aitken, *PROV*, 157. See also Judg 8:26; Jer 4:30 & 10:9.

<sup>85</sup> “Murex and purpura snails were harvested off the coast of eastern Crete and the Levant, where shell heaps attest to their use from 2000 BCE onward. The Phoenicians were particularly famous for the ‘Tyrian’ purple dye they produced.” Peskowitz, *TEX*, 192.

<sup>86</sup> See Stevenson, *COP*, 446. “Evidence for dyes begins before 3000 BCE in Europe, Egypt, and perhaps the Levant.” Peskowitz, *TEX*, 192.

<sup>87</sup> Peskowitz, *TEX*, 192.



31:23: נודע בשערים בעלה בשבתו עם-זקני-ארץ "Her husband is known in the gates, where he sits among the elders (a special class)."

This verse provides information about the husband of the אשת-חיל. Until this point in the poem, all that is known about this unnamed spouse is that he trusts his wife and gains materially from being married to this successful businesswoman. Verse 23 speaks about the place of honor that he holds within the community.

In the ancient Near East, it was common for elders, counselors and prominent men of the city to gather at the city's entrance (near the gates) "to adjudicate and discuss local affairs."<sup>88</sup> Some scholars believe the husband is welcomed into this honorific group because of the virtues of his wife. Hirsch is one of them: "When her husband sat in the councils of the city or the nation, he was pointed out as the husband of the valiant woman whose moral and spiritual influence was discernible in the words and actions of the man in public life. Thus through the voice of her husband, the fine example she set and her prudent, wise counsel became a beneficial force in the affairs of the community."<sup>89</sup> In other words the husband enjoys stature in the community because of the notable character of the אשת-חיל.<sup>90</sup>

Stevenson agrees that the husband's position of responsibility is attributed to his wife—but offers a different reason: "The context suggests that his ability to devote himself to these matters rests upon his knowledge that his wife carefully oversees the household. He is able to devote himself to community matters outside of the family."<sup>91</sup> McKane shares this view, writing, "Such a woman makes a notable contribution to her

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<sup>88</sup> Cohen, *PROVAC*, 6.

<sup>89</sup> Hirsch, *WOM*, 250.

<sup>90</sup> Aitken, *PROV*, 158.

<sup>91</sup> Stevenson, *COP*, 446.

husband's success in public life, for he has no domestic worries and can build his reputation on the basis of an honourable and prosperous household. By virtue of her character and genius for sound management he is well set to exert his influence on the life of the community and make a name for himself as a counselor and man of weight."<sup>92</sup>

Whether it is because of her virtues as a moral, ethical and/or spiritual woman, or her managerial skills, what seems clear is that the husband of the אשת-חיל has the privilege of being a member of the town's assembly, and hence the opportunity to discuss and deliberate over matters both legal and political, because of his wife. This is quite significant, for it indicates that the אשת-חיל had a great deal of responsibility, which she carried out successfully, and that members of the community recognized her efforts.

**31:24:** סדין עשתה ותמכר ותגור נתנה לכנעני "She makes and sells clothing, and gives"<sup>93</sup> a girdle to the tradesman."

Verse 24 reverts to discussing the business and trading activities of the אשת-חיל. This depiction of an Israelite woman, who produces and sells clothing, is supported by archaeological findings: "The evidence of textile production in households for household use and perhaps also for tribute, trade, or communal use, is substantial."<sup>94</sup> Additionally, "Textile production, especially in terms of the expertise required, was a quasi-professional enterprise involving knowledge of techniques, substances, equipment, guidelines, and other production factors."<sup>95</sup>

The סדין and תגור, two garments made by the אשת-חיל, were part of the basic garb during the Israelite period. The סדין was an outer linen wrap worn by both men and

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<sup>92</sup> McKane, *PNA*, 669.

<sup>93</sup> Also translated as "trades", see Ezek 27:12.

<sup>94</sup> Meyers, *MRSR*, 433.

<sup>95</sup> Meyers, *MSRS*, 436.

women (Judg 14:12-13; Isa 3:23).<sup>96</sup> "The [*hagor*, or] *hagora* was a long, folded cloth of wool or linen, wound around the waist over the tunic, similar to a cummerbund or sash. Its folds could accommodate weapons and other items" (1 Sam 18:4; Isa 3:24; 2 Sam 20:8).<sup>97</sup> This is supported by a painted sherd, found in modern day Israel, depicting a male figure wearing a "garment over which is a red mantle held at the waist by a belt."<sup>98</sup>

This verse implies, more strongly than others in the poem, that the אשת-חיל interacts with non-Israelite men. This runs contrary to the stereotypical image of the Israelite woman who is locked away in her home, doing little more than tending to the basic needs of her children.

**31:25:** עז-והדר לבושה ותשחק ליום אחרון "Strength and splendor are her clothing, and she laughs at the future."

Verse 25 uses the metaphor of clothing to convey attributes of the אשת-חיל. In other words, she is *wrapped* in strength and splendor, two of her many positive attributes. Plaut interprets this verse as: "Inner qualities are her real garments: she possesses optimism and faces life with confidence."<sup>99</sup> The אשת-חיל is a strong, confident woman who does not look to the future with fear. Rather, she is able to have a positive outlook on life because she trusts that her abilities, skills and positive attributes will see her through the uncertainty of life. Her conscientiousness and kindness are two qualities referred to by עז והדר.<sup>100</sup>

This phrase, עז והדר, is very similar to another phrase, found in Ps 104:1: הדר וקדש (majesty and splendor). The latter is a reference to Adonai: "Adonai, my G-d, You are

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<sup>96</sup> Stevenson, *COP*, 447.

<sup>97</sup> King and Stager, *LBI*, 267-68. See also Cohen, *PROVAC*, 213.

<sup>98</sup> Sheffer, *NS*, 545.

<sup>99</sup> Plaut, *BOP*, 315.

<sup>100</sup> Hirsch, *WOM*, 251.

very great, clothed in majesty and splendor.” The close parallel between the two verses is notable and significant, suggesting that the author purposely chose to praise the אשת-חיל with divine attributes.

Other scholars interpret this verse quite differently, believing it speaks to the financial security of the אשת-חיל. For example, McKane writes, “She can laugh at the uncertainty of the future because she has built up ample reserves and is confident that no tide of adversity will be able to swamp and undermine her prosperity.”<sup>101</sup> Stevenson adds, “Through her many accomplishments, this woman covers herself with ‘strength and honour.’ This alludes to the financial stability of the household under her leadership. For this reason, she faces the future with confidence.”<sup>102</sup> A final interpretation that supports this understanding comes from Cohen: “The future causes her no anxiety because of her secure financial position.”<sup>103</sup>

Either of these explanations could have been the actual intent of the author. Enough has been said about the successful business acumen of the אשת-חיל to accept that this verse speaks of the strength of her financial security. However, it is also plausible to understand this verse as a reference to her strong and splendid character—one that allows her to move through life with confidence, self-reliance, and a positive outlook.

**31:26:** פיה פתחה בחכמה ותורת-חסד על-לשונה “Her mouth opens with wisdom, and kind teaching is on her tongue.”

This verse focuses attention on the intellect of the אשת-חיל. Depending on how one translates and understands תורת-חסד, this verse will or will not have a religious

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<sup>101</sup> McKane, *PNA*, 669.

<sup>102</sup> Stevenson, *COP*, 447.

<sup>103</sup> Cohen, *PROVAC*, 214. Oesterley notes that v. 25 speaks to her *social* strength, while v. 17 refers to her physical strength. Toy, *CEC*, 547.

connotation. According to Koehler-Baumgartner, חורת-חסד means *kind teaching*. This definition, by itself, does not necessarily invoke Torah or religion.

McKane understands this verse in a secular way: "She [the אשת-חיל] is equally adept at instruction and management. Alert and energetic, she has her finger on the pulse of her household and nothing escapes her scrutiny and control. Whatever she has to say ranks as wisdom and reliable advice."<sup>104</sup> Cohen also subscribes to an interpretation that refers to her overall intelligence and ability to communicate with others in a kind fashion: "When she speaks, her words are distinguished by good sense and discretion . . . . She gives her directions to children and servants in sympathetic language and not in a domineering tone of voice."<sup>105</sup> C.H. Toy agrees, writing: "Though firm in her administration, as becomes a business woman, she is not domineering or harsh."<sup>106</sup> Each of these scholars lauds the אשת-חיל for being an effective manager who is bright, effective, and has the ability to direct others with respect and kindness.

Stevenson, however, reads a more religious and spiritual tone into this verse. He translates v. 26 as, "She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness."<sup>107</sup> His comments on this verse accordingly: "As she instructs her family, the godly wife carries out her responsibilities in 'wisdom' . . . and in 'kindness' . . . . This moral example in her instruction likely makes more of an impact on the children than the formal teaching that she gives them. It is important that godly character shine forth in every situation. This woman has a consistent example before her family."<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> McKane, *PNA*, 670.

<sup>105</sup> Cohen, *PROVAC*, 214.

<sup>106</sup> Toy, *CEC*, 547.

<sup>107</sup> Stevenson, *COP*, 447.

<sup>108</sup> Stevenson, *COP*, 447.

In this verse, I do not believe תורת-חסד has a religious implication. Like many of the verses in Prov 31:10-31, the meaning is more or less straightforward. For this reason, I am inclined to agree with the scholars who suggest v. 26 praises the אשת-חיל for being a wise and intelligent woman who knows how to share her knowledge, guidance and instruction in a manner that is received well by others.

31:27: צופיה הליכות ביתה ולחם עצלות לא תאכל "She examines the doings of her household, and the bread of sluggishness she does not eat."

This verse touches on a characteristic of the אשת-חיל that has already been referred to (rises early and retires late), but which is now stated directly: her diligent work ethic. Verse 27 not only indicates that she manages her household and staff, but it also credits her with being a conscientious worker. The use of the Hebrew word ביתה, *her house*, is notable, for it implies that she, too, is responsible for the activities that take place within, and around, her household.<sup>109</sup> This is supported by Meyers, who writes:

... the female's role in the household production system was no less important than the male's. Women participated in agricultural tasks, were responsible for the processing of crops into comestibles, made most of the clothing and probably also the baskets and the ceramic vessels, managed the activities of children and grandchildren (and of servants, hired workers, sojourners and the like, if present), to say nothing of their role as progenitors. In such situations, households are typically characterized by internal gender balance rather than gender hierarchy.<sup>110</sup>

Stevenson also views the אשת-חיל as a diligent woman who remains quite busy: "She does not eat "the bread of idleness" through indolence. Rather, she works long hours in order to establish the well-being of the home."<sup>111</sup> C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch comment similarly: "Her eyes are turned everywhere; she is at one time here, at another there, to look after all with her own eyes; she does not suffer the day's work, according to

<sup>109</sup> See also Prov 31:21; Gen 24:28; Ruth 1:8; Song 3:4, 8:2.

<sup>110</sup> Meyers, *RH*, 98-9.

<sup>111</sup> Stevenson, *COP*, 447.

the instructions given, to be left undone, while she folds her own hands on her bosom; but she works, keeping an oversight on all sides, and does not eat the idleness . . . but bread well deserved . . .”<sup>112</sup>

**31:28-29:** קמו בניה ויאשרוה בעלה ויהללה . רבות בנות עשו חיל ואת עליה על-כלנה “Her children<sup>113</sup> rise up and call her happy, her husband praises her, too [saying] ‘Many daughters<sup>114</sup> have proven themselves capable<sup>115</sup>, but you surpass all of them.’”

While Prov 31:10-31 pays tribute to the אשת-חיל by describing and applauding her various actions, activities, strengths, and characteristics, vv. 28 and 29 praise her abilities as a mother and wife. The husband and children of the אשת-חיל recognize and appreciate what she does for them, be it educating, clothing, feeding, and/or working to insure their financial security. These verses suggest that appreciation and gratitude are expressed; the אשת-חיל is not taken for granted.<sup>116</sup>

**31:30:** שקר החן והבל היפי אשה יראת-י' היא תתהלל “Grace is deceitful/false and beauty is vain, [but] a woman who fears/respects Adonai will be praised.”

While vv.10-29 discuss tangible matters as they relate to the אשת-חיל, such as spinning, trading, planting, manufacturing, and managing, v.30 deals with more ethereal topics—one’s relationship with G-d and the nature of beauty. Since the content of this verse differs so greatly from the previous ones—particularly with regard to religion—some scholars believe an emendation was made to the original text. Toy writes, “[the reference to Adonai] may be the correction of a scribe who thought a poem describing the

<sup>112</sup> Keil and Delitzsch, *COT*, 339.

<sup>113</sup> The Hebrew word בניה can refer to sons, or to a combination of both sons and daughters.

<sup>114</sup> Some suggest *daughter* is a poetic synonym for *women*. See Plaut, *BOP*, 315; Cohen, *PROVAC*, 215.

<sup>115</sup> חיל can also be translated as *valiantly*, *virtuously*, and *bravely*.

<sup>116</sup> “Her husband and sons sing her praises and testify to her superlative worth.” McKane, *PNA*, 670.

ideal woman should not fail to mention piety as an element of her character.”<sup>117</sup> Crook has a similar, yet somewhat different view: The אשת-חיל is “sufficiently colored by Israelite religion to bring her recognizably into the community of Israel.”<sup>118</sup> Other than the comment in v.30 that says the אשת-חיל respects Adonai, there is nothing in this hymn that indicates she actually worshipped Adonai. There is no indication that she offered sacrifices or engaged in other *Yahwistic* cultic rituals. Likewise, nothing is said that speaks of her ideological or theological beliefs. Inclusion of such information would lend credence to the idea that she truly was a religious woman.

While the suggestion, that a textual gloss was made to v.30, is plausible, albeit conjectural, there are other scholars who think piety is the culminating virtue of the אשת-חיל, and the source of her “industry, business acumen, reliability and kindness.”<sup>119</sup> Plaut perceives her to be a God-fearing woman and suggests it is her piety, more so than her other qualities, that makes her “valorous.”<sup>120</sup>

While this is the main topic of v. 30, the concept of beauty is also raised in this verse. The A clause, שקר הזון והבל היפי, “grace is deceitful/false and beauty is vain” distinguishes between fleeting, false, physical beauty and true, enduring, inner beauty. The text is not denouncing beauty. Rather, it is implying that one’s inner beauty, as defined by character and action, are more important than one’s physical beauty. This is particularly true with the אשת-חיל, for nothing is known of her physical appearance.

<sup>117</sup> Toy, *CEC*, 549. See also Oesterley, *TBOP*, 287.

<sup>118</sup> Crook, *MM*, 137.

<sup>119</sup> Aitken, *PROV*, 158; Fox, “Proverbs” in *JSB*, 1498. See also Prov 1:7, 2:5, and 9:10.

<sup>120</sup> Plaut, *BOP*, 315.



However, her behavior, attributes and piety have won her great favor in the eyes of her family and community.<sup>121</sup>

**31:31:** תנו-לה מפרי ידיה ויהללוה בשערים מעשיה "Give her from the fruit of her hands, and let her deeds praise her in the gates."

This concluding verse acknowledges and confirms that the אשת-חיל deserves praise for all that she does. The difference in opinion between scholars is how literally to interpret "praise her in the gates." McKane, Keil and Delitzsch understand the verse literally: her achievements and accomplishments have led her to be praised publicly, "in the gates," where people congregate and assemble, for she enjoys a favorable reputation and has a high standing in the community.<sup>122</sup>

Oesterley, on the other hand, refutes this literal interpretation, saying, "... women's domestic virtues were not the kind of things which were discussed in public assemblies; nevertheless, the exaggeration is natural and pardonable."<sup>123</sup>

Stevenson, refuting Oesterley directly, in his work, writes:

This conclusion ignores the fact that the gates of a city served as the center of a wide variety of activities in the OT. Not only were they the place for legal actions (Deut. 21:19-20; 25:7) and prophetic oracles (Jer. 17:19-20; Amos 5:10), but they also served as places for the gathering of news (II Sam. 15:2) and gossip (Ps. 69:12). Ruth received praise in the gates and the people pronounced a blessing upon her there (Ruth 4:11-12). Since the passage poetically describes the ideal woman, the 'gates' may well be meant metaphorically, signifying public praise. A literal understanding of the word, however, fits well with the use of the word elsewhere.<sup>124</sup>

Stevenson supports his position well, especially by citing the public praise of Ruth (see below). The אשת-חיל, being the idealized and near perfect version of the Israelite woman,

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<sup>121</sup> See Isaacs, *EPG*, 72.

<sup>122</sup> See McKane, *PNA*, 670; Keil and Delitzsch, *COT*, 342.

<sup>123</sup> Oesterley, *TBOP*, 287.

<sup>124</sup> Stevenson, *COP*, 449.

certainly deserved to be praised publicly, whether she actually was, or not. Regardless of how she was praised—either publicly or in the privacy of her own home—what remains unchanged is that she was worthy and deserving of praise. The אשת-חיל made major contributions to both her family and society. She was a dynamic, bright and hard working mother, wife, businesswoman and boss, who not only took care of her family, but was able to hold her own in a man's world. Perhaps Fontaine best encapsulates the essence and value of the אשת-חיל when she says,

. . . [The] (*eshet hayil*) indicates a woman of power and valor or a woman who produces prosperity. In the Bible, the term *wife* encodes a set of productive and managerial tasks that, along with a woman's reproductive role, were essential to the existence of the Israelite household. There is no equivalent understanding of 'wife' as a social category in the modern West, where women's household work does not usually contribute to the family economy and tends to be ignored, trivialized, minimized, or otherwise degraded. The often insulting idea of 'just a wife and mother' would have had no meaning in the biblical world.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Fontaine in *WIS*, Meyers, 303.

### 3.

## **BIBLICAL NARRATIVES: THE FOUR MATRIARCHS OF GENESIS—SARAH, REBEKAH, RACHEL, AND LEAH**

The four matriarchs, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah are four biblical women whose personalities are developed to varying degrees in the Genesis narratives. Through their experiences, decisions, actions, struggles, and emotional reactions, one is able to gain some insight into the lives of these influential Israelite women. The narratives of Genesis focus on domestic matters and family life in a way that is not found in the other four books of the Torah.<sup>126</sup>

The stories of the matriarchs represent, in an idealized version, the characteristics and attributes of the Israelite woman, whether they existed or not. While the matriarchs lived a more privileged lifestyle than the average woman, one can still gain insight into the lives of the common Israelite woman by studying their lives, for the stories in Genesis depict the qualities and characteristics that were valued in antiquity. The same holds true today with regard to movies, television shows and magazine pictures: most people do not look like nor live the lifestyle of those shown; however, what is presented nonetheless reflects the values of society, in general. Through the study of the narratives that include Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah, I will highlight characteristics and attributes of the *ideal* Israelite women, noting similarities and differences.

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<sup>126</sup> See Meyers, *EVE*, 14.

## SARAH

Sarah, whose name means *princess*,<sup>127</sup> is the first matriarch mentioned in Genesis. She is introduced in Gen 11:29 as the wife of Abram, אשת-אברם שרי. The next verse reveals an additional detail—she is barren, עקרה, and has no child, אין לה וילד (this is also noted in 16:1).<sup>128</sup> To my modern-day sensibility, it strikes me as odd that the second detail offered about Sarah is her inability to conceive. How often would we, today, introduce a person in that fashion? Is this the most important detail of a woman's life? I think not; however, the book of Genesis seems to inform otherwise. During antiquity, the period of the writing of Genesis,<sup>129</sup> a high value was placed on fertility and producing offspring (particularly males). Bearing a male child brought status to a woman, while infertility brought shame and despair, for it was the woman, and not the man, who was regarded as the source of barrenness.<sup>130</sup> Childlessness, for a married woman, was understood as “a mark of divine disfavor,”<sup>131</sup> and as “a misfortune of overwhelming proportions.”<sup>132</sup> The impact of this is reinforced when one considers that Sarah's first reported speech (16:2), like that of Rachel (30:1),<sup>133</sup> reflects a desire to have children<sup>134</sup>: “And Sarai said to Abram, ‘Look, Adonai has prevented me from giving birth. Come please, to my slave-girl, and maybe I will be built up [have a son] from her,’” ותאמר שרי

<sup>127</sup> “If it [the name Sarai] is based on the Akkadian word ‘*sharratu*’ (a term used for the female consort of the moon god Sin, the principal god of Ur), it means ‘queen.’” Potok, *EH*, 62.

<sup>128</sup> “The sentence in 11:30 . . . together with its parallels in 2 Sam. 6:23; Judg. 13:2f; Is. 45:1, is an important witness for the significance of the narrative motif of the infertility of a wife in a variety of different contexts.” Westermann, *WES1*, 139.

<sup>129</sup> “The oldest extant parchment scroll of Genesis dates from about 600 C. E., which is perhaps as much as 1,500 years later than the likely time of its composition.” Plaut, *GEN*, xxiii.

<sup>130</sup> See Sarna, *JPSG*, 119.

<sup>131</sup> Plaut, *GEN*, 148.

<sup>132</sup> Westermann, *WES2*, 237.

<sup>133</sup> Gen 30:1 says: “Give me children, for if not, I will die,” הבה-לי בנים ואם-אין מתה אנכי.

<sup>134</sup> See Alter, *FBM*, 77.

אל-אברם הנה-נא עצרני יי מלדת בא-נה אל-שפחתי אולי אבנה ממנה. She seems to have given up hope that she will be able to give birth to an heir.

Abraham seems to share this conclusion, for he says to Adonai: "Lord Adonai, what can you give me, seeing that I am going to die<sup>135</sup> childless . . . Since you have given me no offspring, my steward will be my heir,<sup>136</sup> . . . אדני יי מה-תתן-לי ואנכי הולך ערירי . . . (15:2-3). Although not stated directly, Abraham appears doubtful that the divine promise of 12:2 ["And I will make of you a great nation," ואעשך לגוי גדול] will come to fruition. It does seem somewhat ironic that this promise from Adonai for offspring comes four lines after the Torah indicates Sarah is incapable of conceiving.<sup>137</sup> With Adonai's intervention, however, Sarah will eventually give birth to a son (see below).

Prior to this happening, however, Sarah—desperate for a child—gives her maidservant, Hagar, to Abraham in order to become a mother through surrogacy. Understanding that her status in the community is at stake, Sarah hopes to build herself up,<sup>138</sup> both figuratively and literally, אולי אבנה ממנה, by having a child through Hagar (16:2). Westermann understands Sarah's action as more of a *necessity* than a desire: "The life of a woman is an integral whole . . . only when she is a member of a family in which she presents her husband with children. In the patriarchal period there was no other way for a woman to be a member of society. It is only in this environment that the

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<sup>135</sup> "The Hebrew says simply 'I am going,' but elsewhere 'to go' is sometimes used as a euphemism for dying, and, as several analysts have argued, the context here makes that a likely meaning." Alter, *FBM*, 73.

<sup>136</sup> "God remains impassively silent in the face of Abram's brief initial complaint, forcing him to continue and spell out the reason for his skepticism about the divine promise." Alter, *FBM*, 73. Also, "In the ancient Near East, a servant who performed filial duties for a childless couple—paying them proper respect, maintaining their household, taking care of their physical needs and comforts in their old age—could become their adopted heir." Potok, *EH*, 83.

<sup>137</sup> See also Gen 17:2,4.

<sup>138</sup> The Hebrew word אבנה, meaning *I will be built up* is also understood to be a wordplay on בן (son) and בנה(build up).

solution that Sarah adopts is comprehensible. It is a question of the very meaning of her life; she knows no other."<sup>139</sup> While this might sound harsh, unreasonable, or even irrational by 21<sup>st</sup> century Western values, the role of mother was valued most by, and for, Israelite women. Motherhood surpassed the other contributions women made to their households, such as food and clothing production, tending to livestock, and assisting with agricultural activities.

The practice of enlisting a surrogate mother is well attested to in ancient Near Eastern legal documents,<sup>140</sup> but this does not mean the process was free from problems. Genesis 16:4 indicates that after Abraham impregnates Hagar, "her mistress [i.e. Sarah] was insignificant in her eyes," ותקל גברתה בעיניה [also translated as "was lessened in her eyes," or "lost caste in her eyes."] Hagar exhibits a sense of superiority over Sarah after conceiving. This is not an isolated occurrence, according to N. Sarna: "This is a natural consequence of a situation in which barrenness is regarded as a disgrace. Ancient law codes reflect the diminished social position of the barren wife."<sup>141</sup>

<sup>139</sup> Westermann, *WES2*, 239.

<sup>140</sup> Alter, *FBM*, 77. According to N. Sarna in *JPSG*, 119, "The custom of an infertile wife providing her husband with a concubine in order to bear children is well documented in the ancient Near East. The laws of Lipit-Ishtar (early 19<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C.E.) deal with the case of a harlot who produces children for the husband of a barren wife; these become his heirs. An Old Assyrian marriage contract (19<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C.E.) stipulates that if the wife does not provide him with offspring within two years she must purchase a slave woman for the purpose. The provision of a concubine slave for bearing children is taken for granted in the laws of Hammurabi in the specific case of a wife who is priestess and is thus barred from giving birth. In Sarai's case, it is unclear whether she had fully despaired of ever having children of her own or whether her action reflects the widespread popular belief that a woman who is unable to conceive may become fertile by adopting a child."

<sup>141</sup> Sarna, *JPSG*, 119. "The laws of Ur-Nammu [2112-2095 B. C. E.] prescribe that the insolent concubine-slave have 'her mouth scoured with one quart of salt' . . . " Sarna, *JPSG*, 120. Potok writes: "The Laws of Hammurabi (numbers 146-147) deal with the problem of the female slave-concubine who bears children and claims equality with her mistress. They prescribe that the insolent concubine be reduced to slave status and again bear the slave mark." Potok, *EH*, 87. Levenson writes: "Given the high estimation of motherhood in biblical culture, the status of Sarai and Hagar now reverses. Among the four things at which 'the earth shudders,' according to the book of Proverbs, is 'a slave-girl who supplants her mistress' (Prov. 30:23)." Levinson, "Genesis" in *JSB*, 36.

When Sarah, herself, finally conceives, it is only because of divine intervention, (as mentioned above). While Abraham is the ultimate benefactor of Sarah's pregnancy, I suggest that Sarah is neither irrelevant nor invisible in the sight of Adonai in this regard. There are several textual references that show God takes notice of Sarah, causes her to become pregnant, and give birth to Isaac: 1) When Abraham tells Adonai that his servant will become his heir, Adonai responds, saying, "This one will not be your heir, but the one that comes forth from you—he will be your heir," יִרְשֶׁךָ זֶה כִּי-אִם יֵצֵא מִמַּעֶיךָ הוּא (15:4). While Adonai is clearly stating that Abraham will become a biological father, it also becomes clear, as the narrative unfolds, that Hagar will not be the mother of the son with whom Adonai establishes a Covenant.

2) When Adonai changes Sarai's name to Sarah, Adonai says, "And I will bless her and I will also give you a son from her; I will bless her and she will become nations, kings of peoples will issue from her," וּבֵרַכְתִּיהָ וְהָיְתָה לְגוֹיִם מְלֻכִּים וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶתְּהָ וְגַם נָתַתִּי מִמֶּנָּה לְךָ בֵּן וּבֵרַכְתִּיהָ וְהָיְתָה לְגוֹיִם מְלֻכִּים. Again, Adonai is indicating that Sarah will become a biological mother, that *she*, too, will be blessed, and that nations will come from *her*. Upon hearing this news, Abraham is skeptical, for he is already one hundred years old and Sarah is ninety (17:17).<sup>142</sup> Adonai reiterates the point, stating further that Sarah will give birth to a son named Isaac, that the Covenant will be established with him, and that Isaac will be born "at this season, in another year,"<sup>143</sup> לְמוֹעֵד הַזֶּה בַּשָּׁנָה הָאֲחֵרָה (17:19, 21).<sup>144</sup>

<sup>142</sup> "In the very moment of prostration, he [Abraham] laughs, wondering whether God is not playing a cruel joke on him in these repeated promises of fertility as time passes and he and his wife approach fabulous old age. He would be content, he goes on to say, to have Ishmael carry on his line with God's blessing." Alter, *FBM*, 84.

<sup>143</sup> בַּשָּׁנָה הָאֲחֵרָה is commonly translated as next year.

<sup>144</sup> "Isaac's birth represents the triumph of God over the limitations of nature." Potok, *EH*, 92.

3) Later, when the three visitors (understood as messengers of Adonai)<sup>145</sup> arrive at Abraham's tent, they ask for Sarah by name: "Where is your wife Sarah?"<sup>146</sup> איה שרה. After Abraham responds that she is in the tent, one messenger says, "I will return to you next year, and your wife Sarah will have a son," וזהו בן לשרה. The messenger does not tell Abraham that *he* will have a son, but rather, he indicates that *Sarah* will have a son. Upon overhearing this news, Sarah laughs. Adonai hears her laughter, and says to Abraham, "Why is this, that Sarah laughed, saying, 'Shall I in fact give birth, being that I am old?' Is this too difficult for Adonai? I will return to you at this season, in about a year's time, and Sarah will have a son," ויאמר "אל-אברהם למה זה צחקה שרה לאמר האף אמנם אלד ואני זקנת. היפלא מיי דבר למרעד אשוב אליך כעת וזהו בן לשרה. Again, even though the comment is directed towards Abraham, the spoken words are, "Sarah will have a son," and not, "You, Abraham, will have a son." This is the second time that this is stated. Scholars indicate that repetition in the Hebrew Bible is significant. I suggest one possible interpretation for this phrase: Adonai has decided that Sarah will become the first matriarch of the Israelite people, and to this end, Adonai blesses her with a son. While one could argue that Sarah has a son so that the divine promise can come true, I do not think this purpose negates my interpretation. In other words, while I fully recognize and accept that Adonai gives Abraham a son so that he can become the father of many, I also assert that Adonai takes an interest in Sarah, as well. Divine intervention, as I will show in this paper, is not limited exclusively to males.

4) The final indication that Adonai intervenes in Sarah's life is found in 21:1-2:

"Adonai took note of Sarah as He said, and Adonai did for Sarah according to what He

<sup>145</sup> See Potok, *EH*, 101; Plaut, *GEN*, 170.

<sup>146</sup> "The fact that the visitors know her name without prompting is the first indication to Abraham (unless one assumes a narrative ellipsis) that they are not ordinary humans." Alter, *FBM*, 86.



spoke.<sup>147</sup> Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the specified time that *Elohim* had spoken," את-שרה כאשר אמר. ויעש יי לשרה כאשר דבר. ותהר ותלד שרה. <sup>148</sup> "פקד את-שרה כאשר אמר. ויעש יי לשרה כאשר דבר. ותהר ותלד שרה. This verse makes it rather clear that Sarah became pregnant, and bore a son, because Adonai deemed it would happen, and then made it happen. God's intervention allowed the promise of posterity to be fulfilled, as well providing the answer to Sarah's prayers for motherhood.

The episodes surrounding Sarah's barrenness and fertility shed light on other aspects of her personality, as well as on her relationship with Abraham. When Sarah decides that she wants Abraham to lie with Hagar, she informs him of her decision. She does not consult with him or ask his opinion; rather, she takes charge of the situation. Abraham, as the text informs, "heeded the voice of Sarai," ישמע אברהם לקול שרי (16:2). In other words, Sarah is a decision-maker in her marital relationship; she is an active participant, a partner, who possesses real power within her marriage. This contradicts the stereotypical belief that Israelite women were passive and impotent women. B. Greenberg furthers this point: "There is a striking contrast between biblical law and biblical narrative, however. The law presupposes a passive woman whose destiny was controlled by men, but the narrative portrays matriarchs as powerful figures."<sup>149</sup>

Another example that shows Sarah's empowerment comes after Hagar gives birth to Ishmael. Hagar's air of superiority leads Sarah to become enraged. Sarah blames Abraham for her loss of status in the eyes of Hagar (16:5). When Sarah finishes chastising Abraham, he responds in a way that affirms not only Sarah's power over

<sup>147</sup> This is a reference to Gen 17:16.

<sup>148</sup> "The Hebrew stem *p-k-d* connotes the direct involvement or intervention of God in human affairs." Sarna, *JPSG*, 145.

<sup>149</sup> Greenberg, *OWJ*, 59.

Hagar, but her ability to make decisions that affect the household: “Here, your slave-girl is in your hands. Do to her what pleases you,” *הנה שפחתך בידך עשי-לה הטוב בעיניך*. Clearly, it is Sarah, not Abraham, who decides what is to become of Hagar.

One might argue that Sarah has the ability to decide how to handle Hagar because Sarah is Hagar’s owner, *ולא שפחה מצרייה ושמה הגר* (16:1). Hagar belongs to Sarah, not to Abraham. Alter confirms this as he defines the Hebrew word *שפחה*: “The tradition of English versions that render this [*שפחה*] as ‘maid’ or ‘handmaiden’ imposes a misleading sense of European gentility on the sociology of the story. The point is that Hagar belongs to Sarah as property, and the ensuing complications of their relationship build on that fundamental fact.”<sup>150</sup> Sarna reinforces this view by focusing on the meaning of *ולא* (*and she had*): “Hebrew *ve-lah* emphasizes Sarah’s proprietary rights. The maid attended primarily to the personal needs of her mistress and apparently was not the common property of husband and wife.”<sup>151</sup> Both of these comments speak to Sarah’s authority and status. She is allowed to own property (albeit human property) and be a master. Sarah’s ownership is affirmed in 16:7, when an angel of Adonai calls out to Hagar saying, *שפחה שרי*, “slave-girl of Sarah.”

A third episode that affirms Sarah status within her household takes place when Sarah sees Isaac and Ishmael together (21:9). She is disturbed by this sight and says to Abraham, “Expel this slave-girl and her son, because this slave-girl’s son will not inherit with my son, with Isaac,” *גרש האמה הזאת עם-בני עם-יצחק* (21:10). Abraham is distressed by Sarah’s directive. God says to Abraham, “Do not let this seem evil in your eyes on account of the boy and your slave-girl. All that Sarah says to you, listen to her voice,

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<sup>150</sup> Alter, *FBM*, 77.

<sup>151</sup> Sarna, *JPSG*, 119.

because with Isaac, your descendants will be called,"<sup>152</sup> ויאמר אלהים אל-אברהם אל-ירע בעיניך. (21:12). Abraham heeds Sarah's command, rises early the next morning, gives bread and water to Hagar, and sends her away with Ishmael (21:14). The significance of these verses are two-fold: First they show Sarah is respected and her opinion matters. She is not an irrelevant, invisible or silent woman. Second, it adds credence to a point made earlier, that Adonai pays attention to Sarah, and hears her voice. By extension of thought, it can be inferred that God tells Abraham, "Listen to her voice," שמע בקלה, because Sarah is an intelligent, insightful woman.<sup>153</sup>

A final passage that reflects the respectful treatment Sarah receives from her husband begins with Gen 12:5. When Abraham leaves Haran for Canaan, Sarah goes with him, ויקח אברהם את-שרי אשתו ואת-ליות בן-אחיו. This seemingly minor detail, noted in the text, is anything but minor. The inclusion of Sarah's name is meaningful, for it implies that she is a significant person, both to the narrative and to Abraham. Lot is the only other person, who left with Abraham who is mentioned by name.<sup>154</sup> When Abraham and Sarah travel to Egypt, due to a famine in Canaan, Abraham makes a request of Sarah: "Here now, please! I know that you are a woman who is beautiful in appearance."<sup>155</sup> When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'She is his wife.' They will kill me, and you, they will let live. Now please say that you are my sister,<sup>156</sup> so that it will be good for me on account of you, and I will be able to live—because of you," ויהי כאשר הקריב לבוא מצרימה.

<sup>152</sup> This is an indication that Abraham's lineage will descend through Isaac.

<sup>153</sup> Alter indicates that *listen to her voice* is a Hebrew idiom meaning "to obey." Alter, *FBM*, 104.

<sup>154</sup> References to Sarah traveling with Abraham are also made in Gen 12:20 and 13:1.

<sup>155</sup> Speiser translates יפת-מראה as "comely of appearance." He translates יפת-תאר, found in Gen 29:17, as "comely of figure," and refers to the latter as a companion phrase to the former. Speiser, *ABG*, 90.

<sup>156</sup> The sister-wife motif refers to an attempt by a husband to pass his wife off as his sister. This occurs three times in the Torah—twice with Abraham and Sarah (Gen 12:13; 20:2) and once with Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 26:7).

ויאמר אל-שרי אשתו הנה-נא ידעתי כי אשה יפת-מראה את. והיה כי-יראו אתך המצרים ואמרו אשתו זאת (12:11-13). The two most significant words in these three verses (for the purpose of this paper) are *Please say*, אמר-נא, for they clearly indicate that Abraham is making a request of Sarah. He is not demanding or commanding her into action. Rather, he is asking her to assist him. Sarna holds this opinion too: "This [Please say] is not an order but a respectful plea."<sup>157</sup> R. Friedman comments, regarding the usage of נא, "Abraham's words to Sarah contain the first two occurrences of the Hebrew word *na'*. . . . It is an untranslatable particle that is a sign of polite speech."<sup>158</sup> These commentators support the idea that Sarah's relationship with Abraham is one in which she is treated respectfully. This portrayal serves to dispel the myth that biblical women, in general, were weak, subservient, and controlled by their husbands. It also contradicts the notion that women of antiquity were physically unattractive. This is particularly notable in Sarah's case, for she is sixty-five years old at the time of this occurrence.<sup>159</sup>

Another aspect of Sarah's personality, revealed during episodes involving Hagar (and mentioned above), is her humanness. Despite being the first Israelite matriarch, Sarah is very much a human being who responds to life in a very human way. Like all people, she expresses emotions, has strengths, weaknesses, flaws, and even makes questionable decisions. Perhaps Friedman expresses this sentiment best; ". . . one of the great qualities of the *Tanakh* is precisely that none of its heroes is perfect."<sup>160</sup>

<sup>157</sup> Sarna, *JPSG*, 94.

<sup>158</sup> Friedman, *FRD*, 52. See also Gen 22:2.

<sup>159</sup> Sarna, *JPSG*, 94. For further references to Sarah's age, see Gen 12:4; 17:17; and 23:1.

<sup>160</sup> Friedman, *FRD*, 88-9.

This is first seen with Sarah when Hagar becomes pregnant and adopts an attitude of superiority. While this must have been very upsetting for Sarah, she misdirects her anger. She blames Abraham and holds him responsible. To make matters worse, it was Sarah, not Abraham, who suggested that they have sexual relations. Sarah had a right to exercise legal recourse against Hagar (see nn. 8-9), but it was inappropriate and unfair for her to blame Abraham.

Sarah's emotions continue to get the best of her, even after she chides Abraham. One might expect Sarah to punish Hagar in some fashion, but she deals with her so harshly that she flees. Genesis 16:6 states: "Sarai oppressed her [Hagar] and she fled from her," ותענה שרַי ותברח מפניה. E. A. Speiser indicates the literal meaning of ותענה is "applied force to her, treated her with violence."<sup>161</sup> C. Potok echoes this sentiment, writing, "The Hebrew verb used here (*va-t-anneha*) implies that Sarai subjected Hagar to physical and psychological abuse and carries with it the nuance of a negative judgment of her actions."<sup>162</sup> The point of including these commentators is not to condemn Sarah and say that she is a terrible person; rather, it is to convey the notion that although she is a matriarch—the primary matriarch—of the Israelites (and eventually the Jewish people), her emotional composition is no different than others. She is not exempt from making mistakes or overreacting. She is not a perfect woman who is beyond the pale of human experience. Rather, she is a *real* person who experiences real life issues and reacts to them. As Sarna says, "The biblical heroes are not portrayed as demigods or perfect

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<sup>161</sup> Speiser, *ABG*, 118.

<sup>162</sup> Potok, *EH*, 87.

human beings. They are mortals of flesh and blood, subject to the same temptations and possessed of the same frailties as are all other human beings."<sup>163</sup>

When Sarah sees Isaac playing with Ishmael, her humanness shines through, as well. When she tells Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael, Sarah further insults and degrades them, thereby showing the "depth of her contempt"<sup>164</sup> by not referring to them by their proper names: "Expel this slave-girl and her son," גֵּרְשׁ הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת-בְּנָהּ (21:10). Commentators have tried to understand Sarah's motivation for having Hagar and Ishmael sent away; however, based on the text, one is hard pressed to find an actual threat posed by Ishmael. Speiser writes, "According to [Gen] xvi 16 combined with vs. [21:] 5 above . . . Ishmael would now be at least fifteen years old. But his 'playing' with Isaac need mean no more than that the older boy was trying to amuse his little brother. There is nothing in the text to suggest that he was abusing him, a motive deduced by many troubled readers in their effort to account for Sarah's anger."<sup>165</sup> Alter notes, "Some medieval Hebrew exegetes, trying to find a justification for Sarah's harsh response, construe the verb [playing] as a reference to homosexual advances, though that seems far-fetched."<sup>166</sup> Others suggest that Sarah does not want Isaac to be faced with any competition from his half-brother, Ishmael. She wants to insure that he, and only he, will inherit from Abraham. Additionally, one cannot overlook the fact that by sending them away, not only does Sarah remain the sole wife of Abraham, but also, she no longer has a daily, visible, reminder that her maidservant produced a son for her husband. Given the

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<sup>163</sup> Sarna, *JPSG*, 94.

<sup>164</sup> Levenson, "Genesis" in *JSB*, 44. See also Alter, *FBM*, 103.

<sup>165</sup> Speiser, *ABG*, 155.

<sup>166</sup> Alter, *FBM*, 103.

lack of clear evidence of any wrongdoing by Ishmael, I conclude that Sarah's decision was based on her emotional state.

The final example that supports the idea that Sarah, too, is a multi-dimensional woman with both assets and shortcomings, occurs when the three visitors come to Mamre. When Sarah hears one of Adonai's messengers say that she will give birth to a son in the following year (18:10), she laughs (18:12). God hears her laughter, asks Abraham why she laughed, and Sarah responds with a lie: "I did not laugh," *לא צחקתי* (18:15). The text indicates Sarah lied because she was afraid, *כי יראה*, (18:15). However, Adonai gets the final word, saying: "No, you did laugh," *לא כי צחקת* (18:15). A weakness of Sarah is exposed in this exchange. "Sarah is now afraid because she knows that she is face to face with a messenger of God. Her fear expresses itself in her denial that she laughed. . . . It is only now that she is aware of what she has done. . . . Sarah would much prefer to cancel her laughter; but the messenger says: no, the laughter remains a fact."<sup>167</sup>

This depiction of Sarah is quite human. I'm sure many people can relate to Sarah's attempt to backtrack, and get out of a lie. It is this human quality of biblical figures that allows readers to relate to them, despite the passage of time.<sup>168</sup> As said by Potok, "The Bible does not gloss over the human failings of Israel's traditional heroes."<sup>169</sup>

Despite her shortcomings, Sarah is nonetheless respected during her lifetime as well as in death. Genesis 23:1 notes her passing: "And Sarah's life, the years of Sarah's

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<sup>167</sup> Westermann, *WES2*, 282.

<sup>168</sup> "She is depicted as down-to-earth to a fault, with her curiosity, her impulsiveness, and her feeble attempt at deception . . . For all that Sarah knew, the promise of a child was a gesture made by meddlesome travelers; her impetuous reaction was one of derision." Speiser, *ABG*, 131.

<sup>169</sup> Potok, *EH*, 101.

life, were one hundred and twenty-seven years, שנה ועשרים שנה ושבע שנים. יהיו חיי שרה מאה. שני חיי שרה. The inclusion of this information in the Hebrew Bible is significant, for it denotes the importance of Sarah, a woman, in Israelite society.<sup>170</sup> It must also be stated that Sarah is the only matriarch, and the only woman, whose age at death is recorded.<sup>171</sup> While this speaks to the special treatment afforded Sarah, it does not diminish the significance of this occurrence, for the lifestyle of the matriarchs set the tone for the *ideal* treatment of women in society, in general. Therefore, one can understand the mentioning of Sarah's age at the time of her death as a model that attests to the valuation of women in Israelite society. This does not mean that the average Israelite woman was treated as well as Sarah, or was afforded the same privileges as she; however, it does indicate that at least some women in Israelite were treated quite well.

Sarah is then honored further when Abraham mourns her death. Genesis 23:2 reads: "Sarah died in Kiryat Arba—that is Hebron<sup>172</sup>—in the land of Canaan. And Abraham mourned for Sarah and wept for her," לשרה ולבכתה.<sup>173</sup> This is the only reference to mourning a woman's death in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>174</sup> It is significant, nonetheless, for it serves as a model for how other Israelite women may have been treated when they died. Abraham's mourning and grieving over the loss of Sarah shows how much he valued her, and how painful and difficult it was when she died. I make this

<sup>170</sup> "This repetition [Sarah's life, the years of Sarah's life] that emphasizes a woman's age at her death is unique in the Bible. It testifies to Sarah's importance as the first Matriarch." Potok, *EH*, 127.

<sup>171</sup> "Her age surpasses the ideal 120 with the sacred number of 7." See Amit, *WC*, 155.

<sup>172</sup> "Hebron, in the hill country of Judah, 20 miles south-southwest of Jerusalem, was also the first seat of David's kingship (2 Sam. 2.1-4; 5.1-5)." Levenson, "Genesis" in *JSB*, 47. Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Leah are also buried in the Cave of Machpelah. See Gen 23:19; 35:27; 49:29-32; 50:13.

<sup>173</sup> In this particular verse, לטפח means "begin to sing the lament for the dead, mourn for someone." Koehler and Baumgartner, *HAL*, 763.

<sup>174</sup> Amit, *WC*, 156. There are references to mourning the death of men in the Hebrew Bible, such as Gen 50:10 (Joseph mourns the death of his father, Jacob).



deduction because mourning and bewailing—a part of Israelite religious ritual—can also be understood as an act of emotional expression.<sup>175</sup>

Once Abraham completes his mourning period, he focuses his attention on burying his deceased wife. He purchases land—the cave of Machpelah—so that he can give Sarah a proper burial. “Sarah’s grave is the first permanent, legal presence in the land promised to Abraham and to their descendants.”<sup>176</sup> It is quite notable that an event surrounding a woman (albeit the death of Sarah) brings with it the fulfillment of part of Adonai’s Covenant with Abraham—land acquisition (17:8). It is also important to recognize that Sarah’s death marks “. . . the first recorded death and burial in the history of the people Israel.”<sup>177</sup> This event clearly shows that Israelite women (at least some of them) were valued in antiquity.

### **REBEKAH**

After the burial of Sarah, Abraham turns his attention to his son, Isaac. More specifically, he focuses on finding an appropriate wife for Isaac. Abraham understands that until Isaac marries, the divine promise of posterity cannot be fulfilled. To this end, Abraham sends his senior servant back to his birthplace, in search of a suitable wife. Prior to his departure, however, the servant is made to swear an oath, indicating that he will not select a wife from among the daughters of the Canaanites (24:3), nor will he bring Isaac back to Abraham’s land of origin if the selected woman will not return with

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<sup>175</sup> See Plaut, *GEN*, 219.

<sup>176</sup> Amit, *WC*, 158.

<sup>177</sup> Potok, *EH*, 127.

him, to Canaan (24:6). Additionally, Abraham informs his servant<sup>178</sup> that Adonai will send an angel<sup>179</sup> to help the servant be successful in his mission (24:7).

When the servant arrives at his destination (Aram-Naharaim), he goes directly to the well that is outside the city.<sup>180</sup> The servant then prays, asking that the woman—whom God has selected to be Isaac's wife—will offer water to his camels; this, the servant hopes, will be a sign from God, indicating that she is the selected spouse for Isaac (24:11-14). The young maiden who approaches the servant is Rebekah, the great-niece of Abraham. When he asks for a little bit of water, מעט-מים, Rebekah replies, "Drink, my Lord . . . I will also draw water for your camels until they drink their fill, גם. . . שותה אדני . . . (24:18-19). From this initial encounter (24:15-20), several physical characteristics are learned about Rebekah, and thus about the *ideal* Israelite woman.

Rebekah is very beautiful, נערה טבת מראה מאד. Her physical attractiveness is also mentioned in 26:7, in conjunction with the sister-wife motif:<sup>181</sup> "When the men of the place asked about his wife, he said, 'She is my sister,' because he was afraid to say, 'my wife,' lest the men of this place kill me on account of Rebekah, because she is beautiful," וישאלו אנשי המקום לאשתו ויאמר אחתי הוא כי ירא לאמר אשתי פן-יהרגני אנשי המקום על-רבקה כי-טובת מראה היא. As with Sarah (12:12; 20:2), Rebekah's well-being (and the life of her spouse) are cast into jeopardy before a foreign king, because of her beauty. The Hebrew Bible

<sup>178</sup> Many scholars speculate that the servant is Eliezer, mentioned in Gen 15:2. "The chief servant in an aristocratic household was invested with considerable power and responsibility." Sarna, *JPSG*, 162.

<sup>179</sup> "God's providence is here personified as a heavenly being." Potok, *EH*, 132

<sup>180</sup> "It was natural for a newly arrived stranger to head for the public wells. He could replenish his water supplies and at the same time cull much valuable information about the town and make useful contacts, for the well served as a meeting place for the townsfolk and the shepherds. Jacob, too, gravitated at once toward the well on arriving at Haran in 29:2, and Moses did the same thing when he fled to Midian in Exodus 2:15. In each case the encounter at the well eventuated in a betrothal. The three scenes share a number of features in common." Sarna, *JPSG*, 164.

<sup>181</sup> See n. 156.

seems to imply that although pleasing to the eye, beauty can be a dangerous attribute for a woman to possess.<sup>182</sup>

The second stated characteristic about Rebekah is: בתולה ואיש לא ידעה. Literally defined, this phrase means “a virgin whom no man has known,” i.e. no man has had sexual relations with her. Clearly, in biblical times, the virginity of a woman at the time of marriage was quite important. However, more can be learned from the term בתולה<sup>183</sup> when it is not interpreted literally. Y. Amit writes: “In the ancient world, women often married shortly after puberty; therefore, one can assume that Rebekah is very young.”<sup>184</sup> This leads to two notable characteristics of the *ideal* Israelite woman: she marries at a young age—just after she is physically capable of reproducing—and she should be a virgin on her wedding day.

The next insight, gained about Rebekah from the opening well scene, is that she is physically active and strong. As Alter indicates, Rebekah’s watering all ten of the camels is “... a feat of ‘Homeric’ heroism. . . . A camel after a long desert journey drinks many gallons of water, and there are ten camels here to water, so Rebekah hurrying down the steps of the well would have had to be a nonstop blur of motion in order to carry up all this water in her single jug.”<sup>185</sup> This is even more impressive when one considers that a single camel “requires at least twenty-five gallons of water to regain the weight it loses in the course of a long journey. It takes a camel about ten minutes to drink this amount of water.”<sup>186</sup> Whether the description of Rebekah watering ten camels by herself, with one single jug, is hyperbolic or actual, the indication remains the same: a strong woman was a

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<sup>182</sup> See Prov 6:25.

<sup>183</sup> בתולה also refers to “a sexually mature young girl of marriageable age.” Potok, *EH*, 133.

<sup>184</sup> Amit, *WC*, 160.

<sup>185</sup> Alter, *FBM*, 120.

<sup>186</sup> Sarna, *JPSG*, 164.

desirable attribute in antiquity—much the way size 2 women are desired, yet not the norm, in America. It is possible that Rebekah was a strong woman (like the אשת-חיל of Prov 31:17) for no place in the Hebrew Bible does it suggest that women were small or thin. If Rebekah did complete such an arduous and labor-intensive task, she must have had great stamina. This quality is alluded to in 24:20 and 24:26, where Rebekah is described as *hurrying*, וחמהר, when she draws water for the camels. She is portrayed as quick on her feet when she *runs*, ותרץ, to inform her family that Abraham's servant will be their overnight guest (24:28). Rebekah is portrayed as an energetic woman who does not tarry, and is comparable to the אשת-חיל who does not eat the bread of sluggishness (Prov 31:27.)<sup>187</sup>

In addition to mentioning Rebekah's physical characteristics, the episode at the well also sheds light on some of Rebekah's positive personality traits. Perhaps the most notable are her generosity, helpfulness, friendliness, and hospitality.<sup>188</sup> These are demonstrated not only by the way she draws water for the servant and his camels, but also by the way she welcomes this complete stranger into her family's home: "We have much straw and fodder [for the camels] and also a place for you to spend the night," וְתֹאמַר אֵלָיו גַּם-תֵּבֶן גַּם-מִסְפּוֹא רַב עִמָּנוּ גַם-מָקוֹם לָלוֹן (24:25). By caring for and helping this stranger, Rebekah models the Jewish value of הכנסת אורחים, *welcoming the stranger*. In this regard, Rebekah is comparable to Abraham, who welcomed three strangers into his tent at Mamre, provided them with food, water, and a place to rest (18:2-5). Similarly,

<sup>187</sup> "She went about her business briskly and conscientiously, not wasting time in idle gossip." Sarna, *JPSG*, 165.

<sup>188</sup> "To provide provender and shelter for the camels is a munificent undertaking." Sarna, *JPSG*, 166.

when Rebekah runs to her mother's household,<sup>189</sup> to tell them to prepare for their guest (24:28), it is similar to Abraham running to Sarah and his servant (18:6-7), telling them to prepare food for their guests. In order to draw another comparison between Rebekah and Abraham, the patriarch *par excellence*, I will digress.

When Rebekah leaves her family's home to travel to Canaan and marry Isaac, her mother and brother bestow a blessing upon her, before she leaves. A similarity exists between this blessing and the one that Abraham receives from Adonai on Mount Moriah, after Abraham sacrifices a ram in place of Isaac. Rebekah's blessing reads, "They blessed Rebekah and said to her, 'Our sister, may you become thousands of ten thousands, and your offspring inherit the gate of their enemies,'" <sup>190</sup> ויברכו את-רבקה ויאמרו לה אחתנו את היי (24:60). The blessing from Adonai says, "I will bless you and multiply your offspring like the stars of heaven and the sand on the shore of the sea, and your offspring will inherit the gate of their enemies," כי-ברך אברכך והרבה ארבה את- (22:17). The similarity between these two blessings is that they both request a vast number of offspring who will have the ability to subdue their enemies. The significance of this is that it shows that Rebekah, too, has a role in fulfilling the Covenant made between Adonai and Abraham—progeny and land.<sup>191</sup> While it's certainly true that Isaac becomes the second Israelite patriarch, he does not receive the blessing of multiple offspring and land acquisition, as does Rebekah. With this in mind, it is as if the text is saying: the patriarchal line will continue through Rebekah. Whether this is the intended message of the text or not, it

<sup>189</sup> "The mention of women's domain (tent or house) occurs only in Genesis 24, the book of Ruth (1:8), and Song of Songs (3:4, 8:2)—texts in which we find women of strong character." Amit, *WC*, 162.

<sup>190</sup> This blessing is often recited over brides at contemporary Jewish wedding ceremonies.

<sup>191</sup> Amit, *WC*, 164. See also Sarna, *JPSG*, 169; and Levenson, "Genesis" in *JSB*, 51.

does not lessen the significance of the similarity between the blessings bestowed upon both Abraham and Rebekah.

Returning to the episode at the well, when Rebekah offers assistance to the traveling servant, there is no indication that she is doing this for self-serving motives. Rather, it seems to be an altruistic gesture. Additionally, her willingness and ability to converse with a complete stranger indicate that she is not a shy person, but rather, an outgoing and confident woman who feels at ease around others.<sup>192</sup> Commentators describe Rebekah's personality as forceful and enterprising,<sup>193</sup> managerial,<sup>194</sup> energetic, and resourceful.<sup>195</sup> These are strong and complimentary terms that portray a capable and able-bodied young woman. They are also similar to the attributes of the אשת-חיל (Prov 31:11, 13, 15, 18, 25, 27).

While the revelation of Rebekah's physical and personal attributes are significant to the understanding of the *ideal* Israelite woman, perhaps the most notable attribute from the well scene is that Adonai intervenes on her behalf. For Rebekah, this occurs first when God selects her to become the wife of Isaac, and the next matriarch of the Israelites.<sup>196</sup> She appears at the well as soon as the servant completes his prayer, asking God for guidance in selecting a wife for Isaac (24:12-15). Rebekah is chosen because she has the qualities and characteristics needed to insure that Adonai's promise would be carried forward, into the future.<sup>197</sup> "... the fact that the ideal conditions stipulated in the servant's prayer were met precisely signifies that God guided not only the destiny of

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<sup>192</sup> See Plaut, *GEN*, 275. "Nothing suggests that Rebekah, or other women, were expected to be in seclusion, away from men's gaze or contact, as would become customary later in the Middle East (see also Genesis 29:1-10)." Amit, *WC*, 160.

<sup>193</sup> Alter, *FBM*, 119.

<sup>194</sup> Plaut, *GEN*, 261.

<sup>195</sup> Amit, *WC*, 160.

<sup>196</sup> See Amit, *WC*, 158.

<sup>197</sup> Plaut, *GEN*, 240.

Isaac and Rebekah but also the prayer of the servant.”<sup>198</sup> Rebekah’s selection by Adonai is also supported by the text. Rebekah’s father and brother, following their conversation with the servant, proclaim: “The matter comes from Adonai,” מִי יצא הדבר (24:50).

The next time that Adonai intervenes with Rebekah is in chapter twenty-five. As 25:21 indicates, Rebekah is barren,<sup>199</sup> עקרה (the same word used to describe Sarah in 11:30). Isaac is distressed by this, and prays to Adonai on behalf of his wife, ויעתר יצחק. Adonai responds and Rebekah conceives (25:21). While I would like to say that Adonai intervenes *on behalf* of Rebekah, I cannot, for the text reads, “Adonai responded to him [Isaac],” ויעתר לו יי, meaning God responded for the benefit of Isaac. However, it is nonetheless acceptable to suggest that Adonai is involved with Rebekah’s life, for it is *only* because of Adonai’s intervention that Rebekah conceives.

The next act of divine intervention comes during Rebekah’s pregnancy. Genesis 25:22 tells of the struggle that occurs between Esau and Jacob, within Rebekah’s womb. This causes such discomfort for Rebekah that it leads her “to inquire of Adonai,” לדרש את-יי. God responds to Rebekah. This is known because the text then says: “Adonai said to her,” ויאמר יי לה (25:23). Even though the communication between Adonai and Rebekah is through an oracle<sup>200</sup>—an agent of Adonai—it still constitutes a valid expression of divine contact: Rebekah calls out to God, God responds, and Rebekah hears the reply. In fact, Rebekah hears the voice of God before Isaac, for Adonai first speaks to Isaac in 26:2. Based on this, Friedman concludes: “In matters of revelation, man is not more

<sup>198</sup> Plaut also indicates, “This is the first prayer for divine guidance recorded in the Bible, and it comes from the heart and mouth of a nameless individual.” Plaut, *GEN*, 240.

<sup>199</sup> “The ‘barren mother’ is a common motif in special birth stories. Compare also Rachel (Gen. ch 30) and Hannah (1 Sam. ch 1).” Levenson, “Genesis” in *JSB*, 53.

<sup>200</sup> See Alter, *FBM*, 129; Plaut, *GEN*, 247; Westermann, *WES2*, 412-3; Sarna, *JPSG*, 179.

important than woman.”<sup>201</sup> When the oracle speaks with Rebekah, perhaps the most information she hears is: “the older will serve the younger,” וְרֵב יַעֲבֹד צַעִיר. I draw this conclusion because her most controversial action, taken on behalf of Jacob, is based on this knowledge.

According to Israelite tradition, the oldest son (in this case Esau), is entitled to a special blessing from his father (Isaac). Rebekah, however, devises a plan to insure that Jacob, the son whom she loves (25:28), receives the coveted blessing from Isaac before he dies. This blessing, among other things, calls for the recipient to prevail over his brothers (27:29). In order for Rebekah to guarantee that Jacob receives the blessing, she engages in acts of deception. While some commentators question the moral and ethical nature of Rebekah’s actions—and judge her negatively—there is another way to understand Rebekah’s motives. She has received divine communication from an oracle and therefore understands that it is her job to insure that the divine directive is carried out. In other words, even though she crafts a plan that involves trickery and lies, her motivation is noble, for she is carrying out God’s plan.<sup>202</sup> By viewing Rebekah in this light, one understands Rebekah as a God-fearing woman who is obedient to Adonai. This then, is another notable trait of the *ideal* Israelite woman, seen not only with Rebekah, but with the אִשָּׁת-חַיִּל as well (Prov 31:30).

While it is plausible to interpret Rebekah’s efforts, to have Jacob receive the divine blessing, as an expression of loyalty to Adonai, one cannot overlook some of her other actions which are less favorable. After Rebekah successfully arranges for Jacob to receive the blessing from Isaac, Esau is determined to kill his brother. When Rebekah

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<sup>201</sup> Friedman, *FRD*, 87.

<sup>202</sup> See Levenson, “Genesis” in *JSB*, 55-6; Sarna, *JPSG*, 191; Potok, *EH*, 154-5.



hears this, she orchestrates another plan to spare Jacob's life. Instead of honestly sharing with Isaac that Jacob must be sent away for his own protection, she manipulates Isaac into sending Jacob to her father's house in Paddan-aram (28:2), by playing on Isaac's emotions.<sup>203</sup> Rebekah knows that Isaac's distaste for intermarriage is as great as hers. Esau's marriages to two Hittite women, Judith and Basemath, "were [a source of] bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah," ותהיין מרת רוח ליצחק ולרבקה (26:35). Rebekah uses this knowledge and says to Isaac: "I am disgusted with my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob takes a wife from Hittite women like these, from the native women, what good is [my] life?" ותאמר רבקה אל-יצחק קצתי בחיי מפני בנות חת אם-לקח יעקב אשה מבנות-חת כאלה מבנות [my] life?" (27:46).<sup>204</sup> Isaac responds by ordering Jacob not to marry a Canaanite woman; instructing him to go to Paddan-aram; and telling him to select a wife from among his uncle's daughters (28:1-3). The reasons that I suggest Rebekah manipulated the situation are the following: she speaks to Isaac *after* she has already instructed Jacob to flee to save his own life (27:42-3); she says nothing to Jacob about marrying one of his cousins; she implies, by using the words ימים אחרים that he will stay there for a finite period and then return; and she tells Jacob that she will send for him once the danger passes (27:44-5). Additionally, "Instead of simply registering that Jacob ought not to take a wife from the daughters of the Canaanite . . . she brandishes a sense of utter revulsion, claiming that her life is scarcely worth living because of the native daughters-in-law Esau has inflicted on her."<sup>205</sup> In other words, she exaggerates her emotional state in order to create a more effective explanation.

<sup>203</sup> See Levenson, "Genesis" in *JSB*, 58; Sarna, *JPSG*, 195.

<sup>204</sup> "The phrase she uses, *lamah li hayim*, contains an echo of her question during her troubled pregnancy, *lamah zeh 'anokhi*, 'why then me?'" Alter, *FBM*, 146.

<sup>205</sup> Alter, *FBM*, 146.

While this portrayal of Rebekah is not flattering, and might lead one to wonder why it is included in a study of the *ideal* Israelite woman, the reason for its inclusion is as follows: like Sarah, before her, Rebekah is a very *human* human-being. She is not a superwoman void of human flaws; rather, she, like other biblical characters, has both strengths and weaknesses, assets and liabilities. One such example occurs when Rebekah refers to Esau's sons as Hittite women, rather than by their proper names (27:46). This is an intentional insult, in much the same way that Sarah refused to call Hagar and Ishmael by their names, in 21:10 (see above).<sup>206</sup>

As ironic as it may be, one of Rebekah's strengths comes through when she arranges for Jacob to escape death, at Esau's hands. Although Rebekah undeniably favors one son over the other, her maternal instinct dictates that she love them both. Fearing the worst-case scenario—the twins killing each other<sup>207</sup>—Rebekah says, “Why should I lose both of you both in one day?” למָה אֶשְׁכַּל גַּם-שְׁנֵיכֶם יוֹם אֶחָד (27:45). Since the Hebrew word שָׁכַל is used for a parent's bereavement of a child, it is reasonable to assume that שְׁנֵיכֶם refers to her two sons.<sup>208</sup> Rebekah does not want harm to come to either child. Motherly love (whether expressed properly, or not) is an attribute shared by Rebekah, Sarah (21:10), and the אִשָּׁת-חַיִּל (Prov 31:21, 28-9).

Another characteristic of Rebekah, and hence of the *ideal* Israelite woman, is her ability to decide, at least to some degree, whom she will marry. This is first hinted at when Abraham instructs his servant to find a wife for Isaac to bring back to Canaan. The servant replies: “Maybe the woman will not want to come after me to this land,” אוּלַי לֹא-

<sup>206</sup> Alter, *FBM*, 146.

<sup>207</sup> Alter, *FBM*, 146. In Gen 29:10, Jacob single-handedly removes the stone from the mouth of the well. “. . . he is formidably powerful—and so perhaps Rebekah was not unrealistic in fearing the twins would kill each other should they come to blows.” Alter, *FBM*, 153.

<sup>208</sup> Alter, *FBM*, 146.

תאבה האשה ללכת אחרי אל-הארץ הזאת (24:5). This clearly suggests that an Israelite woman has some say as to who her husband will be. Amit supports this, writing: "The servant's question implies that the woman legally can choose to refuse. A woman cannot simply 'be taken.'"<sup>209</sup> This is affirmed when Rebekah's mother and brother turn to her and ask, "Will you go with this man?" ויקראו לרבקה ויאמרו אליה התלכי עם-האיש הזה (24:57). Rebekah replies: "I will go," אלך (24:58). Even though 24:51 suggests Rebekah's father and brother agree to the marriage before consulting with Rebekah, the text is not completely clear. A disagreement arises as to when Rebekah will depart for Canaan; the servant wants to leave immediately and the family wants her to remain for ten days (24:54-55). This is when Rebekah's family asks her (as mentioned above) if she will go with the servant. They do not ask her *when* she wants to leave, but rather, *if* she will go with him. Based on the question posed, one cannot conclude with certainty that Rebekah's father and brother were the ones who made the final marital decision.

In addition to informing that Rebekah decided when (and possibly if) she would leave her home to travel to an unknown land, this verse also serves another function: it draws another parallel between Rebekah and Abraham (two others have already been noted above). Rebekah's decision to leave her homeland and her family, to go to a new place, and live with an unknown man, is reminiscent of Abraham who left everything behind in order to fulfill a divine command (12:1). This bold and courageous decision not only illustrates Rebekah's internal fortitude, it also speaks to the contributions biblical

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<sup>209</sup> Amit, *WC*, 159. Plaut writes, "Note that Rebekah is asked to consent to the marriage, as was customary also in Nuzi." Plaut, *GEN*, 235. See also Westermann, *WES2*, 390.

women made to fulfill Israel's national destiny, through "bold and vital action at critical moments."<sup>210</sup>

There are other aspects of the marriage process that shed light on the *ideal* Israelite woman. Prior to a young woman entering into matrimony, the family insures that the prospective husband will be able to provide for her. Material comfort seems to be of primary importance. When Abraham's servant departs from Canaan, he leaves with many camels—to impress the family of the chosen woman.<sup>211</sup> When the servant meets Rebekah and believes her to be the woman selected by Adonai, he presents her with gold jewelry (24:22).<sup>212</sup> Upon meeting Rebekah's family, the servant informs them: "Adonai has greatly blessed my master and he has become wealthy; He has given him sheep and cattle and silver and gold and male and female slaves and camels and donkeys," וְיִי בָרַךְ (24:35). As if this is not sufficient information to entice them, the servant continues, "Sarah, the wife of my master, bore my master a son after she had grown old, and he has given him [the son] everything that is his," וְחָלַד שָׂרָה אִשְׁתִּי אֲדֹנָי בֶּן לֵאדֹנָי אַחֲרַי זָקְנָתָהּ וַיִּתֶּן-לּוֹ אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ (24:36). The servant provides this additional information in the hope that it will convince Rebekah's family that she will be well taken care of if she marries Isaac. "Abraham's wealth will be a decisive factor in gaining consent to the marriage and to the bride's journey to a distant land."<sup>213</sup> After the family consents to the marriage, Rebekah receives objects of silver and gold, and garments; her mother and brother receive unspecified

<sup>210</sup> Amit, *WC*, 164. See also Sarna, *JPSG*, 161.

<sup>211</sup> Sarna, *JPSG*, 163.

<sup>212</sup> "Nose-ring. A gift of special prominence that everyone would see (cf. the simile of God giving a nose-ring to Israel; Ezek. 16:12)." Plaut, *GEN*, 230.

<sup>213</sup> Potok, *EH*, 131.

“precious gifts,” מנדנת<sup>214</sup> (24:53). The bride-to-be is adorned with the finest gifts, for they are genuine presents, and not a bride-price.<sup>215</sup>

When Rebekah leaves for Canaan, she takes her wet-nurse along (24:59).

Retaining one's nurse as a permanent companion is a mark of social status.<sup>216</sup> This provides additional insight into the *ideal* Israelite woman—she is a woman of means.

When Rebekah arrives at her destination, “Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah, his mother; and he took Rebekah as his wife; and he loved her and Isaac found consolation after [the death of] his mother,” ויבאה יצחק האהלה שרה אמו ויקח את-רבקה ותהי-לו (24:67). This is a significant biblical verse, for it contains the first mention of spousal love in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>217</sup> It is also the first time that a man's love for a woman is expressed.<sup>218</sup> Additionally, it indicates that Rebekah is a source of solace and support for Isaac.<sup>219</sup> This text models a healthy spousal relationship, based on love and emotional support. This is also seen with the אשת-חיל Prov 31:1, 28, 29 speak of the trust, respect, and appreciation that the אשת-חיל receives from her husband and family.

The final attribute of the *ideal* Israelite woman that can be learned from the study of Rebekah is she was valued more than Canaanite women by her society. This is first presented in Gen 24:3 when Abraham directs his servant to find a wife for Isaac who is

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<sup>214</sup> See also Ezra 1:6; 2 Chr 21:3.

<sup>215</sup> Westermann, *WES2*, 389. Also see Alter, *FBM*, 118.

<sup>216</sup> See Westermann, *WES2*, 238; Alter, *FBM*, 124; Sarna, *JPSG*, 169. “In Mesopotamia the wet nurse frequently had the duties of bringing up the child and acting as guardian.” Potok, *EH*, 137.

<sup>217</sup> The first mention of love is between a parent and child (Gen 22:2). Note: The verb “love” often implies a sexual relationship in the Bible. Amit, *WC*, 166.

<sup>218</sup> Amit, *WC*, 165-6.

<sup>219</sup> Speiser, *ABG*, 185. “The appearance of Rebekah, who is brought to the tent of his mother, comforts Isaac for the death of his mother and hints to the reader to expect the continued fulfillment of the divine promises to the line of Abraham, through Isaac and Rebekah. This final verse, which focuses on Isaac's emotional connections to his mother and to his new wife, reasserts the central role that women play in realizing God's covenantal promises.” Amit, *WC*, 165.

not a daughter of the Canaanites, among whom they live.<sup>220</sup> Abraham is so adamant about this that he makes his senior servant swear an oath, ואשבִיעֶךָ, that he will not select a Canaanite woman for Isaac to marry (24:3). When the servant meets Rebekah's brother, Laban, he recounts the oath that he swore to his master (24:37). Clearly, Israelite women are esteemed and accepted in ways that Canaanite women were not. The implication of Abraham's directive to his servant is: ethnic identity matters. This is a significant statement, for inherent in its message is a statement about the importance of a woman's identity. More specifically, it implies that the Israelite woman has an important function within the family unit, and therefore, her lineage is critical to the proper functioning of the family. It also indicates that the Israelite woman is not merely viewed as property, for if this was the case, her ethnic origin would be of no consequence. It is important to note that the main focus of chapter 24, the longest chapter in the entire book of Genesis, is finding a wife for Isaac. We can speculate that it is not a coincidence that so much attention is devoted to finding a suitable Israelite wife for Isaac, for she will become the next matriarch of the Israelites.

Chapter 24 is not the only place where a high value is placed on marrying an Israelite woman. As noted above, Isaac and Rebekah disapprove of Esau's marriages to Hittite women (26:34; 27:46). From these verses, it is clear that marrying a Canaanite woman is not an acceptable practice. Both Rebekah and Isaac are anguished by the intermarriage of their son. When Isaac hears Rebekah's lament in 27:46, he sends for Jacob and commands him, saying: "Do not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan. Get

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<sup>220</sup> "Abraham wants his son to remain a stranger in Canaan, hence he commands marriage within his own group. Here are the beginning strands of Judaism's strong feelings about mixed marriages—although the term cannot yet, of course, be applied for many centuries. What is at stake is religion and family tradition, not ethnic or racial 'purity.'" Plaut, *GEN*, 227. For reasons mentioned above, I disagree with Plaut. See also Deut 7:1-4 and Ezra 9-10 for intermarriage prohibitions.

up, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel, your mother's father, and take a wife for yourself—from there—a wife from the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother," לא-תקח אשה מבנות כנען. קום לך פדנה ארם ביתה בתואל אבי אמך וקח-לך משם אשה מבנות לבן אחי אמך. A sharp contrast is drawn between Abraham's painstaking efforts to find an Israelite wife for Isaac, and Esau's intentional decision to marry Canaanite women. The pain that Esau's decisions bring to his parents reinforces the idea that the Israelite woman is seen as different than, and superior to, a Canaanite woman.

### **RACHEL AND LEAH**

When Jacob arrives in Haran, like the servant who was sent to Canaan by Abraham, he meets by a well the woman who will become the next matriarch. Rachel, the daughter of Laban and cousin of Jacob, is approaching the well at the same time that Jacob inquires about his uncle, Laban (29:5-6). Rachel, just like Sarah and Rebekah, is described as a beautiful woman. Genesis 29:17 says, "Rachel had a beautiful figure and was beautiful in appearance," ורחל היתה יפת-תואר ויפת מראה. Leah, Rachel's older sister, is also mentioned in this same verse. [For the purpose of this study, it makes sense to look at Rachel and Leah in tandem, for their lives are so closely intertwined]. Unlike the clearly flattering description of Rachel, Leah is depicted as having "tender eyes," ועיני לאה רכות. While this is sometimes understood to mean that Leah is ugly, this is a misinterpretation of the text. The Hebrew word רכות has several meanings, none of which is *ugly*. In addition to *tender*, commentators define רכות as sensitive,<sup>221</sup> delicate,<sup>222</sup>

<sup>221</sup> Koehler and Baumgartner, *HAL*, 1230.

<sup>222</sup> Speiser, *ABG*, 225.

soft,<sup>223</sup> and weak.<sup>224</sup> It can be understood that the text is informing the reader that Leah has one attractive feature—her eyes—in contrast to her sister, Rachel, who is an overall beauty.<sup>225</sup> While it is true that the description of Leah is not as glowing as the compliment given to Rachel, Leah's physical appearance can still be viewed positively. A different interpretation, based on other biblical uses of רכות, suggests the word "denotes refinement and delicacy of breeding."<sup>226</sup> If understood this way, the verse would imply that Rachel's physical beauty is being compared with Leah's internal beauty: her sensitive, kind, and tender spirit.<sup>227</sup>

When Jacob first sees Rachel, she is watching her father's flock. She is a shepherdess, כי רעה הוא (29:9). This verse indicates that Rachel has responsibilities and plays an important role within her family. Tending sheep is a critical task for those living a nomadic or even agrarian lifestyle. To some degree, then, it can be said that the welfare of Rachel's family is in her hands (both literally and figuratively). Westermann supports the interpretation that Rachel works, adding an additional point, as well: "... at that period girls helped with the work and were able to move among the men freely and unhindered . . ."<sup>228</sup> This understanding of the interplay between the sexes mimics that of the אשת-חיל who also interacts with men when performing her duties. This then, is another attribute of the *ideal* Israelite woman: she is not secluded behind the walls of her home, hidden away from public view; rather, she is an active member of society, who is

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<sup>223</sup> Alter, *FBM*, 153.

<sup>224</sup> Plaut, *GEN*, 289.

<sup>225</sup> See Speiser, *ABG*, 225; Alter, *FBM*, 153.

<sup>226</sup> Yee, *ABD* 4, 268. Also see Deut 28:54, 5 and Isa 47:1.

<sup>227</sup> Yee, *ABD* 4, 268.

<sup>228</sup> Westermann, *WES*2, 465. See also Ex 2:16.



visible and seen.<sup>229</sup> The same can be said about Rebekah, who was the first to greet Abraham's servant, tend to his needs, and invite him to her home (24:18-21, 25).

When Jacob meets Rachel at the well, Jacob kisses Rachel,<sup>230</sup> and tells her that he is Rebekah's son (29:12). She then "ran and told her father," ותָּרַץ וַתֵּגַד לְאִבֶּיהָ, that they had a visitor. This is reminiscent of Rebekah's running to inform her family that Abraham's servant had arrived. Since this is the second time that a woman has hurried home to announce the presence of a guest, it is worth noting, even though commentators have not written much on this verse. Alter indicates that this is a "... requirement of the 'betrothal type-scene.'"<sup>231</sup> While this is a notable point, it does not explain how this relates to the *ideal* Israelite woman. Additionally, there is only one other biblical passage where a woman *ran and told*, ותָּרַץ וַתֵּגַד, of contact with a visitor, and this visitor was an angel of Adonai.<sup>232</sup> With sparse information to draw upon, there is much room for conjecture. I have three thoughts on the meaning of 29:12 and 24:28: one is that Rachel, like Rebekah, is excited that a visitor has arrived.<sup>233</sup> (In Rachel's case, all the more so, for it is her cousin who has come to visit; family or clan relations are of great importance in the Bible.) Filled with emotion, Rachel runs home to convey the news to her father. This reaction is natural, and reflects what one would do—even today—if an unexpected guest arrived at home.

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<sup>229</sup> "We know from the Nuzi records, which so often mirror conditions in the Har(r)an area—and hence also in patriarchal circle—that women were subject to fewer formal restraints than was to be the norm later on in the Near East as a whole." Speiser, *ABG*, 223.

<sup>230</sup> "This is the only instance in a biblical narrative of a man kissing a woman who is neither his mother nor his wife." Sarna, *JPSG*, 203. Plaut interprets *kissed Rachel* as "A formal greeting, here offered with deep emotion." Plaut, *GEN*, 288.

<sup>231</sup> Alter, *FBM*, 154.

<sup>232</sup> See Judg 13:10.

<sup>233</sup> See Westermann, *WES2*, 466.

A second function of these verses is to support the point stated above: Israelite women were free to move about outside of the home and have contact with members of the opposite sex. The third purpose is to show that Israelite women were conveyors or information, the ones who "spread the news." As noted above (n. 180), the public wells were a common site for newly arrived strangers to gather. It also served as a meeting place for the local folk. Additionally, the well was the site where women and girls gathered and engaged in conversation.<sup>234</sup> This said, it is plausible to see how information, along with water, was gathered at the well, and later, disseminated. Additionally, archaeological evidence exists that suggests women of antiquity worked in groups as they turned grain into bread (grinding, kneading, and baking) and produced textiles (spinning, weaving, and sewing). It is plausible to think "a sense of solidarity" developed among these women when they worked together. Membership in such "information alliances" afforded women "access to social knowledge" that was not available to men. This information could be used for "forging political connections, solving economic problems such as the differential need for field labor among households, and assisting with difficulties such as illness or death in individual households."<sup>235</sup> Being that the Bible portrays the matriarchs in an ideal light, based on the values of society, I suggest that Rachel's announcing Jacob's arrival is symbolic of a societal function associated with women: spreading news and information within the community.

The next notable characteristic regarding Rachel, that is also present with Rebekah (see above), is the love of her husband. Verse 29:18 says, "and Jacob loved

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<sup>234</sup> Westermann, *WES2*, 386; Sarna, *JPSG*, 164.

<sup>235</sup> Meyers, *MSRS*, 435-36.

Rachel," ויאהב יעקב את-רחל. "This is one of the very few explicit references to romantic love in the Tanakh."<sup>236</sup> The notion that Jacob loves Rachel is reinforced in 29:20, where the text informs, "And Jacob served seven years for Rachel,"<sup>237</sup> and in his eyes they were like a few days, because of his love for her," ויעבד יעקב ברחל שבע שנים והיו בעיניו כימים. This is a strong testimony of love: experiencing seven years of servitude (fourteen in total) as only a few days of labor. Westermann writes, "It is his [Jacob's] love for Rachel that moves him and makes this long period seem short even though it was by no means easy, as Gen. 31:38-40 shows."<sup>239</sup> The third and final mention of Jacob's love for Rachel is found in 29:30, where the text states, "And Jacob loved Rachel more than he loved Leah, ויאהב גם-את-רחל מלאה. This is an interesting verse, for while it clearly demonstrates Jacob's preferential love for Rachel, it also implies that Jacob loves Leah, as well. The inclusion of the words *more than* indicates a comparison; in this case, the comparison is being made between the amount of love that Jacob has for Rachel, relative to Leah. Based on this verse, I conclude that Jacob loves *both* Rachel and Leah. I maintain this opinion, even in spite of 29:31, which reads, "And Adonai saw that Leah was reduced in status,"<sup>240</sup> וירא יי כי-שנואה לאה. If read literally, one might translate this verse as "Leah was hated," for *hated* is the literal definition of שנואה. Others translate the Hebrew as *unloved*, which, along with *hated*, directly contradicts my point that Jacob loves Leah. While it might appear that a dramatic shift has taken place in Jacob's feelings for Leah, it is important to understand that שנואה is "a technical, legal

<sup>236</sup> Sarna, *JSBG*, 60.

<sup>237</sup> Since Jacob is unable to offer a *bride-price* to Laban, he offers manual labor instead.

<sup>238</sup> ימים אחדים are the same words used by Rebekah when she tells Jacob to go to Haran (27:44). In both cases, the actual length of time is much more than a *few days*.

<sup>239</sup> Westermann, *WES2*, 466.

<sup>240</sup> *Reduced in status* is the definition of שנואה as per Koehler and Baumgartner, *HAL*, 1340. This term is also defined by commentators as *unloved* (Plaut, *GEN*, 291; Westermann, *WES2*, 470; Speiser, *ABG*, 228), and *despised* (Alter, *FBM*, 156).

term for the unfavored co-wife."<sup>241</sup> "When paired with the word meaning 'beloved' (*ahuvah*) in a context of a husband's relationship to his co-wives, it does not mean 'hated' against 'beloved.' It refers to a degree of preference (see Deut. 21:15)."<sup>242</sup> Based on this explanation, I still assert that Jacob loves both of his wives, albeit to differing degrees.

The fact that Jacob loves Rachel more than Leah must be very painful for Leah to endure. However, this is not the only source of jealousy and rivalry between the two sisters. The competition begins right after Jacob marries Leah and cohabits with Rachel. Since they both understand that their culture places a high value on producing children (particularly sons) for their husbands, and they know infertility brings pain, shame and embarrassment,<sup>243</sup> they try to win Jacob's love by producing offspring for him. The society of the matriarchs demands that women reproduce to help bring about God's promise of land, posterity, and a great name.<sup>244</sup> The birth of children is also critical for defense, care of aging adults, and the transmission of property (inheritance). During the agrarian biblical periods, offspring were also needed to work the land, produce food, and help run the household.

The narratives that describe Leah and Rachel's continual efforts to bear more children indicate how closely aligned the image of the *ideal* Israelite woman is with fertility and reproduction. Their efforts to reproduce are even more significant in light of the life-threatening risk presented by childbirth, to both mother and child. "The average life span of women was significantly shorter than that of men, in part because of the risks

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<sup>241</sup> Alter, *FBM*, 156.

<sup>242</sup> Potok, *EH*, 173.

<sup>243</sup> See also Westermann, *WES2*, 474.

<sup>244</sup> Yee, *ABD* 4, 268.

of dying in childbirth."<sup>245</sup> Yet, the two sisters continue their competition to reproduce, which ultimately claims Rachel's life (35:17-19).

While Rachel and Leah are motivated to reproduce (both for personal and national reasons), there is also an indication in the text that they believe barrenness, and fertility, are determined by God. The first indication of this comes in the B clause of 29:31: "and He [Adonai] opened her [Leah's] womb, but Rachel was barren," ויפתח את-רחמה ורחל ויפתח עקרה. There are three implications here: 1) Leah will be able to conceive because Adonai opened her womb,<sup>246</sup> 2) prior to this point, Leah is unable to conceive,<sup>247</sup> and 3) Rachel is barren because this is what Adonai has decreed.

As a result of Adonai intervening on Leah's behalf, she conceives and gives birth to four sons (29:32-35). When the first three are born, Leah is hopeful that her husband's love for her will increase.<sup>248</sup> She even selects names for these children that express this desire (29:32-35). "With the birth of her fourth son, she no longer expresses hope of winning her husband's affection but instead simply gives thanks to God for granting her male offspring."<sup>249</sup> The idea that a woman's value and self-identity are contingent on her ability to reproduce male offspring is reinforced by Leah's actions.

Rachel, however, is not as fortunate as Leah. As stated in 29:31, Rachel is barren. This causes her to suffer emotionally.<sup>250</sup> Rachel cries out to Jacob, saying, "Give me

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<sup>245</sup> Meyers, *HH*, 16.

<sup>246</sup> "As in the case of Hagar (16.10-12; 21.17-18), God shows compassion to the unfavored mate, thus partly equalizing the disparity between her and her co-wife." Levenson, "Genesis" in *JSB*, 61.

<sup>247</sup> See Sarna, *JPSG*, 206; Potok, *EH*, 173.

<sup>248</sup> "The names Leah gives her first three sons communicate her deep distress at not being the preferred wife. In Heb, *The LORD has seen my affliction* (v. 32) is close to the message of the angel to Hagar, 'For the Lord has paid heed to your suffering' (16.11)." Levenson, "Genesis" in *JSB*, 61.

<sup>249</sup> Alter, *FBM*, 157.

<sup>250</sup> Rachel believes a life without children is worthless. Potok, *EH*, 175; Sarna, *JPSG*, 205. "Barrenness, in some instances a punishment (e.g., 2 Sam. 6:20-23), serves in Rachel's case to place her in succession to Sarah and Rebekah (11:30; 25:21)." Levenson, "Genesis" in *JSB*, 61.

children, for if not, I will die!" *הבה-לי בנים ואם-אין מתה אנכי* (30:1). Jacob responds in a manner that clearly indicates the gift of children comes only from one Source—God—and that he, as her husband, is unable to alter her condition. Jacob says to Rachel, "Can I replace *Elohim* who has denied you fruit of the womb?" *התחת אלהים אנכי אשר-מנע ממך פרי-* (30:2).<sup>251</sup> Knowing of no alternate solution, and desperate to reproduce, Rachel turns to her maidservant, Bilhah. Rachel instructs Jacob to lie with her, so that through her, she may have a child. Following in the footsteps of Sarah, Rachel wants to be "built up" through her maidservant: "I, too, will be built up from her," *ואבנה גם-אנכי ממנה*, says Rachel (30:3). These words are almost identical to the ones spoken by Sarah when she tells Abraham to lie with Hagar: "I will be built up from her," *אבנה ממנה* (16:2; as discussed above). When Jacob lies with Bilhah, she gives birth to a son. Rachel then proclaims, "*Elohim* has vindicated me and also heard my voice and gave me a son," (30:6). Three things are implied by this verse: 1) Rachel prays to God, God hears her prayer, and then intervenes on her behalf—resulting in the birth of a son; 2) Rachel perceives her barrenness as a punishment from *Elohim*; and 3) the son that Bilhah bears is considered Rachel's son (as per the adoption ritual in 30:3).<sup>252</sup> When Bilhah gives birth to a second son, Rachel selects a name for him that indicates her *victory* over Leah (30:8). Clearly, Rachel is as competitive as her sister.

There comes a point when Leah stops conceiving; she, too, then resorts to concubinage. She gives her maidservant, Zilpah, to Jacob. When they lie together,

<sup>251</sup> "According to the convention of the annunciation story, the barren wife should go to an oracle or be visited by a divine messenger or a man of God to be told that she will give birth to a son. Rachel instead importunes her husband, who properly responds that he cannot play the role of God in the bestowal of fertility, or in the annunciation narrative." Alter, *FBM*, 158. "The question *Can I take the place of God?* reappears in 50.19 (where it is translated, "Am I a substitute for God?")." Levenson, "Genesis" in *JSB*, 61

<sup>252</sup> "The words *that through her I too may have children* is another connection to the story of Hagar (16.2). Ancient Near Eastern evidence suggests that placing a child on one's knees represents acknowledgment of that child as one's own." Levenson, "Genesis" in *JSB*, 61.

Zilpah gives birth to two sons (30:10-12). Continuing the ongoing competition, Leah chooses names for her sons that reflect her *luck* and *fortune*. She believes that she will be the envy of other women, saying, "The women will consider me fortunate, אשרוני בנות (30:13). Leah then becomes fertile again, and gives birth to a son, after *Elohim* hears [and responds] to her (30:17). She believes this fifth biological son is a reward from God (30:18). Leah gives birth to two more children—a son and a daughter (30:19, 21). She anticipates that Jacob will surely love her after the birth of her sixth son.<sup>253</sup>

Rachel, too, is eventually blessed with biological offspring. This occurs, however, only after God *remembers* Rachel and opens her womb, ויזכר אלהים את-רחל (30:22).<sup>254</sup> This reinforces the idea that God regulates fertility (see above). Rachel gives birth to a son and declares, "*Elohim* has taken away my disgrace [of childlessness]," ותהר ותלד בן ותאמר אסף אלהים את-חרפתי (30:23). The burden of her shame—that she carried for years—is finally lifted. However, she is not satisfied with just one son. As she tells Jacob in 30:1, she wants more than one, she wants בנים. Rachel goes on to give birth to another son, but dies during childbirth (35:17).

The birth narratives of Rachel and Leah serve three primary purposes, with regard to this study: 1) they reinforce the idea that God intervenes in the lives of the matriarchs—by deciding when they will conceive and bear children; 2) they show the jealousy and rivalry that exist between Rachel and Leah, thereby reinforcing the notion that the matriarchs are very *real* and very *human* women, rather than superheroes, and 3)

<sup>253</sup> Alter, *FBM*, 161.

<sup>254</sup> "After the long years of frustrated hopes and prayers (the latter intimated by God's 'hearing' Rachel), the gift of fertility is represented in a rapid-fire chain of uninterrupted verbs; remembered, heard, opened, conceived, bore." Alter, *FBM*, 162.

they clearly illustrate that it is the woman who names the children. I will now expand on each of these points.

Point 1: God intervenes in the lives of the matriarchs—by deciding when they will conceive and bear children. There is archaeological evidence that suggests women performed religious reproductive rituals specifically designed to increase fertility, insure safe childbirth, and/or deliver healthy children.<sup>255</sup> A large number of small terra-cotta figurines (eight to fourteen centimeters high), shaped like a standing woman, naked from the waist up, have been found in modern day Israel. It is believed that these figurines were used during reproduction rituals. It is believed possible, based on excavated domestic structures, that each household had at least one figurine.<sup>256</sup> Applying this data to the biblical text, it is reasonable to speculate that when the text says, regarding Rachel, “and *Elohim* heard her and opened her womb,” וישמע אליה אלהים ויפתח את-רחמה (30:22) and then, regarding Leah, “*Elohim* heard Leah and she conceived and gave birth,” וישמע תלד אלהים אל-לאה ותהר (30:17), that *Elohim* hears the prayers that offered during a religious reproductive ritual. This idea is even more plausible when one considers that Rachel stole תרפים, small household statues used for religious rituals<sup>257</sup>, when she left her father’s home with Jacob (31:19).<sup>258</sup>

The second point mentioned above, that Leah and Rachel are both very *real* women, complete with human flaws, is worthy of attention. Just like the two matriarchs who preceded them, both Leah and Rachel behave in less than admirable ways, at times.

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<sup>255</sup> The absence of public temples in early Israel adds credence to the idea that worship was performed in households, with household shrines. Meyers, *EVE*, 159. “It is no longer conscionable to ignore or deprecate women’s cultic practices.” Meyers, *HH*, 62.

<sup>256</sup> Meyers, *HH*, 27.

<sup>257</sup> “The household gods, or *teraphim* (the etymology of the term is still in doubt), are small figurines representing the deities responsible for the well-being and prosperity of the household. Alter, *FBM*, 169.

<sup>258</sup> See 1 Sam 19:13.



It is already established that both women are jealous and competitive with each other.<sup>259</sup>

Rachel, however, seems to have more weaknesses than Leah—while Leah has *weaker* eyes, Rachel has a *weaker* character. When she, Jacob, Leah and the members of their household are leaving for Canaan, Rachel steals her father's תרפים (30:19). The text is rather clear in meaning, for the verb used to describe Rachel's action in v. 19 is ותגנב. The root of this word, גנב, is consistently translated by Koehler and Baumgartner as *steal*, *deceive*, or *take away secretly*.<sup>260</sup> While some commentators seek to soften Rachel's actions by providing excuses for her behavior,<sup>261</sup> I maintain that taking what did not belong to her is a character flaw. Even if one accepts that Rachel is merely trying to seek revenge against her father by taking the idols—thereby disavowing her as a thief—it is still arguable that seeking revenge is not an admirable trait, albeit a human reaction. Another possible explanation is Rachel had a right to the תרפים, being a member of the family. However, one is still left with the difficulty presented by the text—the presence of the word ותגנב.

Rachel adds to her misconduct by hiding the idols, and then lying to her father—about why she cannot get off her camel—when he comes looking for them (31:34-5).<sup>262</sup> Rachel disrespects her father by lying and deceiving him. While none of these behaviors is commendable, Rachel, in a sort of backhanded way, helps dispel the myth that biblical

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<sup>259</sup> "The theme of bad relations between a fertile co-wife and a barren one, with the latter as their husband's favorite, appears in more developed form in the story of Hannah in 1 Sam. ch 1." Levenson, "Genesis" in *JSB*, 61

<sup>260</sup> Koehler and Baumgartner, *HAL*, 198.

<sup>261</sup> "The reason for the theft emerges from the accusation that Jacob's wives make against their father (vv. 14-16); Rachel thereby secures herself against the injustice done to her." Westermann, *WES2*, 493; "The issue is bound up with the purpose of Rachel's act. If it was inspired by no more than a whim, or resentment, or greed, then Rachel stole the images. But if she meant thereby to undo what she regarded as a wrong . . . and thus took the law, as she saw it, into her own hands, the translation 'stole' would be not only inadequate but misleading." Speiser, *ABG*, 245

<sup>262</sup> "In the purity system of the Torah, anything on which a menstruant has sat communicates impurity (Lev. 15:22)." Levenson, "Genesis" in *JSB*, 65.

women were subservient and obedient to their male family members. Rachel's actions, while inappropriate, are bold, determined and gutsy. They are also a clear example of a biblical woman exerting her own self-will; her actions are unknown to anyone, including her husband. Had Jacob known that Rachel had taken the idols, he most likely would not have said, "With whomever you find your gods, that person shall not live!" עַם אֲשֶׁר תִּמְצָא (31:32). Rachel's self-directed action supports the statement by Meyers: "... male dominance is a public attitude and not a functional reality, and female power is functionally active though culturally concealed."<sup>263</sup>

The third point, mentioned above, regards women naming the children. In a patriarchal society, one might expect the husband to name, or at least be involved with naming his own children, particularly the boys. However, this is not the case. In fact, Rachel and Leah do not even consult Jacob when selecting names for their children. The one time that Jacob names a child is when Rachel gives birth for the last time. As she struggles through a difficult childbirth that claims her life, Rachel names her son בן-אֹתִי, *son of my mourning*, before taking her last breath (35:18).<sup>264</sup> Jacob however, calls him בְּנִימִין, Benjamin, meaning *son of my right hand*, *son of old age*, or *son of the south*. "This is the sole instance of competing names assigned respectively by the mother and father [in the Hebrew Bible]."<sup>265</sup> It is assumed that Jacob changes his son's name because keeping a name associated with the death of Rachel would be too painful to bear.<sup>266</sup>

<sup>263</sup> Meyers, *EVE*, 175.

<sup>264</sup> Koehler and Baumgartner define אֹתִי as *mourning* or *lament* (*HAL*, 23); the term is also defined as *suffering* or *strength* (Plaut, *GEN*, 344); *pain* (Westermann, *WES2*, 547); and, *sorrow* or *vigor* (Alter, *FBM*, 197).

<sup>265</sup> Alter, *FBM*, 197-8.

<sup>266</sup> Plaut, *GEN*, 344.

According to Meyers, naming a child (and circumcising newborn sons) were ritual acts performed by Israelite women as part of their religious culture.<sup>267</sup> These responsibilities fell mainly within their purview. Women pronounce "the newborn's name in 62 percent of the name-giving events [in the Hebrew Bible]."<sup>268</sup> Additionally, the act of name-giving in the Israelite world was taken seriously; it was not simply a means of identification, but rather, "signified the essence of a person" and established the "vitality of a new life."<sup>269</sup> A. Cohen adds to the understanding of the importance of names: "Almost all ancient peoples held a belief in the potency of names and often identified the name with the person, believing that the name exercised a power for good or evil over the person who bore it."<sup>270</sup>

When trying to understand the role of women in Israelite society, it is important to refrain, as much as possible, from viewing the ancient world through the lens of 21<sup>st</sup> century Western paradigms. Understandably, this is easier said than done; however, in order to be able to recognize the status and power of women in antiquity, it is necessary to judge that society based on its own mores. It is also important to remember, "The biblical record is a cultural document that emerges from, but does not necessarily mirror, social reality."<sup>271</sup> This is as true regarding "gender valuation"<sup>272</sup> as it is for any other aspect of life during biblical times. Additionally, "The controversial wisdom that saw women as passive and powerless in virtually all premodern societies is now recognized to

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<sup>267</sup> Meyers, *HH*, 42.

<sup>268</sup> Meyers, *HH*, 42. See also Ruth 4:14-17; 1 Sam 4:20-21.

<sup>269</sup> Meyers, *HH*, 43.

<sup>270</sup> Cohen, *FM*, 40.

<sup>271</sup> Meyers, *EVE*, 34.

<sup>272</sup> Meyers, *EVE*, 33.

be deeply flawed.”<sup>273</sup> A clear example of women’s power in the Bible is found in the interaction between Rachel, Leah, and Jacob, as noted below.

When Jacob wants to leave Haran and return to his homeland, he consults with his wives (31:1-17). Jacob knows that he must obtain their approval before he and his family can actually leave.<sup>274</sup> Therefore, he calls them to the field, where he is tending his flock, to give them a detailed explanation of why he wants to relocate (31:4). Rachel and Leah’s going out to the field, to speak with Jacob, validates the notion that Jacob conferred with his wives; even though the text does not explicitly state this is the reason he summoned them, it is implied.<sup>275</sup> In contrast, Jacob does not consult with Bilhah and Zilpah, for their lower social status does not demand that Jacob seek their approval to leave Haran.<sup>276</sup> After Jacob explains his reasons for wanting to leave, Rachel and Leah give their consent, saying, “And now, everything that *Elohim* said to you, do,” ועתה כל אשר אמר אלהים אליך (31:16). Rachel and Leah have the final word, and it is only because *they* are willing to leave that Jacob and his household can return to Canaan.<sup>277</sup>

Another example of female power and dominance is seen when Rachel and Leah give their maidservants to Jacob for procreation purposes (30:3, 9, respectively). In both instances, the matriarchs do not consult Jacob or ask him if he agrees to having sexual relations with Bilhah and Zilpah; rather, they order him to do so. Rachel uses the Hebrew

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<sup>273</sup> Meyers, *MSRS*, 434.

<sup>274</sup> Westermann, *WES2*, 490; Sarna, *JPSG*, 214.

<sup>275</sup> “Jacob proceeds in this fashion not only because he is busy tending the flocks, as he himself repeatedly reminds us in the dialogue, but also because he needs to confer with his wives in a safe location beyond earshot of Laban and his sons.” Alter, *FBM*, 167.

<sup>276</sup> Sarna, *JPSG*, 214.

<sup>277</sup> The text supports this, by the presence of the consecutive *vav* at the beginning of v. 17; the consecutive *vav* is a grammatical and literary tool that indicates continuous action. In other words, it serves to indicate a connection between what is said in one verse and the next. In this case, the consecutive *vav* shows that the departure is now possible because the wives have agreed: “And Jacob got up, and put his sons and his wives on the camels,” ויקם יעקב וישא את-בניו ואת-נשיו על-הגמלים. Also see Westermann, *WES2*, 493.

word בא, the command form of the verb בא, when directing Jacob to lie with Bilhah (30:3). In a similar fashion, after Rachel and Leah trade mandrakes for a night with Jacob, Leah meets Jacob as he returns from the field, saying: "Come to me [tonight] because I rented you with my son's mandrakes,"<sup>278</sup> אלי תבוא כי שכר שכרתיך בדודאי בני (30:16). The text then says: "And he lay with her that night," וישכב עמה בלילה הוא (30:16). Jacob obediently followed the directive of Leah. He did not respond verbally, neither objecting to the implication that he has been *rented*, שכר שכרתיך, for the night,<sup>279</sup> nor indicating that it is he who decides with whom he spends the night.

These episodes clearly indicate a lack of power and control by Jacob over Rachel and Leah. A comment by Meyers, although not made in reference to these verses, is applicable here, nonetheless: "Within the household itself, the striking absence of hierarchical control of male over female is noteworthy."<sup>280</sup> While this goes against a commonly held belief of male dominance, it is possible to understand this phenomenon by introducing a concept developed by anthropologists: *heterarchy*. Heterarchy "allows for systems to be perceived as related to each other laterally rather than vertically."<sup>281</sup> In other words, each gender has particular areas in which they are the primary decision makers; one gender does not have total control over the other. This system affords each adult member of the household responsibilities and authority in some areas, but not in all areas. (As noted above, reproduction rituals, food and textile production, and child

<sup>278</sup> "... these plants with tomato-shaped fruit were used for medicinal purposes and were thought to be aphrodisiac, and also to have the virtue of promoting fertility, which seems to be what Rachel has in mind." Alter, *FBM*, 160. See Song 7:14.

<sup>279</sup> "In his transactions with these two imperious, embittered women, Jacob seems chiefly acquiescent, perhaps resigned. When Rachel instructs him to consort with her slavegirl, he immediately complies, as he does here when Leah tells him it is she who is to share his bed this night. In neither instance is there any report of response on his part in dialogue." Alter, *FBM*, 160.

<sup>280</sup> Meyers, *EVE*, 169.

<sup>281</sup> Meyers, *MSRS*, 437.

rearing were under the auspices of the women.) Additionally, "feminist inquiry has shown women to be significant social actors whose roles differ from those of men but are no less important."<sup>282</sup>

Another notable example of Rachel and Leah's authority (also seen with Sarah and Rebekah, above) is their ownership of maidservants. They each acquire their respective maidservants from their father, when they marry (29:24, 28). This is indicative of Rachel and Leah's membership in the upper stratum of society, for it was among this class that brides were treated to a personal slave girl.<sup>283</sup> While Sarna maintains "The custom of a father presenting his daughter with a maid on her marriage is widely attested in Mesopotamia over a long period of time,"<sup>284</sup> I tend to think that this was a practice limited to those members of society with financial means. I do not think the average peasant of antiquity could afford to provide a daughter with a maidservant of her own.

A final indication that women in antiquity had rights and privileges is indicated by Rachel and Leah's response to Jacob, when he tells them how their father cheated him. This information is conveyed during the conversation that Jacob has with Rachel and Leah, when he explains his desire to leave Haran (noted above). They respond, saying, "Do we still have a share of the possession of our father's house? הָעוֹד לָנוּ חֵלֶק וְנַחֲלָה בְּבֵית אָבִינוּ (31:14)."<sup>285</sup> They are inquiring about the inheritance they are due to receive from their father. Just the mere asking of this question indicates they believe that they are entitled to receive Laban's acquired wealth. When their inheritance seems

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<sup>282</sup> Meyers, *EVE*, 7-8

<sup>283</sup> Speiser, *ABG*, 227.

<sup>284</sup> Sarna, *JPSG*, 205.

<sup>285</sup> See also 2 Sam 20:1; 1 Kgs 12:16.

uncertain, Rachel and Leah ask: "Are we not to be regarded as foreigners because he [Laban] sold us and consumed all of our money? "Because all of the wealth that Elohim removed from our father is ours and our children's," - הלוא נכריות נחשבנו לו כי מכרנו ויאכל גם- (31:15-6). It is possible that Rachel and Leah are referring to the מֹהָר, or "compensating sum,"<sup>286</sup> a father receives when he gives his daughter in marriage. It appears customary that a father passed-on a portion, if not all, of the מֹהָר to his daughter.<sup>287</sup> In this case, since Jacob arrived without sufficient funds, the מֹהָר was the fruit of Jacob's fourteen years of labor. Laban, however, does not comply with this custom. His lack of regard for his daughters reduces them to chattel,<sup>288</sup> implying that Laban sold them for a profit, as is done with a *bought marriage*. Since bought marriages were not the Israelite custom,<sup>289</sup> Laban, in effect, treats his daughters like foreign women who would not be legally permitted to inherit.<sup>290</sup> Rachel and Leah accuse Laban of violating the family laws of their country by withholding from them their "inalienable dowry" (35:16).<sup>291</sup> This verse deals with a legal formulation. "The wives lay claim for themselves and their children to a share of the wealth that Jacob has acquired in their father's house. . . . It stands in opposition to the claim that Laban makes in v. 43."<sup>292</sup> Rachel and Leah conduct themselves as bold and determined women. They have a strong sense of self that prompts them to stand up for what is legally theirs. When they leave Haran, they part ways with their father's household and

<sup>286</sup> Westermann, *WES2*, 492.

<sup>287</sup> See Westermann, *WES2*, 492; Alter, *FBM*, 168; Levenson, "Genesis" in *JSB*, 64.

<sup>288</sup> Alter, *FBM*, 168.

<sup>289</sup> Westermann, *WES2*, 466.

<sup>290</sup> "The Nuzi texts furnish new evidence on the favored status of native women compared with that of outsiders . . . Under certain conditions, moreover, transfer of property to such 'foreign women' is expressly forbidden." Speiser, *ABG*, 244-45.

<sup>291</sup> See Speiser, *ABG*, 244-45.

<sup>292</sup> Westermann, *WES2*, 492-3. In Genesis 31:43, Laban says to Jacob, "The daughters are my daughters and the children are my children and the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine."

make a claim for their own. As stated by Westermann, "While the daughters renounce the house of their father, a new house arises, the house of Jacob. Once again, we see the importance of women in patriarchal society."<sup>293</sup>

Rachel and Leah are also concerned for the welfare of their children's future. Like Sarah and Rebekah before them (see above), these two matriarchs have a strong maternal instinct that leads them to act in ways that benefit their children. When they speak of their inheritance, they indicate that it belongs to their children, as well (31:16). They are not going after the assets simply for themselves, but rather, as the text suggests, to insure their children's welfare. Rachel and Leah try to protect their children from being cheated out of what is rightfully theirs.

The last indication, from the Rachel and Leah narratives, that women were valued members of society is found in the narratives surrounding their deaths. After Rachel dies during childbirth, Jacob honors her by setting up a מצבה, an un-hewn funerary stone set upright,<sup>294</sup> over her grave (35:20). This is reminiscent of the מצבה, an un-hewn cultic memorial stone set upright,<sup>295</sup> that Jacob erects on his way to Haran (after his encounter with God) marking the *house of God*, בית אלהים (28:22); and the מצבה he sets up after his encounter with God in 35:14. Jacob also sets up a מצבה, a commemorative stone for concluding a covenant,<sup>296</sup> when he makes a territorial pact, ברית, with Laban (31:45). It seems clear that Jacob sets up מצבות to recognize important events in his life. Therefore, the fact that he also sets up a מצבה at Rachel's grave indicates that Jacob regards Rachel's

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<sup>293</sup> Westermann, *WES2*, 492.

<sup>294</sup> Koehler and Baumgartner, *HAL*, 620. The Jewish custom, still practiced today, of placing a gravestone marker at the burial site of a loved one, arose out of Jacob placing a מצבה on Rachel's grave. Additionally, Jewish women who are trying to conceive often visit Rachel's grave, located approximately four miles south of Jerusalem and one mile north of Bethlehem. Also, see 1 Sam 10:2.

<sup>295</sup> Koehler and Baumgartner, *HAL*, 620.

<sup>296</sup> Koehler and Baumgartner, *HAL*, 621.



death as a significant occurrence in his life. This is verified years later, when Jacob speaks to his son, Joseph, and recalls the details of Rachel's death (48:7). Alter writes, regarding this conversation,

At first glance, Jacob's comment about the death of his beloved Rachel in the midst of blessing his grandsons seems a non sequitur. It is, however, a loss to which he has never been reconciled. . . . His vivid sense of anguish, after all these decades, is registered in the single word *'alai* ('to my grief,' but literally, 'on me,' the same word he uses in 42:36, when he says that all the burden of bereavement is on him), and this loss is surely uppermost in his mind when he tells Pharaoh that his days have been few and evil.<sup>297</sup>

Another repercussion of Rachel's death, and Jacob's desire to hold on to Rachel, is his desire to adopt two of his grandsons as his own sons (48:5); Jacob tries to maintain an emotional connection with the wife he so loved, by adopting the sons of Rachel's firstborn son.<sup>298</sup>

As for the death of Leah, there are no details that explain her cause of death (although this is not unusual in the Hebrew Bible). However, 49:31 does indicate that Leah is buried, by Jacob, in the Cave of Machpelah, along with Sarah, Abraham, Rebekah, and Isaac.<sup>299</sup> The inclusion of this burial information is a testimony to the importance of these women to the Israelite nation (see information of Sarah's burial, above).

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<sup>297</sup> Alter, *FBM*, 278.

<sup>298</sup> See Alter, *FBM*, 278.

<sup>299</sup> Sarna, *JPSG*, 346. This is the first time that the death and burial of Leah and Rebekah are mentioned. When Jacob dies, he too, is buried in the Cave of Machpelah (50:13).

#### 4.

### THE *IDEAL* WOMAN AS PORTRAYED IN THE BOOK OF RUTH

The book of Ruth, like the book of Proverbs, is found in the third section of the Hebrew Bible, Ketuvim. While it is not known with certainty when the book of Ruth was written—as is the case with most biblical texts—many scholars date this work as preexilic, between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries B. C. E.<sup>300</sup> While the actual author of this book, often called a *novella*, is unknown, some ascribe authorship to the prophet Samuel.<sup>301</sup> Others, like S. Sandmel, suggest the “‘delicacy’ and gentleness of the narrative . . . make him wonder ‘if it’s unknown author were perhaps a woman.’”<sup>302</sup> Meyers, however, discounts the idea of a woman as the writer for Ruth, for it is “part of a canon that is almost entirely ascribed to male authorship . . .”<sup>303</sup> However, despite the ongoing debate over actual authorship, I believe it is plausible that a female presence shaped the narrative.<sup>304</sup>

There are three notable features of this book: 1) It is one of only two biblical books that bears a woman’s name—the other is the book of Esther—deriving its name

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<sup>300</sup> Tribble, *ABD* 5, 843; Campbell dates Ruth between 950-700 B. C. E. Campbell, *ABR*, 26.

<sup>301</sup> Tribble, *ABD* 5, 843.

<sup>302</sup> Meyers, *RH*, 89.

<sup>303</sup> “Recent scholarship has convincingly reversed the notion that the production of literature in biblical antiquity was almost entirely the result of the compositional activities of men. Once it is recognized that much literature emerges from oral composition and that authorial activity and literacy need not be equated, the possibility of women as authors becomes less improbable. Still, even if the existence of female authors for certain biblical verses, chapters or even books can be accepted, the idea of female authorship seems problematic in light of the fact that the literary context of Scripture, in the redactional and recording stages even if not in all its compositional ones, was that of male scribal activity.” Meyers, *RH*, 89.

<sup>304</sup> Tribble, *ABD* 5, 843.

from the story's heroine; 2) Women dominate both the narrative and the dialogue. This is significant, for the bulk of the Bible is androcentric, leading to minimal space devoted to the lives of biblical women; and 3) This book is read on *Shavuot*, the Jewish agricultural festival that commemorates the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai.<sup>305</sup>

Unlike the matriarchal stories, containing drama, deceit, and tension, the book of Ruth does not contain these elements. In its place, however, are people who exhibit loyalty, courage, kindness, and concern for each other. This is seen extensively in the interplay between Ruth and Naomi, and between Ruth and Boaz. Ruth and Naomi are two women who "... bear their own burdens. They know hardship, danger, insecurity, and death. No God promises them blessing; no man rushes to their rescue. They themselves risk bold decisions and shocking acts to work out their own salvation in the midst of the alien, the hostile, and the unknown."<sup>306</sup> They are women who not only survive but thrive.

Ruth is a woman who has a number of notable characteristics. In fact, she almost appears to be perfect—the "ideal woman." Her positive attributes and characteristics are many, and are recognized by those with whom she comes in contact. As the story of Ruth unfolds, so does her loyalty, courage, assertiveness, kindness, and humility.

Ruth is introduced as a Moabite woman who was married to a son of Naomi, an Israelite. When the book of Ruth begins, Naomi's husband and two sons have already died. Naomi decides to return to her native Canaan, since Adonai has put an end to the famine that had caused Naomi and her family to leave Bethlehem. Ruth 1:6-7 indicate

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<sup>305</sup> "The association with Shavuot is appropriate. The events told in Ruth span a period somewhat equivalent to that of Passover to Shavuot, that is, a seven-week period from the beginning of the barley harvest to the end of the wheat harvest." Reinhartz, *JSBR*, 1579.

<sup>306</sup> Tribble, *TW*, 251.

that Naomi's two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, begin the journey to Bethlehem, with Naomi. However, Naomi instructs them "to return to their mother's house," לִכְנֹה (1:8). She asks Adonai to show them the loyalty and faithfulness, חֶסֶד, they have shown to the deceased (implying her husband and sons), and to her (1:8). She blesses the two women by asking Adonai to provide them with a dwelling place, a "place of quiet at home,"<sup>307</sup> מְנוּחָה, in the house of a husband (1:9). Naomi speaks lovingly to Ruth and Orpah and is concerned for their future welfare. Naomi understands that in her society it is very difficult for a woman to make it on her own. Therefore, she wants them both to return to their native homes, remarry, and find security. She puts their best interest before her own, willing to travel back to Bethlehem by herself. Naomi exhibits the attributes of kindness, concern, selflessness, and courage.

It is interesting to note that Naomi uses the words *mother's house*, בֵּית אִמָּה, rather than *father's house*, בֵּית אָב, which is a more common term in the Hebrew Bible. The term בֵּית אִמָּה only occurs three additional times (Gen 24:28; Song 3:4, 8:2; see note 189)<sup>308</sup>. One explanation for the use of this term relates to the ancient Arab culture where each wife had her own tent that was regarded as her property, and the girls lived in their mother's tent.<sup>309</sup> Another explanation is it was in the mother's house, i.e. her bedroom, where marriages were arranged.<sup>310</sup> This lends credibility to the comment by Meyer: "Israelite women apparently had a role equal to if not greater than their husbands in arranging the marriages of their children, although this is not always easy to discern under the

<sup>307</sup> Koehler and Baumgartner, *HAL*, 600. Other commentators define מְנוּחָה as *security*. See Sasson, *RU*, 22; Campbell, *ABR*, 60; Hubbard, *BOR*, 105.

<sup>308</sup> The Hebrew word בֵּיתָהּ, *her household* is found in Prov 31:15, 21, implying certain aspects of the household came under the purview of the woman.

<sup>309</sup> De Waard & Nida, *TBOR*, 12, 81.

<sup>310</sup> Hubbard, *BOR*, 102-03. See also Campbell, *ABR*, 64; Gen 24:28, Song 3:4, 8:2.

androcentric layering of the texts.”<sup>311</sup> She also indicates, “It cannot be assumed, in texts where fathers are said to secure marital liaisons, that they are acting on their own; rather, it is likely that the male voice reporting the liaison is overpowering the female voice that in fact participates in securing mates for a couple’s offspring.”<sup>312</sup> If one assumes this understanding of the text is correct, then it is reasonable to conjecture that women working in groups, and forming alliances, aided this effort (see above).

After Naomi instructs Ruth and Orpah to return to their own people, they tell Naomi they will remain with her. Again, Naomi urges them to return, saying, “Do I have any more sons in my body who can be your husbands,” העוד-לי בנים במעי ודיו לבם לאנשים” (1:11). She goes on to indicate that she is too old to have more children (although the text actually reads *too old to marry*), and even if she did have more children, she asks, “Would you wait for them to grow up, and be blocked from entering a new marriage [in the meantime]? הלאן תשכרנה עד אשר יגדלו הלאן תענה לבלתי היות לאיש (1:13). These verses indicate that it was critically important for a woman to be married in antiquity.<sup>313</sup> Single women were not accepted by society as they are today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The second, yet unspoken part of Naomi’s message to Ruth and Orpah is: you need to get married so that you can have children. Ruth and Orpah are both barren at this point in the narrative, having had no children after ten years of marriage (1:4).<sup>314</sup> Given the high value placed on having children and the great pain of not being able to conceive (as mentioned above), there is no reason to assume that Ruth and her husband intentionally tried to prevent

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<sup>311</sup> Meyers, *RH*, 112.

<sup>312</sup> Meyers, *RH*, 113.

<sup>313</sup> See Ruth 3:1 which implies Ruth can only be happy if she marries again.

<sup>314</sup> See Sasson, *RU*, 161; Hubbard, *BOR*, 285; Hamlin, *STF*, 68. Campbell believes *ten years* mentioned in 1:4 indicates “the time span *after* the marriages of the two sons, rather than the entire length of the family’s sojourn in Moab.” Campbell, *ABR*, 58. Also see Campbell, *ABR*, 167.

conception. In fact, doing so would go against a premise of this study—that producing progeny brought status to women of the Hebrew Bible.

After Naomi makes this point, Orpah, crying and kissing Naomi, decides to return to her people. While this is the last that will be mentioned of Orpah, it is important to recognize that she, too, has been commended for the *חסד* she showed to Naomi and her deceased husband. Orpah is loyal, but Ruth even more so.<sup>315</sup> Ruth responds differently to Naomi; she clings, *דבקה*, to her (1:14). The verb *דבק* is found in other places in the Hebrew Bible and indicates a strong bond of love and/or commitment.<sup>316</sup> When Ruth clings to Naomi she is binding them together, in solidarity, to face an unknown future. She also exhibits a level of “ . . . loyalty and commitment that go beyond the bounds of law or duty.”<sup>317</sup> P. Tribble suggests Ruth’s decision to remain with Naomi—especially in light of what Naomi said about marriage—further demonstrates Ruth’s loyalty: Ruth reverses “sexual allegiance” by committing herself to an older woman, rather than to the pursuit of a husband. “One female has chosen another female in a world where life depends upon men. There is no more radical decision in all the memories of Israel. Naomi is silenced by it (1:18).”<sup>318</sup> Tribble pays Ruth a tremendous compliment.

Once again, Naomi urges Ruth to return to her own people. She refuses. Ruth’s next response is perhaps the most well-known verse from the book of Ruth: “Do not press me to leave you, to return from following after you, because wherever you go, I will go; and where you spend the night, I will spend the night; your people will be my people; and your God will be my God; where you die, I will die, and there I will be

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<sup>315</sup> Campbell, *ABR*, 82.

<sup>316</sup> See Genesis 2:24, Prov 18:24.

<sup>317</sup> Reinhartz, *JSBR*, 1578.

<sup>318</sup> Tribble, *TW*, 258.



Adonai to reward Ruth for her deeds. Additionally, it seems that when Boaz speaks these words to Ruth, he is drawing a comparison between the patriarch Abraham and Ruth. When Abraham is called by Adonai (12:1), the text says he leaves his native land, מולדתו, the same term used by Boaz when he speaks to Ruth. Perhaps this similarity is coincidental, and perhaps not. The use of the word מולדתו in relation to Ruth leaving Moab draws a parallel with Abraham. Ruth's status and place in history are elevated by this similarity; some might claim that Ruth's act is even more commendable, for unlike Abraham, who leaves in response to a divine calling, Ruth leaves on her own volition—motivated by the loyalty and kindness of her own heart. Tribble writes:

Abraham was a man, with a wife and other possessions to accompany him. Ruth stands alone; she possesses nothing. No God has called her; no deity has promised her blessing; no human being has come to her aid. She lives and chooses without a support group, and she knows that the fruit of her decision may well be the emptiness of rejection, indeed death. Consequently, not even Abraham's leap of faith surpasses this decision of Ruth.<sup>322</sup>

Additionally, I would be remiss in my comments if I did not mention that Sarah accompanies Abraham when he leaves, and therefore also deserves recognition (as noted above). The same holds true for Rebekah, who mounts a camel and heads for Canaan, with no indication that she will ever return to her family or native land (Gen 24:61).

By examining the words Ruth speaks to Naomi in vv. 16-18, further insights into Ruth's loyalty are revealed. For example, when Ruth indicates her willingness to "spend the night," לון, where Naomi will, she is not simply referring to the nights they will spend journeying to Bethlehem. Rather, she is speaking in a broader sense, implying, "Whether Naomi's future home is in a palace or in a hut, . . . [she is] determined to share her

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<sup>322</sup> Tribble, *TW*, 258.



mother-in-law's dwelling.<sup>323</sup> When she says, "Where you die, I'll die," באשר תמות אמות, she is not referring to the actual place of death, but rather, Ruth is indicating her willingness to stay with Naomi and endure the same unknown fate, even if this means death by hunger, plague, war or the like.<sup>324</sup> When Ruth goes on to say "and there I will be buried," ושם אקבר, she is indicating that she will remain loyal to Naomi, and the Israelite ways, until she, herself, is buried.<sup>325</sup>

When Naomi and Ruth complete their journey, they are greeted in Bethlehem by a welcoming group of women.<sup>326</sup> "The city went wild over them," ותהם כל-העיר עליהן, according to 1:19. This warm reception indicates solidarity among the women. It also shows that women were out and about, and were not hidden away in their homes. The last verse of chapter 1 informs that Naomi and Ruth arrived at the beginning of the barley season, בתחלת קציר שערים.

In the second verse of chapter 2, Ruth informs Naomi that she wants to go to the field and glean. Depending on how one interprets the verse—and arguments have been made for both ways—Ruth is either requesting permission to glean or informing Naomi of her decision to do so.<sup>327</sup> According to T. O. Lambdin, the presence of the particle נ in v. 2 suggests that Ruth is declaring her intention to go to the fields and glean.<sup>328</sup> She understands that as childless widows, the two women have no one to provide for them and must insure their own survival. This said, Ruth takes it upon herself to meet their

<sup>323</sup> Sasson, *RU*, 30. Contra Campbell, *ABR*, 74, who understands this statement in a more literal way, meaning, wherever you lodge [for the night], I will lodge, on the journey to Bethlehem.

<sup>324</sup> Sasson, *RU*, 30.

<sup>325</sup> Contra Campbell, *ABR*, 74-5, who understands this phrase to mean Ruth will adopt the Israelite burial custom of gathering bones, after death and body decomposition, and place them in a family tomb—either in an ossuary or on the floor of the tomb.

<sup>326</sup> See 1 Sam 18:6-7.

<sup>327</sup> See Campbell, *ABD*, 91; Sasson, *RU*, 38; Hubbard, *BOR*, 136.

<sup>328</sup> See Campbell, *ABD*, 91; Hubbard, *BOR*, 136, n. 1.

needs. This is the first indication, but not the last, that Ruth is a proactive woman who takes initiative. It also shows that she is not afraid of hard work. R. Hubbard suggests that Ruth goes to the fields almost immediately upon arrival in Bethlehem—without taking time to rest from her long journey—for she senses the immediacy of the situation, given that the harvest period has already begun.<sup>329</sup>

When Ruth announces that she will go to the fields to glean, she also tells Naomi that she will glean behind someone “in whose eyes I find favor,” אשר אמצא-חן בעיניו. This is another way that Ruth takes initiative and shows her intelligence. According to the three biblical verses that mention gleaning of fields by those in need, Lev 19:9, 23:22, and Deut 24:19, not one of them indicates that a gleaner must seek permission from the owner of the field or glean behind someone who takes a liking to her. As an אלמנה, widow, and גר, resident alien, Ruth has the right to glean in any field. However, Ruth intuitively understands that in order to maximize her efforts, it will be beneficial to work behind someone who does not mind her presence. To this end, Ruth requests permission to glean. She also asks to be allowed to “gather among the sheaves behind the reapers,” ואספתי בעמרים אחרי הקוצרים (2:7), a request that goes beyond the privileges normally extended to gleaners.<sup>330</sup> Ruth exhibits great courage, determination, and initiative by making this request. It is reasonable to assume that she seeks this permission because she has accepted upon herself the responsibility of providing for Naomi, in addition to herself.

Boaz, who owns the field that Ruth selects, shows her kindness and generosity. He grants her request to glean among the sheaves (2:15-16), instructs her to remain in his

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<sup>329</sup> Hubbard, *BOR*, 136. Also see Tribble, *TW*, 260.

<sup>330</sup> See Hubbard, *BOR*, 159.

fields (2:8), orders his male workers not to touch or hurt her (2:9), and offers her food and drink (2:9, 14). Ruth is appreciative of the kindness shown to her by Boaz and expresses her gratitude with respect and humility. She bows and prostrates herself on the ground, ותפל על-פניה ותשתחו ארצה (2:9), and expresses hope that she will continue to find favor in his eyes, calling him *my lord*, אמצא-חן בעיניך אדוני (12:13).<sup>331</sup> She refers to herself as a שפחה, a maidservant who is on the lowest rung of the social scale, when speaking to him (2:13).<sup>332</sup> This Hebrew term, שפחה, is used as an expression of humility.<sup>333</sup> Ruth also shows Boaz proper respect when she later refers to herself as אמתך, “your handmaid” (3:9).<sup>334</sup>

Another example of Ruth’s modesty is seen when Boaz summons her to eat with him and the reapers. She sits “at the side of” or “next to” the reapers, as opposed to among them, וחשב מצד הקוצרים (2:14).<sup>335</sup> Ruth does so as a sign of respect, knowing that her status is below that of the others. In a similar vein, as noted above, Ruth asks permission to glean in the field, even though she is not required to do so. “She would glean not with presumption—written law or not—but with humility.”<sup>336</sup> She also shows an honest valuation of herself when she refers to herself as a “foreigner,” saying: ואנכי נכרייה (2:10). Ruth understands that she is a foreigner in a foreign land and has no delusions of grandeur. This, however, does not hinder her ability to do what she must to provide for Naomi and herself.

<sup>331</sup> Also see Hubbard, *BOR*, 161, 168; Campbell, *ABR*, 100.

<sup>332</sup> A שפחה performs menial tasks and cannot marry. This in contrast to an אמה (3:9) who can marry a free man and has a higher status than a שפחה. See Sasson, *RU*, 53; Hamlin, *STF*, 45; Campbell, *ABD*, 101.

<sup>333</sup> See 1 Sam 25:41; Sasson, *RU*, 54.

<sup>334</sup> Hamlin, *STF*, 44.

<sup>335</sup> Campbell, *ABR*, 102.

<sup>336</sup> Hubbard, *BOR*, 139

Ruth proves to be a diligent worker in the field. It can be inferred from the text that she returns to the field before the others—perhaps while they are still eating—for 2:15 says, “She got up to glean,” ותקם ללקת, as opposed to *they got up to glean*.<sup>337</sup> The implication is that Ruth took a shorter break than the rest. Ruth 2:17 informs that she gleaned until the evening and then first begins to beat the sheaves. The lateness of the hour does not cause Ruth to retire, despite the fact that she has been on her feet since the morning, ותבוא ותעמוד מאז הבקר (2:7). Ruth puts in a full day’s work, an indication of her stamina and perseverance (also characteristics of Rebekah and the אשת-חיל, as discussed above).

Additional evidence of her intensive labor is the sizable amount of barley that she accumulates in one day—about an *ephah*,<sup>338</sup> כאיפה שערים (2:17).<sup>339</sup> To put this quantity into perspective, an *ephah* is approximately two-thirds of a bushel<sup>340</sup>—the equivalent of one-half of one month’s salary—no small feat.<sup>341</sup> Ruth’s strong work ethic is reminiscent of the אשת-חיל, who rises early and stays up late (Prov 31:15, 18; as discussed above).

After Ruth completes her work, she returns to the city, carrying her grain. Her load is not light—twenty-nine to fifty pounds—depending on how one calculates the conversion of an *ephah* into pounds.<sup>342</sup> This said, it is logical to deduce that among her many other attributes, Ruth is also a physically strong woman.<sup>343</sup> The same is true of the אשת-חיל and Rebekah—obviously a desirable attribute of the *ideal* Israelite woman (see discussion above).

<sup>337</sup> See Hubbard, *BOR*, 175.

<sup>338</sup> An *ephah* is a standard unit of dry measure.

<sup>339</sup> Hubbard, *BOR*, 179.

<sup>340</sup> Reinhartz, *JSBR*, 1582. According to 1 Sam 17:17, one *ephah* could feed a number of men military men.

<sup>341</sup> Hubbard, *BOR*, 179; Sasson, *RU*, 57.

<sup>342</sup> See Campbell, *ABD*, 104; Sasson, *RU*, 57; Hubbard, *BOR*, 179.

<sup>343</sup> Contra Campbell, *ABD*, 104.

Other notable characteristics of Ruth are kindness and consideration for others. When Boaz offers Ruth roasted grain, “she ate and was satisfied and had leftover [food],” תאכל ותשבע ותתר (2:14). She saves the food for Naomi and gives it to her when she returns home at the end of the day, ותתן-ליה את אשר-הותרה משבעה (2:18). Given that Ruth worked from the morning into the night, it is likely that she could have benefited from eating the saved food. However, being the generous woman that she is, Ruth saves it for her mother-in-law.

Another strong example of Ruth’s courage, assertiveness and generosity is seen when Naomi wants Ruth to visit Boaz, at the threshing floor<sup>344</sup>, at night. Naomi, who has identified Boaz as a member of the same clan, משפחה, as her deceased husband, Elimelech, wants Ruth to present herself to Boaz in hopes that he will serve as their redeemer, מגאלנו הוא (2:20).<sup>345</sup> This will serve two functions and fulfill Naomi’s desires, as well: 1) the possibility of an heir for Naomi’s son, and 2) Ruth will have a husband, a secure home, and an overall better situation, בתי הלא אבקש-לך מנח אשר ייטב-לך (3:1). (Here, again, Naomi infers that true happiness can only come to one who is married.) Ruth does as Naomi requests, despite the risks of Naomi’s “potentially dangerous and compromising” plan.<sup>346</sup> If Ruth is caught alone with Boaz at night, she would most likely be shamed, humiliated and/or have her name tarnished, on account of inappropriate behavior. Despite this, her “unquestioning obedience” to Naomi shows Ruth’s loyalty, once again.<sup>347</sup>

<sup>344</sup> “The *threshing floor* is an elevated open space where the kernels of grain were separated from the chaff (winnowed). *Winnowing* was done in the evening when strong breezes would carry the chaff away.” Reinhartz, *JSBR*, 1583.

<sup>345</sup> See Lev 25:25; Deut 25:5-6.

<sup>346</sup> Tribie in *WIS*, 146. See also Tribie, *ABD* 5, 844; Campbell, *ABR*, 121.

<sup>347</sup> Hubbard, *BOR*, 206.

When Boaz is awakened by Ruth's presence, she takes her devotion and concern for her mother-in-law to a new level. Contrary to the directive that Naomi gives Ruth—to wait for instruction from Boaz—Ruth takes charge of the situation, saying, “Spread the skirt of your garment<sup>348</sup> over your maidservant, because you are a redeemer,” ופרשת כנףך על-אמתך כי גאל אותה (3:9). By asserting herself in this fashion, Ruth is proposing marriage.<sup>349</sup> She puts the desires of Naomi, to have an heir for her deceased son, before her own needs. She relinquishes the possibility of marrying a younger man who may be better suited for her. “. . . [Ruth] acted neither from passion nor greed. Rather, sacrificially setting aside personal preferences, she chose a marriage of benefit to her family.”<sup>350</sup> It is not by chance that Ruth uses the word כנף when speaking to Boaz. This is the same word that he used—when they first met—to bless her with refuge under Adonai's wings, לחסות תחת-כנפיו (2:12). “Carefully carried out by Ruth, her daring, shrewd scheme worked to perfection; Ruth would at last have a husband.”<sup>351</sup> Ruth's boldness results in a foreign woman calling an Israelite man to responsibility.<sup>352</sup> Her gutsy behavior calls to mind Rachel, who brazenly removed the תרפים from her father's home, without his knowledge (see above).

Boaz recognizes the significance of Ruth's actions and exclaims, “May you be blessed by Adonai, my daughter. Your last act of חסד (subordinating her needs for Naomi's need for an heir) is better than the first (coming to Bethlehem with Naomi). You did not go after the young men, either poor or rich [whom you could have married],”

<sup>348</sup> Koehler and Baumgartner, *HAL*, 486. Other commentators translate כנף as *corner of garment*, *wrap*, and *robe*.

<sup>349</sup> See Ezek 16:8; Campbell, *ABR*, 123; “It probably reflects a marriage custom still attested among Arabs whereby a man symbolically took a wife by throwing a garment-corner over her.” Hubbard, *BOR*, 212; also see p. 212, n. 3.

<sup>350</sup> Hubbard, *BOR*, 215.

<sup>351</sup> Hubbard, *BOR*, 229.

<sup>352</sup> Tribble in *WIS*, 147.

ויאמר ברוכה את ליי בתי היטבת חסדך האחרון מן-הראשון לבלתי-לכת אחרי הבחורים אם-דל ואם-עשיר (3:10). By these words, Boaz acknowledges Ruth's selfless devotion to Naomi. He continues to praise her high character saying, "And now, my daughter, do not be afraid. All that you will say, I will do for you, because כל-שער, all the people who gather in the gateway,<sup>353</sup> know that you are an אשת-חיל, a worthy woman (3:11).<sup>354</sup> This is a high compliment that not only acknowledges that Ruth is a noble woman, but also indicates that the elders and legislators of the town are aware of her stature, too. Whether Boaz or the writer had knowledge of the אשת-חיל of Prov 31:10-31, or not, Ruth is being compared to a woman who shares many of these same qualities. Furthermore, when Boaz says, "All that you say, I will do for you," כל אשר-תאמרי אעשה-לך, Boaz is acknowledging Ruth's status in their relationship. While a case can be made that Ruth has subtly been calling the shots all along—deciding to glean in the field of a friendly landowner, seeking permission before gleaning, telling Boaz to put his garment over her—her power is now confirmed by another; Boaz consents to do as she asks. This verse shows, as was seen with the אשת-חיל and the matriarchs, that Israelite women were able to shape their destinies. Ruth transforms herself from a Moabitess, to a נכריה, to a שפחה, to an אמה, to the wife of a wealthy man,<sup>355</sup> to the great-grandmother of King David. This is a major accomplishment in the patriarchal climate of the ancient Near East. Meyers affirms the accomplishments of Ruth, writing, "Although it is often assumed that gender hierarchies

<sup>353</sup> Koehler and Baumgartner, *HAL*, 1616. Other translations of כל-שער are: *the legally responsible body of the town*, Campbell, *ABR*, 124; *my fellow citizens*, Hubbard, *BOR*, 216; *elders of the town*, JPS translation.

<sup>354</sup> Koehler and Baumgartner define חיל as *strength*. I consider this to be an accurate definition, for it is her strength of character—resulting from her many positive attributes—that make her an *ideal* woman. Koehler and Baumgartner, *HAL*, 311; see Num 24:18.

<sup>355</sup> Ruth, like the אשת-חיל and matriarchs, becomes a woman of means. She acquires wealth through her marriage to Boaz. As Sasson writes, "Boaz . . . was not an ordinary, run-of-the-mill Israelite, but a man of substance." Sasson, *RU*, 40.

in ancient Israel precluded female autonomy, all the women in Ruth . . . assume active roles . . . they initiate or decide on actions that affect the course of their lives."<sup>356</sup>

Commentators indicate, and I agree, that Ruth's proactive behavior leads her to become "the true bringer of salvation in this story."<sup>357</sup> It is the assertiveness of Ruth, and her confidence in her ability to take matters into her own hands, that secures Boaz as the redeemer for Naomi's son (and the Israelite nation, in general; see below). While Naomi deserves credit for devising the plan and guiding Ruth as a loving mother would—instructing her to bathe, anoint, dress appropriately, and what to do upon arrival—it is Ruth who musters the courage to ask Boaz to marry her.<sup>358</sup> This said, however, Naomi's concern for Ruth's welfare and security must also be noted. There is no other citation in the Hebrew Bible that records a mother-in-law's effort to help her daughter-in-law find a spouse.<sup>359</sup> Naomi's involvement in finding a suitable husband for Ruth makes an important statement about the role women had in arranging marriages (see above). Additionally, Naomi calls Ruth "my daughter," בִּיתִי, four times. (2:22; 3:1, 16, 18), indicating a true fondness for her. Perhaps it was Naomi's kindness toward Ruth, in Moab, that led her to follow Naomi back to Canaan. Moreover, Naomi shows Ruth concern, and offers guidance, when she says, regarding the offer by Boaz to glean in his field, "It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his female workers and not be molested in another field," טוב בִּיתִי כִּי תֵצֵא עִם-גִּדְרוֹתָיו וְלֹא יִפְגְּעוּ-בְךָ בַּשָּׂדֶה אֲחֵר (2:22). Naomi understands that working among men could lead to Ruth being physically hurt or

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<sup>356</sup> Meyers, *RH*, 109.

<sup>357</sup> Hubbard, *BOR*, 213.

<sup>358</sup> See Hubbard, *BOR*, 213.

<sup>359</sup> Hubbard, *BOR*, 205.



sexually harassed.<sup>360</sup> As Hubbard speculates, “. . . greedy owners and reapers probably often obstructed the efforts of gleaners by ridicule, tricks, and in some cases outright expulsion.”<sup>361</sup> It is also probable that Ruth could encounter other gleaners, who, being desperate for survival, could resort to desperate measures. Naomi tries to keep Ruth safe, and in the best possible situation, as she provides for them. Naomi, in her own rite, models the positive attributes of kindness, concern, guidance, and courage—all characteristics of the *ideal* Israelite woman.

From 2:22, mentioned above, and 2:8, where Boaz invites Ruth to remain in his field and “join with my female workers,” וְכָה חִדְּבָקִין עִם-נְעֹרָתִי, it is evident that Israelite women were part of the essential labor force. These verses support Meyer’s theory that although women were not regularly involved in field or plow agriculture, their “seasonal participation at labor-intensive periods cannot be ruled out.”<sup>362</sup> Other scholars also suggest that women worked in the fields. E. Campbell believes men sickled the stalks and women gathered them into sheaves and bound them.<sup>363</sup> Hubbard agrees with this, but adds two additional points: it was the women who carried the bundles from the field to the threshing floor; and perhaps, more importantly, “One should not . . . distinguish these groups absolutely, as if men never bundled sheaves or women never cut grain from stalks.”<sup>364</sup> I think that Hubbard is most likely correct. While a general system was most likely in place that divided the labor, it is reasonable to conclude that both genders performed the various tasks at various times. Additionally, what is more important than

<sup>360</sup> יִפְעֹז-בָּהּ is also translated as *bother, treat roughly, rough up*, Hubbard, *BOR*, 159; *to chance upon, to meet*, Sasson, *RU*, 62.

<sup>361</sup> Hubbard, *BOR*, 136.

<sup>362</sup> Meyers, *EVE*, 146.

<sup>363</sup> Campbell, *ABR*, 98.

<sup>364</sup> Hubbard, *BOR*, 158.

determining exactly which tasks women performed specifically, is recognizing the invaluable contribution they made to the agrarian economy of the ancient world. By working in the fields, especially during harvest seasons, women became principle partners in securing food, and thus sustaining, their respective households. Additionally, since Ruth and other women are noted as working in the fields, they support the validity of the agriculture work performed by the אשת-חיל.

Another notable trait of the *ideal* Israelite woman, seen with Ruth, as well as with the matriarchs (see above), is Adonai's intervention in her life. When Ruth goes to the fields to find a place to glean, she has no idea that the "jumbled patchwork of subdivided property"<sup>365</sup> that she selects belongs to her relative. The text indicates it is by chance, or luck, that Ruth comes to the portion of the field that belongs to Boaz, ויקר מקרה חלקת השדה, (2:3). According to biblical thought, however, there is no such thing as chance; what appears to be luck is understood as divine intervention.<sup>366</sup> Adonai, then, brings Ruth to Boaz's field. This is the first sign of God's direct involvement with Ruth. The next instance, stated more directly by the text, is found in 4:13: Boaz marries Ruth, he lies with her, "and Adonai allowed her to conceive, and she bore a son," ויתן יי לה הריון ותלד בן. The implication is that Ruth is now able to reproduce, unlike in the past, because Adonai has willed this to occur. The women who gather around (the same women who greeted Naomi on her return to Bethlehem) echo this sentiment also, saying "Blessed is Adonai who has not left you without a redeemer today, ברוך יי אשר לא השבית לך גאל היום, (4:14). Additionally, God's hand in Ruth's conceiving is foreshadowed in 4:11, when the townspeople bless Ruth by asking Adonai to make her "like Rachel and Leah, the two

<sup>365</sup> Campbell, *ABR*, 141.

<sup>366</sup> See Tribble, *TW*, 260; Hubbard, *BOR*, 141; Campbell, *ABR*, 112; contra Sasson, *RU*, 44.

who built up the house of Israel," כרחל וכלאה אשר בנו שתיהם את-בית ישראל. This prayer recognizes the contribution of Rachel and Leah to the Israelite nation. While it can be understood literally, referring to their twelve sons and the subsequent twelve tribes, there is also reason to interpret this verse in a more general sense, recognizing the contributions these two matriarchs made to Israelite society. By understanding the verse in this manner, the text is implying that Ruth will have a place among the people of Israel, similar in stature to that of the matriarchs. When Adonai responds favorably to the pleas of the people of Bethlehem, resulting in the birth of a son, Ruth takes her place among the matriarchs who also conceive with divine intervention (21:1-2; 25:21; 29:31; 30:17, 30:22-3).

Once Ruth's son is born, the women perform the ritual of naming the child, calling him Obed (4:17). This is the sole example in the Hebrew Bible of a name given by someone other than a parent<sup>367</sup> (see above). Obed becomes the father of Jesse, who becomes the father of King David. When the women tell Naomi that her redeemer has arrived (4:14), they also say, "May his name<sup>368</sup> be proclaimed<sup>369</sup> in Israel," ויקרא שמו בישראל (4:14). This is a foreshadowing that Ruth's son will become someone important in the Israelite nation. Some see the royalty of Ruth's great-grandson as her ultimate reward for the acts of חסד she performs for Naomi. Whether or not this is Adonai's ultimate reward to Ruth, is open to individual interpretation. However, what is clear is that by giving birth to her son, Ruth is forever connected to Israel's national history. Furthermore, it is only because of the daring plan drawn up by Naomi, and the flawless

<sup>367</sup> Hubbard, *BOR*, 276.

<sup>368</sup> While opinions vary among scholars as to who is the antecedent of *his name*, I agree with those who say the newborn son is the redeemer who is to be hailed. See Campbell, *ABR*, 163; Sasson, *RU*, 163; Hubbard, *BOR*, 271.

<sup>369</sup> ויקרא literally means *and he was called*.

execution by Ruth, that this comes to fruition. It is significant that the founding king of the royal house of Judah has his roots with two women who possess many of the attributes of the *ideal* Israelite woman. Additionally, it is Ruth, more so than Boaz, who is hailed as the progenitor of King David.

The praise for Ruth, as abundant as it has already been thus far in the text, continues further. In 4:15, the women of Bethlehem praise Ruth when speaking to Naomi, saying, "she is better to you than seven sons, אשר-היא טובה לך משבעה בנים. This is an exceptional comment of praise, bestowed upon an exceptional woman. As is commonly accepted, sons were more valued than daughters in antiquity.<sup>370</sup> This said, if Ruth had been declared better than even *one* son, it would still have been noteworthy. The implication is that Naomi, who is loved by Ruth (4:15), receives better care from her daughter-in-law than she would have from seven sons, had she been so blessed.<sup>371</sup>

A final point that must be brought forth is the inheritance of land by Naomi. Elimelech owns land when he, his wife, and two sons leave Bethlehem. (Naomi is mentioned, by name, when she leaves Bethlehem (1:2). Her inclusion in the text indicates she is an important member of the family. The matriarchs, too, are mentioned by name when their families journey from their homeland (see above).)<sup>372</sup> When Naomi returns home, she is the one who inherits Elimelech's property. This is indicated in 4:3 when Boaz says, "The portion of the field that belonged to our brother, Elimelech, Naomi has put up for sale," חלקת השדה אשר לאחינו לאלימלך מכרה נעמי. The second reference to Naomi being a landowner is found in 4:5: "On the day you acquire the field from the hand of

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<sup>370</sup> Also see Hubbard, *BOR*, 273.

<sup>371</sup> See 1 Sam 2:5; Job 1:2. The number seven symbolizes *totality* or *completeness*, Hamlin, *STF*, 72; it is the ideal number of natural sons, Tribble, *ABD* 5, 845.

<sup>372</sup> See Gen 12:5.

Naomi," ביום-קנותך השדה מיד נעמי. This passage is followed by the acquisition of the property in 4:9. These verses clearly show that not only could an Israelite woman inherit land,<sup>373</sup> she could also reclaim it from one who occupied it during her absence.<sup>374</sup> The text also indicates that a woman could engage in the legal activity of selling property, as well.<sup>375</sup> Naomi, like Rachel and Leah, are Israelite women who had property rights and exercised them—Naomi by selling her land, Rachel and Leah by claiming theirs.

It is significant that the last spoken words of the book of Ruth are uttered by women, not men (4:14-17). This is notable, given the women of Bethlehem see Obed as the restorer of Naomi's life, not as the restorer "of the name of the dead to his inheritance."<sup>376</sup> Similarly, they declare a son has been born to Naomi, not "An inheritor has been born for Elimelech!"<sup>377</sup> Ending the book with the voices of women, the same as it begins, shows that this truly is a story with a strong female agenda. If the book of Ruth was not written by a woman, as some scholars claim, one cannot overlook the strength, bravery, determination, and assertiveness of the female characters. If a man did, indeed, write this story, it speaks highly about the role of women in his society and his perception of them.

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<sup>373</sup> See Num 27:5.

<sup>374</sup> Campbell, *ABR*, 157; see 2 Kgs 8:1-6.

<sup>375</sup> See Tribble, *TW*, 275; Since Boaz seems to be conducting the business on behalf of Naomi, it is possible that a woman's ability to engage in legal transactions by herself was limited.

<sup>376</sup> Tribble, *ABD* 5, 845.

<sup>377</sup> Tribble, *ABD* 5, 845.

## 5.

### CONCLUSION

#### WITH REFLECTIONS FOR MODERNITY

The aim of this concluding chapter is to draw connections between the ancient model of the *ideal* Israelite woman and modern concepts of the *ideal* Jewish woman. In order to make this task more manageable and perhaps more credible, it is necessary to specify to which group of Jewish women I am referring. This is critical, for the *ideal* Reform woman will look different from the *ideal* Orthodox woman. Similarly, the *ideal* American Jewish woman will be categorized differently than the *ideal* Israeli, Australian or Ethiopian Jewish woman. Also, a heterosexual woman will have different values than a homosexual woman. Since I am a Reform, American, heterosexual Jewish woman, I will focus my comments on women from this religious and national group who also share my sexual orientation. It must also be stated that despite my generalizations, I fully understand that each Jewish woman is unique—even within the subsets of Reform, American and heterosexual. However, in order to draw conclusions, I will need *to paint with broad strokes*.

When thinking about Reform American Jewish women (herein referred to as Jewish woman or women), one of the first attributes that comes to mind is educated. This is supported by *The National Jewish Population Study 2000-01: Strength, Challenge and Diversity in the American Jewish Population (NJPS)*. According to this study, “More than half of all Jewish adults (55%) have received a college degree, and a quarter (25%)

have earned a graduate degree. The comparable figures for the total U.S. population are 29% and 6%. Jewish men are more likely than Jewish women to have college degrees (61% vs. 50%) and graduate degrees (29% vs. 21%).<sup>378</sup> Despite the fact that more Jewish men receive degrees than Jewish women, the percentage of Jewish women who have had a higher education is notable and greater than the national average.

As a result of advanced education levels, and the wider acceptance of women into a greater number of professional fields, Jewish women are important members of the American work force. It is not uncommon to find Jewish women employed as doctors, lawyers, business executives, professors, rabbis, cantors, and other professions. These women not only add to the welfare of the country's economy, but also to the economic stability of their own households. In this manner, they are comparable to their biblical predecessors. Granted, the method by which these two groups of women contribute to their households is very different; however, what remains constant is the benefit they bring to their families. The modern day Jewish woman draws a salary that helps procure items needed by her family, while the אשת-חיל of Proverbs purchased real estate, manufactured textiles and garments, traded with merchants, planted a vineyard, and managed the household, servants and workers. Rachel was a shepherdess, watching over her family's flocks, and Ruth gleaned in the fields (alongside other female workers in Boaz's field) to provide for herself and Naomi.

In addition to the work done outside of one's home, the Jewish woman is also responsible for taking care of her family. This includes, but is not limited to food shopping and meal preparation, maintaining the home, and tending to the many needs of any children including educational, socialization and emotional nurturing. Mothers also

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<sup>378</sup> NJPS, 6.

have the responsibility of purchasing (or sewing) clothing for their children. While men might participate in all of the tasks just named, the primary responsibility for running the home and caring for the children still falls mainly on women—even those employed outside of the home. An example of this is *back-to-school* shopping; one need only visit a clothing store at the end of the summer to see that more mothers, than fathers, are engaged in this activity. None of this is surprising, for the roots of this behavior can be traced back to the biblical period. The אשת-חלל sought out quality material and then made clothes for her children and herself (31:13, 19, 22, 24). Proverbs 1:8 and 6:20 indicate that mothers were involved in teaching their children the needed skills to grow and develop into productive and useful members of society. Sarah was very protective of Isaac and had Ishmael sent away when she thought Isaac was in danger; Rebekah was the mastermind behind Jacob's being sent away so that Esau could not harm him; and Naomi was concerned with finding an heir for her deceased son so that his name could be carried on. Additionally, it was the female members of Israelite society who were responsible for food production, as noted above.

Another characteristic of the modern Jewish woman is that she decides *whom* she will marry, *when* she will marry, and *if* she will marry. The first and second characteristics are not entirely different from two of the biblical women discussed in this study: Rebekah and Ruth. Rebekah decided if and when she would follow Abraham's servant to Canaan and marry Isaac (24:58), and Ruth took initiative by proposing to Boaz (3:9). While they are not characteristic of the average Israelite woman, they are part of the biblical text. However, the point of departure comes with the third characteristic—the uncertainty of marriage.



While biblical narratives never imply that a woman might not want to marry, the 2000-01 NJPS indicates twenty-five percent of American Jewish adults (this figure includes men) are single and have never been married.<sup>379</sup> Additionally, the study reports, "American Jews, both men and women, tend to marry later than Americans generally. In every age group under 65, proportionally fewer Jews than all Americans have ever married, with the largest gap being among those age 25-34. Only among those 65 and over do more or equal proportions of Jews report having been married than the general U.S. population."<sup>380</sup> While it is reasonable to assume that some of the women included in this statistic would marry if the right opportunity arose, it is also reasonable to conclude that other women in this group are single by design. This represents a break with tradition and is the first major difference between the ancient Israelite woman and the modern Jewish woman.

This phenomenon, in turn, is related to another aspect of the modern Jewish woman that is significantly different from the *ideal* Israelite woman: she might not choose to have children. Unlike the Israelite women who felt pain, shame, embarrassment, and punished by Adonai when unable to reproduce, today's Jewish woman does not necessarily regard having children as a sign of status, self-worth, and/or a sign of favor by God. The NJPS reports, "At all ages, fertility among Jewish women is lower than fertility for all U.S. women, whether gauged by the percent who are childless or the average number of children ever born."<sup>381</sup> It also indicates Jewish fertility rates are below population replacement levels.<sup>382</sup> A. Baker suggests one reason for this is the "...

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<sup>379</sup> NJPS, 3.

<sup>380</sup> NJPS, 3.

<sup>381</sup> NJPS, 3.

<sup>382</sup> NJPS, viii.

redefinition of women's roles. On average, the Jewish woman of childbearing age in contemporary society is well-educated and, frequently, professionally employed. Inevitably, except amongst the Orthodox, the tendency is for her to marry late, to delay having children and then to limit the size of her family."<sup>383</sup> I agree with this explanation and have found it to be the case among many Jewish women.

While the Jewish population in the United States is shrinking, I am not sure that most Reform Jews are aware of this statistic. As a result, I do not think couples that choose to have few children, or none at all, are pressured into conceiving by their communities. In fact, my sense is that Jewish women who choose to remain single and/or choose to remain childless are no less accepted than married women with children. Marriage and motherhood are recognized as one of the options today, not as the *only* option.

For those women who choose to marry, it is safe to assume that the vast majority, if not all, feel loved by their husband on their wedding day. The desire to enter into a love-filled marriage has its roots with our biblical matriarchs, Rebekah (24:67) and Rachel (29:18). The text clearly states that both of these women were loved by their husbands. The אשת-חיל was trusted, valued and praised by her husband, as indicated by Proverbs 31:11 and 28-9. Similarly, prior to Ruth's marriage to Boaz, she was praised by him and referred to as an אשת-חיל.

Another attribute of the *ideal* Israelite woman was the involvement of Adonai in her life. In this study, I made the case that the four matriarchs and Ruth each experienced divine intervention, either through conception (Sarah, Rachel, Leah, Ruth), becoming aware of God's greater plan (Rebekah), or in other ways. While the אשת-חיל did not

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<sup>383</sup> Baker, *JWCS*, 25.

experience such intervention, she was God fearing, implying she had an awareness of Adonai. Many modern Jewish women would not claim that God micromanages or is directly involved in the details of their lives. A fair number would probably acknowledge the desire to feel the presence of God. In the twenty-first century, it is common to hear Reform Jews speak of a quest for spirituality. For some, this is expressed through synagogue worship and/or Jewish study. For others, this comes by assuming a leadership role in their synagogue or larger Jewish community. Others will experience God when they engage in acts of *tikkun olam* and social action. In whatever form, I suggest that the search for some type of connection or relationship with the Divine is also an attribute of the modern Jewish woman.

Another aspect of the modern Jewish woman is her desire to be physically fit, physically attractive, and physically healthy. It is a common sight, today, to see Jewish women exercising in JCCs, gyms and fitness centers. The Hebrew Bible implies that there is nothing wrong with a strong woman who is physically attractive. Rebekah's physical strength is demonstrated when she draws water for multiple camels (24:20); Ruth's strength is implied by her ability to carry a heavy load of grain from the field back to the city limits (2:18); and the אשת-חיל girds her loins with strength and strengthens her arms (31:17). The book of Ruth implies Ruth has the necessary stamina and vigor to work from early in the morning until late at night (2:7, 17); the same holds true for the אשת-חיל (31:15, 18). The Hebrew Bible also explicitly mentions the physical beauty of three of its matriarchs: Sarah (12:11), Rebekah (26:7), and Rachel (29:17).

In addition to being physically strong and beautiful, the Israelite women discussed in this study made decisions on behalf of herself, her husband and family; she took risks,

showed courage, and exhibited strength of character. The אשת-חיל was a successful businesswoman and manager, who cared for her family while successfully maneuvering in a male-dominated society. She is praised for excelling above other Israelite women (31:29) and is described by commentators as alert, energetic, and in control (see above). Sarah was a tough woman who knew how to make tough decisions. When she believed her son was being threatened, she insisted that Abraham expel both Ishmael and Hagar. Sarah commanded respect when she spoke and Abraham heeded her words. Rebekah was noted for her hospitality, kindness and generosity. However, she is also described as forceful, enterprising, energetic and resourceful (see above). While Rebekah was privy to, and carried out Adonai's plan, her method of execution was manipulative and deceitful. Rachel was envious and became competitive with her sister. However, she was also bold, gutsy, and defied her own father by removing the תרפים from the household without his knowledge. Leah was also a competitive woman who, along with Rachel, had the courage to leave home for a new land when their husband was no longer being treated properly by their father. Ruth was perhaps the most courageous of all the women studied, for she left her homeland and adopted a new culture and new religion. She did so out of the goodness of her heart and the loyalty of her character. Ruth was also an assertive woman who took initiative and was not afraid of hard work. She will always be remembered as the great-grandmother of King David.

The matriarchs of our people, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah, along with Ruth and the אשת-חיל, together with their male counterparts, were instrumental in shaping the tradition of the Israelite, and later, the Jewish people. They serve as role models for women while reminding us that they, too, were imperfect human beings. Their flaws did

not overshadow their contributions. Additionally, their humanity allows every Jewish woman the space to fall, stumble and err, as she does her best to advance the Jewish people. While the heroines of the Hebrew Bible have secured their place in Jewish history, each Jewish family has its own Jewish matriarch who will resemble, in one form or another, the characteristics and attributes of the *ideal* Israelite woman.

## **APPENDIX**

### **Linear Translation of Proverbs 31:10-31**

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|--|-------|
| אשת-חיל מי ימצא ורחק מפנינים מכרה  | v. 10 |
| A capable wife, who can find? Her purchase price is far above pearls of coral.                                 |       |
| בטח בה לב בעלה ושלל לא יחסר  | v. 11 |
| The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain<br>(i.e. property and wealth).        |       |
| גמלתהו טוב ולא-רע כל ימי חייה  | v. 12 |
| She does him good and not evil, all the days of her life.  |       |
| דרשה צמר ופשתים ותעש בחפץ כפיה   | v. 13 |
| She searches for wool and flax (as material for clothing), and she actively<br>labors with her eager hands.    |       |
| היתה כאניות סוחר ממרחק תביא לחמה   | v. 14 |
| She is like trading vessels, bringing her bread from afar.   |       |
| ותקם בעוד לילה ותתן טרף לביתה וחק לנערותיה   | v. 15 |
| She rises while it is still night and gives food to her household, and prescribes<br>tasks for her attendants. |       |
| זממה שדה ותקחהו מפרי כפיה נטעה כרם   | v. 16 |
| She ponders a field and acquires it, with the fruit of her hands she plants a<br>vineyard.                     |       |
| חגרה בעוז מתניה ותאמץ זרעותיה  | v. 17 |
| She girds herself (her hips and loins) with strength, and strengthens her arms.                                |       |

- v. 18  
 טעמה כי-טוב סחרה לא-יכבה בלילה נרה  
 She perceives that her trading profit is good, her oil lamp does not go out at night.
- v. 19  
 ידיה שלחה בכישור וכפיה תמכו פלך  
 Her hands are cast/placed on the spindle, and her palms hold the spindle.
- v. 20  
 כפה פרשה לעני וידיה שלחה לאביו  
 She opens her hand to the poor, and her hands are extended to the needy.
- v. 21  
 לא-תירא לביתה משלג כי כל-ביתה לבש שנים  
 She is not afraid of the snow for her household, for all of her family is clothed in crimson.
- v. 22  
 מרבדים עשתה-לה שש וארגמן לבושה  
 She makes for herself coverings, she wears linen and purple garments.
- v. 23  
 נודע בשערים בעלה בשבתו עם-זקני-ארץ  
 Her husband is known in the gates, where he sits among the elders (a special class).
- v. 24  
 סדין עשתה ותמכר וחגור נתנה לכנעני  
 She makes and sells clothing, and gives a girdle to the tradesman.
- v. 25  
 עז-והדר לבושה ותשחק ליום אחרון  
 Strength and splendor are her clothing, and she laughs at the future.
- v. 26  
 פיה פתחה בחכמה ותורת-חסד על-לשונה  
 Her mouth opens with wisdom, and kind teaching is on her tongue.
- v. 27  
 צופיה הליכות ביתה ולחם עצלות לא תאכל  
 She examines the doings of her household, and the bread of sluggishness she does not eat.

קמו בניה ויאשרוה בעלה ויהללה v. 28  
Her children rise up and call her happy, her husband praises her, too [saying],

רבות בנות עשו חיל ואת עליית על-כלנה v. 29  
“Many daughters have proven themselves capable, but you surpass all  
of them.”

שקר החן והבל היפי אשה יראת-יי היא תתהלל v. 30  
Grace is deceitful/false and beauty is vain, [but] a woman who fears/respects  
*Adonai* will be praised.

תנו-לה מפרי ידיה ויהללוה בשערים מעשיה v. 31  
Give her from the fruit of her hands, and let her deeds praise her in the gates.



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