



RISK-TAKERS FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS: WOMEN IN THE BIBLE

MICHELE BRAND MEDWIN

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Advisor: Dr. Sharon Keller

רִנֵּה צְדָקָה וְחֶסֶד יִמָּצֵא חַיִּים צְדָקָה וְכָבוֹד:

The one who follows after righteousness and loving kindness
finds life, righteousness and honor.

(Proverbs 21:21)

DEDICATION... This thesis is dedicated to my family - to my husband, Steve, and to my children, Dan and Rachel. No other family could have given their wife and mother the support, encouragement and love that I have received from you, as I pursued my dream of becoming a Rabbi. I have been truly blessed by all of you in my life.

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בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
שֶׁחַיֵּינוּ וְקִיָּמנוּ וְהִגִּינוּ לזֶמֶן הַזֶּה.

We praise you, Eternal God, Sovereign of the
Universe, for giving us life, for sustaining us,
and for enabling us to reach this moment.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
1. INTRODUCTION:	
A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO BIBLICAL TEXT5
2. WOMEN IN BIBLICAL SOCIETY	14
3. EVE	23
4. REBEKAH	39
5. TAMAR	60
6. LESSER KNOWN WOMEN	
LOT'S DAUGHTERS	82
DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHECHAD.	98
7. CONCLUSIONS	121
BIBLIOGRAPHY.	127

CHAPTER 1:INTRODUCTION -**A Different Approach to Biblical¹ Text**

Until recently, most biblical study dealing with people in the Bible has focused on the men. Through biblical scholarship we see that the Patriarchs, Moses and Aaron, the Prophets and the Kings are key players in the text. Women assume only a minor role and even when they are mentioned in the text, many of them remain nameless. Edith Deen mentions 34 unnamed daughters, 24 unnamed wives, and 18 unnamed mothers in the Bible.² Biblical scholars tell us that who these women are is unimportant. What they do and to whom they are related to seem more significant.

Biblical society was a patriarchal one and the stories in the Bible seem to be written from that perspective. This is understandable when one looks at the origins of the canonized text. Much of the Pentateuch was derived from Priestly activity, an all-male hereditary group. And virtually all of the historical writings, from Joshua to II Kings were probably based on court documents from royal circles - a largely male group.³ Adela Collins feels that because of this, biblical women are presented and behave in androcentric ways.⁴ The men made the important decisions and

¹ The use of the word 'Bible' in this paper refers to the Hebrew Scriptures which includes Torah, Prophets and Writings.

² Edith Deen, All of the Women of the Bible (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1955, 1983), section III.

³ Carol Meyers, Discovering Eve (New York:Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 12.

⁴ Adela Yarbo Collins, Editor, Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), p. 5.

were expected to control what happened around them. The women's role was to be wives and mothers and were thus usually seen only in relation to their husbands and sons. When the women are discussed, it is from within the context of a patriarchal society. The full picture of these women - their emotions, their thoughts, their motivations, and their activities outside of childbearing and childrearing - is usually not discussed.

Because of the patriarchal bent to the Bible, and because men are the ones who have customarily commented on the Bible, most people throughout history have understood the Bible from this perspective. From Rabbinic times, until the very end of the nineteenth century, almost all of the people who commented on the Bible were male. This has greatly influenced the general populace's knowledge and impression of the text. People who read the Bible are often well versed in the Patriarchs and Prophets, and their personalities and motivations. Yet, little is known about the women in the Bible, other than in the way the women are involved in the lives of these men.

Rabbis of the Midrash and Talmud, the earliest people to comment on the Bible, have a strong male-oriented approach to the text. Although biblical women were often revered as heroines, the Rabbis could not help viewing some of them just as they viewed the women of their own day - according to preconceived notions regarding the limitations of the female

sex.⁵ On the whole, men were discussed in much greater detail than the women. Medieval commentators seem to be even less interested in the women characters in the Bible than were the Rabbis. Very little is said about the biblical verses which contain female narrative or conversation. Most commentary glosses over the women characters as if their presence in the text is insignificant.

Even in modern times - until the past decade or two - most biblical discussion was written by men about men. The Encyclopedia Judaica has a three page discussion of the Patriarchs⁶ but has no entry under "Matriarchs". Although there is an individual entry for each woman, the emphasis is on the Patriarchs to whom they are married, and their roles in relation to their husbands or children. Most modern books containing commentary on Genesis, (which contains the most narratives about women), talk about these stories as stories of the Patriarchs. The Anchor Bible on Genesis, a joint project of Protestant, Catholic and Jewish scholars, calls part II, "The Story of the Patriarchs."⁷ Von Rad, an often quoted German biblical scholar, calls section III of his commentary on Genesis, "The Biblical Patriarchal History."⁸ He describes the theme of the Bible as God, the Creator of the world, calling the Patriarchs and promising them the land of Canaan.⁹ A look at the Table of Contents in Nahum Sarna's

⁵ Leila Leah Bronner, From Eve to Esther (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), xiv-xv.

⁶ Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 13 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1972), pp. 181-183.

⁷ E.A. Speiser, The Anchor Bible: Genesis (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964).

⁸ Gerhard Von Rad, Genesis: A Commentary (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Understanding Genesis¹⁰ gives us a good understanding of the male-oriented approach to biblical study. Each chapter heading has subtopics. The chapter on Creation lists 'Man the pinnacle of Creation', and 'Cain and Abel,' but does not mention Eve. Under the heading of 'The Covenant,' Sarah is not listed. Hagar is mentioned only by her role as it relates to Abraham - 'Hagar the concubine.' The chapter heading, 'The Birth of Isaac and the Akedah' does not mention Sarah. In the chapter 'Winding Up Affairs,' Rebekah is not listed by name but by her role as 'a wife for Isaac.' She is not listed at all under the chapter heading 'Jacob and Esau' even though 'the birth of the twins' is. It is clear that the majority of commentary in these types of books concentrates on the men in the biblical stories and their relationship with God, their families, and the Israelite people.

When women entered the field of biblical scholarship they began to read the text through different eyes. They started to bring their own personal experiences as women to their understanding and explanation of the biblical texts. Letty Russell explains this more fully. "Women, as persons who live in and through a female body, have some distinctive experiences of the world that men do not have."¹¹ Women also have a unique perspective created by the social and cultural differences brought on by living in a male dominated society.

Female commentators have added a new layer of understanding to the biblical stories. Even though the Bible

¹⁰ Nahum Sarna, Understanding Genesis, (New York: Schocken, 1970), pp. ix-xii.

¹¹ Letty M. Russell, Feminist Interpretation of the Bible (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), p. 113.

does not mention women as often as men, there is a tremendous amount of information about them in the text. The stories about women have simply not received the attention they deserve. By carefully reading the texts that mention women, we can learn a tremendous amount about them as individuals and the important roles that they played in biblical society. We can see that biblical women are intelligent and caring, concerned about their families and their people. They are able to analyze situations and establish a sense of priority, weighing their needs against the needs of the community.

There are other reasons for bringing a feminist interpretation of the Bible to light. It can give readers a new perspective on the people in the Bible which could be applied to Modern society. The Bible is often used to improperly perpetuate stereotypes of the subordinate female. For example, the classic image of Eve being created not only second to Adam but also from Adam's rib has been used to continue the attitude of women's inferiority to men. Eve is also considered a temptress and a woman of evil, traits that are often extrapolated to include all women. Esther Fuchs points out that the majority of women in the Bible are portrayed as deceptive women.¹² Because of this, the text has often been used to create suspicion and distrust of women in general. By creating a new approach to biblical studies, the Bible no longer needs to be seen as a vehicle for undermining and devaluing a woman's position in society.

¹² Esther Fuchs, *Who Is Hiding the Truth? Deceptive Women and Biblical Androcentrism*, in Adela Collins, *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, p. 137.

As feminist scholarship has developed, new scholars have begun to analyze the women in the Bible. A careful re-reading of the text shows that known "truths" about the Bible are not totally true. Emerson notes that the negative attitude towards women that many readers perceive is not necessarily inherent in the biblical text.¹³ Frymer-Kensky points out that "the meaning of the story depends precisely on the assumptions that readers make while reading it."¹⁴

Despite the male orientation of the Bible, narratives about women have an essential place throughout the text. Carol Meyers notes that "[t]he women we glimpse in the Hebrew Bible are, almost to a woman, exceptional."¹⁵ Bonner claims that there is "more to be found than meets the eye... It is possible to uncover deeper levels of the text never before noticed or interpreted."¹⁶ Phyllis Tribble says that the stories about women found in the patriarchal text may be signs of female strength. They are "hints of a women's tradition that redactors could not entirely squelch."¹⁷

Another important reason for re-examining the biblical text from a woman's point of view is to create role models for women. Savina Teubal explains this in her book, Sarah the Priestess:

Many generations have delved into the biblical records in an effort to understand what men have

¹³ Grace Emerson, *Women in Ancient Israel* in R.E. Clemens, The World of Ancient Israel. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 371.

¹⁴ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *The Bible and Women's Studies* in Lynn Davidman, Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1994) p. 25.

¹⁵ Meyers, p. 5.

¹⁶ Bonner, p. xi.

¹⁷ Phyllis Tribble, *If the Bible is so Patriarchal, How Come I Love It?* Bible Review 8, (Oct 1992): 55.

achieved in the past, who men are and what they can become. It is against this historical perspective that men can measure themselves and their dreams in the present and in so doing validate their aspirations and achievements. No such perspective is granted to women. Women are denied the ancient pillars of wisdom on which to structure their own aspirations and future achievements. This is not, so to speak, for want of ancient pillars. The pillars are there, waiting to be unearthed from the dust of patriarchal centuries.¹⁸

One way to understand women within the context of the biblical text is to examine the society in which the women lived. This way we can gain more accurate insights into the role they played in the biblical world. We can get a better sense of why the women did what they did. Was what they did always evil or deceptive or immoral? If one looks more carefully at the situations the women are placed in by the narrative, and the options that they have or don't have to effect change, women's actions take on new meaning. We see that these women played a very important and influential role in shaping society by their actions, even though their actions may not have been looked upon favorably. While their roles differed from men's, biblical women were no less important. Their stories show that these strong female figures undermine patriarchal assumptions and temper patriarchal biases.¹⁹

Robert Alter sees the biblical writer as a member of a patriarchal society in which women have more limited legal privileges and institutional functions than do men. Despite

¹⁸ Savina Teubal, Sarah the Priestess (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1984), p. xi.

¹⁹ L.M. Russell, Feminist Interpretation of the Bible (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985) in Carol Meyers, p. 25.

this he says the Bible "includes a remarkable gallery of women - Rebekah, Tamar, Deborah, Ruth - who . . . when thwarted by the male world or when they find it lacking in moral insight or practical initiative, do not hesitate to take their destiny, or the nation's, into their own hands."²⁰ Westermann also points out the unique role of many women in biblical patriarchal society. "It is characteristic of the patriarchal stories, that revolt against established social order, where it is a question of injustice, is initiated by women only."²¹

This paper will attempt to look more closely at certain women of the Bible who have often been looked upon unfavorably by commentators because of the initiatives that they take. The situations in which these women found themselves made it necessary to take actions that are considered to be outside the societal norm. Commentators often criticize these women for being wrong, immoral or foolish without regard to the motivation and reasoning behind the women's behavior. Sometimes it is not until generations later that what these women do is seen as inappropriate. Often times, later generations view these women as very unrighteous and sinful. Through an understanding of the patriarchal societal rules which women were expected to follow, we can begin to see that what has been described as wrong or immoral actions were really attempts to correct injustices in society. Through their own strength of

²⁰ Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, (Basic Books: Harper Collins Publishers, 1981), p. 146.

²¹ Claus Westermann, Genesis 37-50: A Commentary, (Minneapolis, Augsburg Press, 1986), p. 56.

personality or character, they were able to rise to a situation that called for an unusual response."²²

This thesis, 'Risk-takers for Righteousness,' will explore some of those women who had to take risks to do what was righteous. It will look at various interpretations throughout the ages and compare how they explain the motives behind the actions of these extraordinary women.

²² Bronner, p. 1.

CHAPTER 2: WOMEN IN BIBLICAL SOCIETY

In order to gain a better understanding of the women in the Bible it is important to get a general sense of the role of women and their status in biblical society. Based upon the narratives in the text, most people assume that the society in which the biblical stories took place is patriarchal. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are called the Patriarchs, and the time in which their stories take place is called the Patriarchal Period. Patriarchy can be defined as that form of social organization in which "the father is first place."²³ The father is the controlling force, not only within the family but in the community as well. In this context, the eldest son was the next in line to inherit authority as well as possessions from his father.

By analyzing the various narratives in Genesis we get a sense of what patriarchal society is like. The men have occupations - usually of economic or sociological significance. Abel was a shepherd and Cain was a farmer. Cain's descendants founded cities, were musicians and forged tools from metal (Gen. 4:17, 21, 22). Noah's descendants were hunters (Gen. 10:9), as was Esau (Gen. 25:27).

The women in Genesis and throughout most of the Bible did not have occupations. They were the wives, the mothers and the daughters of the men. Rarely did they have a specific independent, economic job. The women were responsible for

²³ Alice L. Laffey, An Introduction to the Old Testament (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 8.

child bearing and child rearing, and other household responsibilities such as food preparation and clothing. For example, Sarah arranged for Hagar to provide Abraham with an heir when she could not (Gen. 16:2). Abraham instructed Sarah to prepare food when the three men appeared before him by his tent in Mamre (Gen. 18:6). Rebekah kept Esau's clothes in her home (Gen. 27:15).

Women were at a disadvantage in this society when it came to decision making. Throughout her life a woman was regarded first as the daughter of her father, and then as the wife of her husband. Women were seen as property transferred from one man to another and therefore were always under a man's control. The word for husband in Hebrew is *אִישׁ*, which can also mean owner.

Leah and Rachel are classic examples of how daughters had to follow their fathers' rules and then when they married, this control was transferred to their husbands. Laban arranged for Leah to marry Jacob before Rachel could marry him (Gen. 29:23). Jacob decided when it was time for Rachel and Leah to leave their father and their homeland and to journey to Jacob's homeland in Canaan (Gen. 31:17).

However, if one examines the text more carefully, it can be seen that these generalizations about stereotypical, gender related roles, did not always hold true. Women were sometimes involved in occupations such as tending the flocks, (Rachel in Gen. 29:6), and men were sometimes involved in food preparation, (Jacob in Gen. 25:29 and Esau in Gen. 27:7).

Women were sometimes consulted when decisions needed to be made and their instructions were carried out. God told Abraham to follow Sarah's advice when the competition between his two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, became a problem (Gen. 21:12).

Savina Teubal, in her book Sarah the Priestess, picks up on all the inconsistencies in the text regarding women who supposedly live in a patriarchal society.²⁴ She explains the 'Patriarchal Period' differently. She feels that it is the commentators themselves, not the text, that place the stories in a patriarchal context. She cites the story of Isaac and Rebekah as an example. "If the narration of events following the death and burial of Sarah were truly patriarchal, it would deal with the life and exploits of the male heir, Isaac. Instead, the accent is on the role of the woman: Rebekah."²⁵

According to Teubal, the stories of Genesis represent the struggle between the women, who were trying to hold on to their traditions, (which were based upon the non-patriarchal society in which they came from), and their husbands, who had absorbed the patriarchal traditions of Canaan. By utilizing data from ancient Mesopotamian inscriptions Teubal explains that many of the actions of women in Genesis show that the women retained some of the customs from that religio-cultural tradition, which had a matrilineal social structure. For example, Sarah's banishment of Hagar and Ishmael can be

²⁴ Savina J. Teubal, Sarah the Priestess (Athens, Ohio University Press: 1984), p. xii.

²⁵ Ibid., p. xv.

explained on the basis of Mesopotamian law codes. Paragraph 146 in the Hammurabi code reads, "If a man had married a priestess and she has given a slave girl to her husband and she bears sons, if that slave girl goes about making herself equal to her mistress, because she has borne sons, her mistress may not sell her, she may put the mark of a slave on her and count her with the slave girls."²⁶ By bringing this information to the foreground we gain new insight into Sarah's actions and it helps to explain why she acted as she did.

Carol Meyers also disagrees with the typical patriarchal explanations of the Bible. She does not feel that the Bible was a patriarchal society in the usual sense of the word. Patriarchal society is often understood as one that is limiting, harsh and oppressive to women. Meyers sees this as a misuse of the term patriarchy because it becomes a synonym for male dominance or a system in which male traits are valued over female ones.²⁷ She does not feel that this is an accurate description of the relationships between men and women in the Bible. Meyers approaches patriarchy from a different point of view. Although patriarchy is related to ideas of male dominance, it does not have to be equated with female passivity or lack of autonomy. "Women may exert their wills and prevail over male members of society in ways that are of consequence for all members of their society."²⁸

²⁶ G.R. Driver and J. C. Miles, The Babylonian Laws (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 57 in Teubal, p. 36.

²⁷ Meyers, p. 26.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 30.

There are many instances of this in the Bible narrations. Eve takes the initiative to seek out the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge:

וַתֵּרָא הָאִשָּׁה כִּי טוֹב הָעֵץ לִמְאֹכֵל וְכִי תִאֲוָה־הוּא לְעֵינִים
וַנִּחְמַד הָעֵץ לְהַשְׂכִּיל וַתִּקַּח מִפְּרִיו וַתֹּאכַל וַתֵּתֶן גַּם־לְאִישָׁהּ עִמָּה
וַיֹּאכַל

And the woman understood that the tree was good for eating and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and the tree was desirable for learning, so she took its fruit and ate it and also gave it to her husband who was with her, and he ate it."(Gen. 3:6)

In Genesis Chapter 27, Rebekah takes action to obtain the blessing for her younger son, Jacob. And in Chapter 38, Tamar cleverly acts to ensure that her dead husband has an heir. So too, did Sarah act to ensure her husband had an heir, by giving Hagar to Abraham (Gen. 16:2).

According to Meyers, in order to understand the people in the Bible and the significance of their actions, it is important to understand Israelite society. Although many Biblical stories, such as those in Genesis, are written about pre-Israelite society, they were written down during the Israelite period and are therefore reflective of Israelite society. In her book, Discovering Eve, Carol Meyers gives us a new view of Biblical life by redefining ancient Israelite society in light of family structure and economic realities.

Meyer feels that using the term 'patrilineal' is more

²⁰ All English translations of Hebrew text in this paper are by the author unless otherwise noted.

descriptive of Israelite society than the term 'patriarchal'. In patrilineal societies, group lineage plays a key role, and is determined through the males. This is different than a patriarchal society in which the male controls everything. The numerous genealogies in the Bible, listed by male parentage, strongly support the notion of a patrilineal society. Lineage genealogies identify a person with a particular family. The family unit, or household, was the central core of the Israelite society. Households were members of a clan or family who in turn were members of a tribe. Membership in a tribe was key to Israelite existence. It was through membership in a tribe that the Israelite people became part of the nation which was called בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, the 'Children of Israel'. It is important to note that the term describing their national identity reflects back on the the importance of family. The Israelites are "children" of Israel, and children are the part of the family unit that continues the lineage of that family.

Myers explains that the Israelite household had many different functions. It was the central institution for most economic, social, political and cultural aspects of biblical life.³⁰ Because of this Israelite women had more power and influence than women in a patriarchal society would have had. Myers notes that "When the household occupies the preeminent place in a society, women have a strong role in decision making and consequently exercise considerable power in the

³⁰ Myers, p. 139.

household."³¹ The household was responsible for almost all of its needs and acted largely as an independent unit. Therefore each family member played a very important role in meeting the needs of the entire family unit.

Although the Bible does not give very much detail regarding the woman's job in the household one could assume that women were involved in all aspects of the family's economic life.³² In addition, women had other non-economic roles. They were involved in the socialization of the young, which included teaching the children the tasks, modes of behavior, cultural forms, and norms and values of their society." Many of these tasks were shared by both parents - such as education. In Proverbs 1:8 we read:

שְׁמַע בְּנִי מִסֵּר אָבִיךָ וְאַל-תִּטֹּשׁ תּוֹרַת אִמֶּךָ

*Listen my son to the instruction of your father,
and don't reject the Torah of your mother; (See
also Proverbs 6:20)*

Meyers feels these verses are an indication of the complimentary contributions of each parent to the socialization of the children.³⁴

Women also played an important role in religious practice in Israelite society. Most religious practices described in the Bible are those in which males led the community as a whole. But there were important aspects of

³¹ Ibid., p. 174.

³² R. Bridenthal and C. Koonz, Becoming Visible: Women in European History (Boston: Houghton Mifflin), pg.6 in Meyers, p.145.

³³ Ibid., p. 149.

³⁴ Ibid.

religious activity practiced by women.³⁵ For example, Leviticus 12:6 offers a detailed description of a religious act to be performed by women:

ובמלאַת | יְמֵי טְהֻרָהּ לְבֵן אוֹ לְבַת תָּבִיא כֶּבֶשׂ בֶּן־שָׁנָה לְעֹלָה
וּבִן־יִוֹנָה אוֹתָר לְחֻטָּאת אֶל־פֶּתַח אֹהֶל־מוֹעֵד אֶל־הַכֹּהֵן.

And when the days of her being purified are fulfilled, for a son, or for a daughter, she will bring a one year old lamb for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon, or a turtle dove, for a sin offering, to the door of the Tent of Meeting, to the priest. (Lev. 12:6)

Carol Meyers explains that the differing roles of men and women in the Bible, rather than being seen as one of hierarchy, can better be understood by looking at the relationship and function of power and authority in a society. Power and authority are not the same. Authority can be defined as the "culturally legitimated right to make decisions and command obedience."³⁶ This was the role given to men in biblical society. Power refers to "the ability to effect control despite or independent of official authority."³⁷ This was the role that many of the women described in biblical stories played.

It is with this understanding, and the new ways of looking at biblical society presented so far, that we shall undertake the analysis of biblical women and the motivation behind the actions they take. This is our task as we learn

³⁵ Ibid., p. 161.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 151.

³⁷ M.Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere Women, Culture and Society (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), in Meyers, p. 145.

about the women in the Bible who are 'Risk takers for
Righteousness.'

CHAPTER 3: EVE - חַוָּה

(GENESIS CHAPTERS 2-3)

Introduction

Throughout history the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden has been used as the basis to explain all the wrong that has been done in the world. Eve was seen as doing the most unthinkable thing - disobeying God. And Adam, not being much better, followed quickly behind. They receive the ultimate punishment for their sin - banishment from the Garden of Eden. However, a careful reading of the text does not necessarily lead the reader to come to those conclusions. This chapter will first explore how others, in the past, have interpreted the story of Adam and Eve. Then, by carefully reading the text, and seeing the story in context, other possible explanations of Eve's actions and the motivation behind them will be offered.

Early interpretations of Eve's actions

Eve is associated with the origin of life in the Bible. Eve - חַוָּה - is called the mother of life - אִם כְּלֵיָּהּ - in Genesis 3:20. In the LXX, חַוָּה is translated as "Zöe," meaning life. Evidence in Ugaritic and Phoenician writings suggest another ancient word meaning "to live" from which חַוָּה could have been derived." Despite this, her image was later

³⁸ Howard Wallace, *Eve*, in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 676.

distorted and she became the mother of death in many interpretations of the Garden of Eden story. The apocryphal and pseudopigraphic literature portrays Eve in a very negative light. Ben Sira, was the first to call Eve the author of death and sin:

מֵאֲשֶׁה תְּחִלַּת עוֹן. וּבְגִלְלָה גִּזְעוֹנוּ יָחַד.

The beginning of sin came from woman, and because of her we die together (with women). (Ben Sira 25:24)

In another source from that time period, Eve is also associated with death. In the pseudopigraphic book *Life of Adam and Eve*, Eve blames herself for causing Adam to sin, which brought suffering and death into the world:

And Eve wept and said, "My Lord Adam, rise, give me half of your illness and let me bear it, because this has happened to you through me, because of me you suffer troubles and pains."³⁹

Adam said to Eve, "Why have you wrought destruction among us and brought us great wrath, which is death gaining rule over all our race"⁴⁰

According to *The Book of the Secrets of Enoch*, God created a wife for Adam from his rib "that death might come to him by his wife".⁴¹ In these interpretations, Eve's role as the source of humankind's sin and evil came to be understood as much greater and more significant than Adam's role.⁴²

³⁹ *Life of Adam and Eve* 9:2. Translation from James Charlesworth, ed., The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 14:2

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2 Enoch 30:17

⁴² Helen Schungel-Straumann, *On the Creation of Man and Woman in Genesis 1-3: The History and Reception of the Texts Reconsidered*, in Brenner, Feminist Companion to Genesis.

Even though the acts of Adam and Eve are never used elsewhere in biblical texts to portray sin or evil, the Rabbis of the Midrash held a similar negative view of them. Eve was regarded as a source of sin and evil in Midrash and Talmud. The Midrash tells us:

מתחלת הספר ועד כאן אין כתיב סמך כיון שנבראת וברא

שטן עמה

From the beginning of the Torah until here a 'samech' (the letter) is not written to show that when she (Eve) was created, Satan was created with her. (Gen. Rabbah XVII:6)

The exact nature of the sin is unclear, but what is clear is that the Rabbis used this view of Eve as their basis for understanding the Adam and Eve story:⁴

ויקרא האדם שם אשתו חוה - ניתנה לו לחיותו ומיעצתו כחייא

ד"א חוה חיוה לה אדם הראשון כמה דורות אבדה

AND THE MAN CALLED HIS WIFE'S NAME EVE (HAVAH means life) (Gen. 3:2). She was given to support him in life, but she advised him like a serpent. Another interpretation: Adam showed her how many generations she had destroyed. (Gen. Rabbah XX:11)

In this Midrash the Rabbis use a play on the words חוה - Eve's name - also meaning 'to give life', and חו"א - the Aramaic word for snake. Although the text only describes the snake as being a deceiver, this trait is transferred to Eve by the Midrash.

⁴ Bronner, p. 24.

Several other Midrashim support this viewpoint:

ולמה נתקללה ר"י ב"ר (שמעון) שלום אמר שעברה על הצווי

And why was (the earth) punished? R. Judah b. R. (Simeon) Shalom said: Because she (Eve) transgressed on (God's) command. (Gen. Rabbah V:9)

א"ר תחליפא דקיסרין אמר הקב"ה כשבראתי את העולם אלא
לאדם הראשון לא צויתי ואחר כך נצטוית חוה ועברה וקלקלה
את העולם

R. Tahlifa of Caesarea said, God said: 'When I created the world, I only commanded the first person, Adam, and then afterward you ordered Eve. And she transgressed and corrupted the world.'
(Ex. Rabbah XXVIII:2)

אמר אדם לפני הקב"ה רבון כל העולמים, כשהייתי לבדי שמא
חטאתי לך. אלא האשה שחבאתי עצלי היא הדיחה אותי מדבריך.
שנאמר: (בר' ג יב) ... אמר הקב"ה לחיה: לא דיך שחטאת אלא
שהחטאת את האדם.

Adam said before the Holy One, blessed be God: Sovereign of all worlds. When I was alone, I did not sin against You. But the woman that You have brought to me is guilty because she seduced me away from Your words...The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Eve: Was it not enough for you that you sinned? But that you also made Adam sin? (Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer Perek 14)

These Midrashim show the attempts by the Rabbis to discredit Eve and put most of the blame on her for eating the forbidden fruit, causing both her and Adam to be banished from the

Garden of Eden. They brought punishment onto humankind. Eve becomes a convenient scapegoat, carrying the blame for all the problems that have plagued the world since the expulsion from the Garden. The Rabbis do this by reading into the text that which is not there, so they can make a point.

For example, in Exodus Rabbah, it is assumed that God commanded Eve not to eat the forbidden fruit. But in the text, God tells Adam not to eat the fruit (Gen. 2:16a). Eve is not even created until several verses after that conversation between God and Adam (Genesis 2:21-22). And God does not speak to Eve until after both she and Adam have already eaten the fruit. The Midrash also says that Eve seduced Adam, making him sin; yet there is no hint of seduction in the text. Gen. 3:6 simply says that Eve 'gave' (נתן) Adam the fruit and he ate it.

Eve and her actions are also used by the Rabbis to explain some of the Jewish customs of their time that are specific to women. This Midrash explains why women menstruate, and why they are responsible for challah and candles on Shabbat. Again, it is linked to the evil of Eve's actions:

ומפני מה הן מהלכות אצל חמת תחלה אמר להם על ידי
שגרמו מיתה לעולם ...

ומפני מה ניתן לה מצות נדה. על ידי ששפכה דמו של אדם
הראשון לפיכך ניתן לה מצות נדה. ומפני מה ניתן לה מצות
חלה. על ידי שקלקלה את אדם הראשון שחיה גמר חלתו של

לפיכך עולם ניתן לה מצות חלהו מפני מה ניתן לה מצות נר
 שבת אמר להן על ידי שכבתה נשמתו של אדם הראשון לפיכך
 ניתן לה מצות נר שבת.

'Why do they (women) walk in front of the dead (at a funeral)?' Because they caused death in the world (referring to Eve) ... And why was the mitzvah of menstruation given to her? ' Because she shed the blood of the first man, Adam, therefore was the mitzvah of menstruation given to her.' 'And why was the mitzvah of "challah" given to her? 'Because she corrupted the first man, Adam, who was the "challah" of the world, therefore was the mitzvah of dough given to her.' 'And why was the mitzvah of the Shabbat lights given to her? He said to them, 'Because she extinguished the soul of the first man, Adam, therefore was the mitzvah of the Shabbat lights given to her.' (Gen. Rabbah XVII:8)

This Midrash uses Eve's actions as the basis for explaining various halakhic rulings regarding women.

The New Testament also has a negative view of Eve. These writings were based upon early Jewish-Hellenistic interpretations which were negative towards women.⁴⁴ In II Timothy 2:12-14 it says, "For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor."⁴⁵ The concept of the Eve, the sinner, is used as the basis for a harsh attitude toward sin, sexuality, suffering and death in many Christian sources.⁴⁶

Later Jewish commentators also see Eve's actions as negative. Rashi explains Eve's motivation for including Adam as one of selfishness:

⁴⁴ Schungel-Strauman, pp. 56-60.

⁴⁵ Translation from The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version.

⁴⁶ Bronner, pg. 34.

ותתן גם לאשה עמה שלא תמות היא ויחיה הוא, וישא
אשה אחרת⁴⁷

AND SHE GAVE ALSO TO HER HUSBAND WITH HER (Gen.
3:6) - so that she would not die and he would live
and marry another wife.⁴⁸

At least Rashi does not hold Eve responsible for being the
source of all Evil.

A Different Approach to the Text

A careful reading of the text and an understanding of
the story within the context of the rest of the Bible, shows
a different perspective on Eve her actions. There is no
mention of the word "sin" or any similar word in the Adam and
Eve story. Sin (חַטָּאת) is not mentioned in the Bible until
Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:7). If we therefore ignore this often
misused concept of Eve's actions and just read the text as it
is presented, we see the story in a new light.

The story of Adam and Eve is the story of the Tree of
Knowledge of Good and Bad.⁴⁹ This may be a clue to Eve's
motivation for eating the fruit that was forbidden to Adam.
One of the most prevalent ideas in the Bible is the concept
of human knowledge. We learn from other biblical texts how

⁴⁷ All Rashi Hebrew in this thesis is from CD-Rom Judaic Classics Library

⁴⁸ Rashi, Gen. 3:6

⁴⁹ Author's translation - 'Bad' has been chosen instead of evil, to connote the opposite of 'good'
which is not necessarily 'evil', the word most translations use. The entire Hebrew phrase,
טוֹב וְרָע - "Good and Bad", can also be understood as a merism to mean "knowledge of
everything".

important it is for human beings to have knowledge. In Hos.4:6 God chastises the people for not having knowledge (הִדְעַת). God rejects those who reject knowledge:

וְדָמוּ עַמִּי מִכְּלִי הִדְעַת כִּי אַתָּה הִדְעַת מְאֹסָת וְאַמְאָסָאךָ

*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge;
because you have rejected knowledge, I will also
reject you.*

In Exodus 31:3 God chooses Bezalel to work on the holy Ark because one of his qualities, instilled in him by God, is knowledge (וּבִדְעַת):

וְאַמְלֵא אֹתוֹ רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים בְּחָכְמָה וּבִתְבוּנָה וּבִדְעַת וּבְכָל-מְלָאכָה

*And I have filled him with the spirit of God, as
wisdom, and as understanding, and as knowledge, and
as all kinds of workmanship.*

In Isaiah 28:9, Isaiah tells the people that the quest for knowledge (דָּעָה) should begin at a very early age:

אֶת־מִי יוֹרֶה דָּעָה וְאֶת־מִי יֵבִין שְׁמוּעָה גִּמּוּלִי מִחֶלֶב עֵתִיקִי
מִשְׁדֵּיִם

*To whom shall one teach knowledge? and whom shall
one make understand doctrine? Those who are weaned
from the milk, and removed from the breasts.*

In Jeremiah 11:18 we see that God wants human beings to have knowledge. The text tells us that God gives knowledge to Jeremiah:

וַיְהִי וְהוֹדִיעַנִי וְאָדָעָה

And God has given me knowledge, and I know . . .

Proverbs 11:9b tells us that having knowledge will save the righteous:

וּבְדַעַת צְדִיקִים יִחְלָצָה

. . .and through knowledge will the just be saved.

Proverbs 18:15 tells us that knowledge is an important component of understanding and of wisdom:

לֵב נָבוֹן יִקְנֶה-דָּעַת וְאָזֶן חֲכָמִים תִּבְקֶשׁ-דָּעַת.

*The heart of the understanding acquires knowledge;
and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge.*

Goodness is also tied with knowledge. Job 34:4 tells us that it is important to know what is good:

מִשְׁפָּט נִבְחַרְהָ-לָנוּ נִדְעָה בֵּינֵינוּ מַה-טוֹב.

*Let us choose what is just; let us know among
ourselves what is good.*

Thus, in the context of these biblical verses, Eve's pursuit of knowledge is not only justified but praiseworthy.

Let us take a closer look at the text. God tells Adam not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. It seems that Eve has a different story. In her conversation with the snake, Eve

explains that God said not to eat from the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. The text is ambiguous as to whether or not these are the same tree. Gen. 2:9 tells us about the trees that God has put in the Garden of Eden:

וַיַּצְמַח יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים מִן־הָאֲדָמָה כָּל־עֵץ נֹחַם לְמַרְאֶה וְטוֹב
לְמַאֲכָל וְעֵץ חַיִּים בְּתוֹךְ הָגֶן וְעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע:

The Lord God caused to grow from the ground every tree, that is pleasant to the sight and good for food and the Tree of Life in the midst of the garden and The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad.

According to this verse, God plants trees in the Garden that are beautiful and provide food. In addition, there are two specific trees mentioned - the Tree of Life in the middle of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge. It is important to note that the Tree of Knowledge is not the tree that is in "the midst of the garden." According to the ta'amim, the phrase - "in the midst of the garden," is joined to the words - "the Tree of Life," and is separated from the words - "the Tree of Knowledge." Therefore, it can be understood that the Tree of Knowledge is NOT in the middle of the garden:

וַיַּצְמַח יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים מִן־הָאֲדָמָה |

כָּל־עֵץ נֹחַם לְמַרְאֶה וְטוֹב לְמַאֲכָל |

וְעֵץ חַיִּים בְּתוֹךְ הָגֶן | וְעֵץ | הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע |

The Lord God caused to grow from the ground | every tree, that is pleasant to the sight and good for food |

and the Tree of Life in the midst of the garden |
and The Tree | of Knowledge of Good and Bad.³⁰

Based upon this understanding of the punctuation of the verses, we see that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad is not in the midst of the garden. Only the Tree of Life is in the midst of the garden.

The next relevant verses in the Adam and Eve story are from Gen. 2:16-17:

וַיֹּצֵא יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים עַל־הָאָדָם לֵאמֹר מִכָּל עֵץ־הַגָּן אָכַל תֹּאכַל:
וּמֵעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בְיוֹם אֲכָלְהָ מָמוֹת
מוֹת תָּמוּת.

*And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, From every tree of the garden you may surely eat;
But of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Bad, you shall not eat from it; because on the day that you eat from it you will surely die.*

Here God tells Adam not to eat from the "Tree of Knowledge." There is no mention made of the tree "in the midst of the garden."

Finally, we look at Eve's understanding of God's command to Adam, Gen. 3:2-3:

³⁰ I have rewritten the text showing where the breaks and pauses are in the text, based upon the trope markings. Vertical lines denote where the longer stops or separations in the text are indicated (קיסרים and מלכים).

וַתֹּאמֶר הָאִשָּׁה אֶל-הַנָּחָשׁ מִפִּי עֵץ-הָגֶן וְאָכַל.

וּמִפִּי הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר בְּתוֹךְ-הָגֶן אָמַר אֱלֹהִים לֹא תֹאכְלוּ מִמֶּנּוּ

וְלֹא תִגְעוּ בּוֹ פֶּן תָּמּוּתוּ.

And the woman said to the serpent, We may eat from the fruit of the trees of the garden;

But from the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God said, you shall not eat from it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.

It seems that Eve knows a different version of the command that God gave to Adam. (The text never tells us how Eve learns of God's conversation with Adam.) God tells Adam not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge but Eve thinks she is not to eat from, nor touch, the "tree in the midst of the garden," which Gen. 2:9 tells us is the Tree of Life. The shrewd snake comes to lure Eve into action by taking advantage of her different understanding of God's command. He calls her attention to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad and tells her that this is the tree whose fruit God does not want her to eat. The snake instills within Eve, the fear that eating from this tree - "the Tree of Knowledge" - is against God's wishes. Yet her original understanding is that this tree is not forbidden. (Hizkuni explains that Eve knew that she had not personally been commanded by God not to eat the fruit⁵¹.) When Eve sees that this tree is -

וְנִחְמָד הָעֵץ לְהַשְׁכִּיל - "desirable for making one wise" (Gen. 3:6),

she makes a conscious and well thought out decision. She

⁵¹Torat Chayim, Hizkuni, Gen. 3:6 וְנִחְמָד הָעֵץ לְהַשְׁכִּיל

decides to take the risk. Even though the snake implies that God will not approve, Eve takes action to obtain what is so important for humankind - knowledge.

If the acquiring of knowledge by humankind is one of the purposes of the Garden of Eden story, why then, does God command Adam NOT to eat from the Tree of Knowledge in Gen. 2:17?

וּמֵעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בַיּוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ
מוֹת תָּמוּת:

But you shall not eat from the tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad; for on the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.

The simple meaning of this verse is that God does not want Adam, (and humankind), to have knowledge of good and bad. Yet this does not make sense within the context of the rest of the Bible. With all the verses praising knowledge, we must assume that there is a different meaning behind God's warning. God's use of the words - מוֹת תָּמוּת - "you will surely die" - in the command to Adam may be a clue. This grammatical form is also used in another biblical story. God speaks these words at Mt. Sinai in Exodus 19:12:

וְהִגַּבְלָתָ אֶת-הָעָם סָבִיב לְאָמַר הִשְׁמְרוּ לָכֶם עֲלוֹת בְּהָר וְנִגְעַ
בְּקִצְחוֹ כָּל-הַנִּגָּע בְּהָר מוֹת יוּמָת:

And you shall set bounds to the people around, saying, Take heed to yourselves, that you go not up

into the mount, or touch its border; whoever touches" the mount shall be surely put to death.

By comparing these two stories, we find a different meaning to this "warning." God warns the Israelite people not to go up the mountain or touch its border. But Moses is allowed to - is supposed to - go up the mountain. God is saying that Moses is needed as an intermediary between the people and the laws that God is going to give them. The people are not capable of receiving the information directly. A parallel can be drawn between this and the Eve story. God warns Adam not to eat from the Tree of Good and Evil. Immediately following that verse, God says that Adam needs a companion. Adam needed an intermediary between him and the tree in order for him, (and therefore all human beings), to obtain the knowledge that the tree provides.

Why then does God punish Adam and Eve if it was meant for them to obtain knowledge? According to Speiser, "The point of the whole narrative is apparently man's ultimate punishment."⁵² Carol Meyers does not see Gen. 3:16-19 as a punishment. According to Meyers, the translations that are available to us fail to accurately communicate the meaning of the text in its original language.⁵⁴ She retranslates these verses and sees them as describing life for Israelite women during biblical times.⁵⁵ These verses are just a statement of

⁵² It is interesting to note that in Gen. 3:3, Eve says she is prohibited from 'touching' the tree or she will die.

⁵³ Speiser, p. 17.

⁵⁴ Meyers, p. 97.

⁵⁵ For a detailed description of Myers explanation of these verses see Chapter 5 in Discovering Eve.

what life was like for the Israelites, not a description of a punishment from God. Mary Korsak also sees the decree by God in Gen. 3:16-19 as describing "good" and positive aspects of human life, and not words of punishment.⁵⁶ Bledstein sees Gen. 3:16 as an explanation to Eve that she is not a goddess in her capacity to procreate - goddesses had painless childbirth.⁵⁷ In contrast to these pagan images of childbirth, Eve and all woman are human beings. Eve, although she ate from the Tree of Knowledge and became god-like, was not a god.

These verses can also be explained as the way to ensure that humans will obey God's commandment to be fruitful and multiply. Hizkuni takes Rashi's Commentary on Gen. 3:6 which makes Eve appear selfish and shows that she had righteous intentions. She eats the fruit to fulfill the mitzvah - "be fruitful and multiply". She invites Adam to eat the fruit so that he too, can fulfill the mitzvah. This can be understood from Ibn Ezra's comment about the Tree of Knowledge.⁵⁸

וכאשר אכל אדם מעץ הדעת. ידעאת אשתו

When Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge, he 'knew' (had sexual relations with) his wife.

Thus we can view the story of Eve in a new way. Eve needed to obtain knowledge for humankind. She is not

⁵⁶ Mary Phil Korsak, *Genesis: A New Look*, in Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, pp. 50-52.

⁵⁷ Adrien Janis Bledstein, *Are Woman Cursed in Genesis 3:16?*, in Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, pp. 142-3.

⁵⁸ *Torat Chayim*, Gen. 3:6. ותרא האשה

disobeying God when she eats from the Tree of Knowledge because God did not tell her not to eat the fruit. In fact, Eve is sent by God as an intermediary to obtain knowledge for all humanity. She pursues knowledge because she knows the tremendous importance of it. Despite the warnings of the snake, Eve knows that the knowledge the fruit provides is something that humankind must have. She therefore takes the risk. She risks the anger of God, and the risk of being seen as the cause of evil by generations to come, for the pursuit of knowledge.

CHAPTER 4: REBEKAH - רֵבֶקָה

(GENESIS 24:1-67, 25:19-28:5)

The Biblical Story

We first meet Rebekah as a young woman of 'marriageable age'. She is at the well filling her water jug when Abraham's servant approaches her. He asks politely for just a little bit of water - מֵעֵט־מַיִם. Rebekah responds with kindness and generosity. She not only fulfills his request for water but also offers to draw water for all of his camels. We thus see that Rebekah is a woman of action. Even though she finds herself in a new situation, facing a stranger she has never met before, she assesses the situation and then quickly does what she feels is the correct thing to do. This Hebrew text is written in such a way as to emphasize her activities and the speed at which she carries them out. According to Robert Alter, a series of verbs in the text indicate purposeful or brisk action.⁵⁹ Genesis 24:16,18,20 offers ten action verbs and one of speech within three verses:

וְהַנַּעֲרָ טַבַּת מְרָאָה מְאֹד בְּתוּלָה וְאִישׁ לֹא יָדָעָהּ

וְהָיְתָה הָעֵינָהּ וְהַמִּלָּא כְדָהּ וְתָעַל

And the girl was very pretty and a virgin, and no man had known her; and she went down to the well, and filled her water jar, and came up.

⁵⁹ Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, p. 8.

וַתֹּאמֶר שְׂתָה אֲדֹנָי וַתִּמְחַר וַתִּרְדַּךְ כֶּדָה עֲלֶיךָ וַתִּשְׁקֶהוּ.

And she said, Drink, my lord; and she hurried, and put down her water jar upon her hand, and gave him a drink.

וַתִּמְחַר וַתַּעַר כֶּדָה אֶל־הַשֶּׁקֶת וַתִּרְץ עוֹד אֶל־הַבְּאֵר לִשְׂאֹב

וַתִּשְׂאֹב לְכָל־גַּמְלֵיהּ.

And she hurried, and emptied her water jar into the trough, and ran to the well again to draw water, and drew water for all his camels.

Rebekah's actions show that she is an independent thinker - capable of making decisions on her own. She was not told by anyone how to treat the stranger that she saw at the well. This can be seen later in the text when she and Abraham's servant retell the story to Rebekah's family:

אֲנִי טָרָם אָכְלָה לְדַבֵּר אֶל־לִבִּי וְהִנֵּה רִבְקָה יָצְאת וְכֶדָה עַל־שִׁכְמָהּ
וַתִּרְדַּךְ הָעֵצִינָה וַתִּשְׂאֹב וַאֲמַר אֵלֶיהָ הִשְׁקִינִי נָא. וַתִּמְחַר וַתִּרְדַּךְ כֶּדָה
מִעֲלֶיהָ וַתֹּאמֶר שְׂתָה וְגַם־גַּמְלֶיךָ אִשְׁקָה וְאַשְׁתִּי וְגַם הַגַּמְלִים הִשְׁקָתָהּ.

And before I had finished speaking in my heart, behold, Rebekah came out with her water jar on her shoulder; and she went down to the well, and drew water; and I said to her, Please let me drink.

And she hurried, and put down her water jar from her shoulder, and said, Drink, and I will give your camels a drink also; so I drank, and she let the camels drink too. (Gen. 24:45-46)

If there had been an accepted custom of treating strangers at the well which everyone knew, Rebekah and the servant would not have had to go into so much detail as they retold their story.

We find that it is not unusual in the community in which Rebekah lived, for women to be decision makers. This can be seen later on in the story. Rebekah's father and brother discuss her marriage to Isaac with Abraham's servant. They acknowledge that the marriage was "decreed by the Lord" (Gen. 24:50). Although the father and brother begin the conversation with Abraham's servant, Rebekah's mother is also involved. Her mother and brother say that it is up to Rebekah to decide when she will go with Abraham's servant to meet Isaac (Gen. 24:57-58).⁸⁰ Rebekah and her mother are integrally involved in the final decision that is made regarding her future.

When Rebekah agrees to go with the servant, she not only begins a new life as part of a new family, but also must adjust to the new society in which Isaac lives. The story of Rebekah and Isaac in Gerar shows that her new life requires a change in how she reacts to the situations in which she finds herself. In Genesis chapter 26, Isaac and Rebekah journey to Gerar because of a famine. Isaac tells the men of Gerar that Rebekah is his sister. He does this to protect himself:

⁸⁰ Gunther Plaut notes that asking a girl's consent to marriage was also customary in Nuzi. The Torah: A Modern Commentary. (New York: UAHC, 1981) pg. 165.

Nuzi was an ancient city in N.E. Iraq during the 15th-14th centuries BCE. Tablets that were excavated there contain customs and laws that may parallel some Biblical writings. (See Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol 12, p. 1288-89.)

וַיִּשְׁאלוּ אֲנָשֵׁי הַמָּקוֹם לְאִשְׁתּוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אַחֲתִי הִוא כִּי יָרָא לְאִמֹּר
אִשְׁתִּי פְּרִיהָרְגָנִי אֲנָשֵׁי הַמָּקוֹם עַל־דִּבְכָּהּ כִּי־טוֹבַת מְרָאָה הִוא:

*And the men of the place asked him about his wife;
and he said, She is my sister; for he was afraid to
say, She is my wife; lest, the men of the place
would kill me for Rebekah; because she was pretty.
(Gen. 26:7)*

Rebekah remains silent throughout this story. This seems uncharacteristic of her, based upon how she had reacted to Abraham's servant at the well in her home community of Nahor. Her silence is parallel to Sarah's silence in two earlier stories when Abraham requests Sarah to also say that she is his sister. (See Gen.12:10-16 and Gen. 20:1-13) One can assume that this was the expected behavior of wives who were part of Abraham and Isaac's society.

By remaining silent, and obeying her husband, Rebekah puts herself at great risk. If the men of Gerar assume she is not married, they could take advantage of her sexually and cause her to commit adultery:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבִימֶלֶךְ מַה־זֹּאת עָשִׂיתָ לָנוּ כִּמְעֹט שָׁכַב אַחֲרֵי הָעַם
אֶת־אִשְׁתְּךָ וְהִבֵּאתָ עָלֵינוּ אָשָׁם:

*And Abimelech said, What is this you have done to
us? one of the people almost lay with your wife,
and you would have brought guilt upon us. (Gen.
26:10)*

Rebekah risks her own safety and morals in order to protect her husband's safety. Since Isaac fears for his life, she agrees to go along with his plan. She feels that this is the

right thing to do as she tries to adjust to her new society.

Abimelech's reaction, when he learns of the truth, makes it obvious that Isaac's idea is not carefully thought through. It also shows that Isaac is not able to learn from his father's mistakes. In the two similar stories about Abraham and Sarah, Pharaoh expels Abraham and Sarah from Egypt and God finds it necessary to interfere to prevent Abimelech from committing adultery with Sarah.

According to Sharon Jeansonne, Rebekah, not Isaac, gains sympathy in this story by her lack of action. "Her silence is an indication of her powerless status in this story. In fact, the impression of Rebekah given in this scene differs from that of the strong and independent woman we saw earlier - a woman who would speak to a male stranger and make her will known to her family."⁶¹ Perhaps this story is told to illustrate the detrimental way women are expected to behave in Canaanite society. This story sets the stage for Rebekah's return to her old ways and customs when confronted with the issue of her son's blessing.

In the story of Rebekah and Jacob's blessing, Gen. 27:1-28:5, Rebekah again becomes a risk-taker for righteousness. This time though, she realizes that she must be the one to determine the outcome of the situation, and not leave it in Isaac's hands as she had done in Gerar.

The story actually begins earlier in chapter 25. Rebekah is pregnant and inquires of God why she feels such

⁶¹ Sharon Pace Jeansonne, The Women of Genesis (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 63-64.

struggle within her womb. God explains:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לָהּ שְׁנֵי גֵימִים [גוֹיִם] בְּבֶטְנְךָ וְשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֶּעֶיךָ
יִפְרְדּוּ וְלֹאֵם מִלֵּאֵם יֶאֱמָץ וְרֵב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר

. . . Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples will be separated from your bowels; and the one people will be stronger than the other people; and the older will serve the younger. (Gen. 25:23)

This poses a problem for Rebekah because God's prophecy contradicts the socially accepted way that family leadership is passed on. In Isaac's society, it is assumed that the first born becomes the leader of the family and receives the father's blessing. Rebekah knows that she must do whatever is necessary to ensure God's prophecy. However, she also realizes that she cannot accomplish this through the usual socially accepted ways. She develops a plan to circumvent the traditional way of passing on paternal authority. This situation calls for Rebekah's true personality to come forth.

Again, Rebekah shows, that she is a woman of action, as she was in Nahor. This can be understood by looking closely at the way the text is written. In the four verses of Gen. 27:14-17 we come across a quick succession of 5 action verbs:

וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיִּקַּח וַיָּבֵא לְאִמּוֹ וַתַּעַשׂ אִמּוֹ מִטְעָמִים כְּאֲשֶׁר אָהָב אָבִיו:

And he went, and fetched, and brought them to his mother; and his mother made savory food, that his father loved.

וַתִּקַּח רִבְקָה אֶת־בְּגָדֵי עֶשָׂו בֶּנֶה הַגָּדֹל הַחֲמֹדֶת אֲשֶׁר אֶתָּה

בְּבֵית וַתַּלְבִּשׁ אֶת־יַעֲקֹב בֶּנֶה הַקָּטָן

And Rebekah took the best clothes of her oldest son Esau, which were with her in the house, and dressed Jacob her younger son;

וְאֵת עֹרֹת גִּדְּי הָעִזִּים הִלְבִּישָׁה עַל־יָדָיו וְעַל חִלְקַת צְנָאָרָיו

And she put the skins of the kids of the goats on his hands, and on his smooth neck;

וַתִּתֵּן אֶת־הַמִּטְעָמִים וְאֶת־הַלֶּחֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂתָה בְּיַד יַעֲקֹב בֶּנֶה

And she gave the savory food and the bread, which she had made, to her son Jacob, in his hand.

This series of verbs in such a short section of text, accentuates the quickness and deliberateness of Rebekah's actions.

To accomplish her task, Rebekah takes great risks - the risk of alienating her husband and incurring the wrath of her oldest son Esau. But she does what is necessary to fulfill God's prophecy. The text itself, reminds us of God's involvement. When the time comes for Esau to receive his father's blessing, Rebekah calls her son Jacob to her and says:

וּרְבֵקָה אָמְרָה אֶל־יַעֲקֹב בֶּנֶה לֵאמֹר

הִנֵּה שָׁמַעְתִּי אֶת־אָבִיךָ מְדַבֵּר אֶל־עֶשָׂו אָחִיךָ לֵאמֹר:

הביאה לי ציד וַעֲשֶׂה־לי מִטַּעֲמִים וְאָכְלָה וְאֶבְרַכְכָּה
לפְנֵי יְהוָה לִפְנֵי מוֹתִי:

Behold, I heard your father speak to Esau your brother, saying, 'Bring me venison, and make me savory food, and I will eat it, and I will bless you before the Lord before my death.' (Gen. 27:6-7)

This is slightly different from what Isaac actually said. In her retelling of the story to Jacob, Rebekah adds some additional words to what Isaac actually says to Esau. Isaac says:

וַעֲשֶׂה־לי מִטַּעֲמִים כַּאֲשֶׁר אֲהַבְתִּי
וְהַבִּי־אָה לִי וְאָכְלָה בְּעֵבֶר תְּבָרְכֶךָ וְנַפְשִׁי בְטָרֶם אָמוּת:

Make me savory food that I love, and bring it to me and I will eat it so that my soul may bless you, before I die. (Gen. 27:4).

Rebekah adds the words, "before God." She reminds herself, Jacob, and the reader that she is in partnership with God as she carries out her plan.

That she is taking a risk, is underscored by Jacob's response to her plan:

אוֹלִי יִמָּשְׁנִי אָבִי וְהִיִּיתִי בְּעֵינָיו כַּמְתַּעֲתֵץ וְהָבֵאתִי עָלַי קָלֶלָה
וְלֹא בִרְכָה

Perhaps my father will touch me, and I will seem like a deceiver in his eyes; and I will bring a curse upon me, and not a blessing. (Gen. 27:12)

Rebekah assures Jacob that she will bear the responsibility of taking such a risk:

וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ אִמּוֹ עָלַי קַלְלָתְךָ בְּנִי אֲךָ שָׁמַע בְּקוֹלִי וְלֹךְ קַח-לִי:

And his mother said to him, Upon me be your curse, my son; however obey my voice, and go take (them) for me. (Gen. 27:13)

Rebekah understands that it is so important for Jacob to receive Isaac's blessing, she is willing to risk her husband's anger and alienation, in order to see God's prophecy fulfilled.

The ultimate consequence of taking this risk is not the curse of her husband, but the loss of her son, Jacob. Because of Esau's unfathomed anger toward his brother, Rebekah must send Jacob away to protect him:

וַיֹּאדָם לְרִבְקָה אֶת-דְּבָרֵי עֵשָׂו בְּנֵה הַגָּדֹל
וַתִּשְׁלַח וַתִּקְרָא לַיָּעֶקֶב בְּנֵה הַקָּטָן וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו הִנֵּה עֹשֶׂה אַחִיךָ
מִתְנַחֵם לָהּ לְהַרְגָּהּ: וְעַתָּה בְנִי שָׁמַע בְּקוֹלִי וְקוּם בָּרַח-לָךְ
אֶל-לָבָן אָחִי חָרְנָה: וַיֵּשְׁבֶתָ עִמּוֹ יָמִים אַחֲדִים עַד אֲשֶׁר-תָּשׁוּב
חַמַּת אַחִיךָ: עַד-שׁוּב אֶף-אַחִיךָ מִמֶּךָ וְשָׂכַח אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עָשִׂיתָ
לוֹ וְשָׁלַחְתִּי וְלִקְחָתִיךָ מִשָּׁם לָמָּה אֲשַׁכַּל גַּם-שְׁנֵיכֶם יוֹם אֶחָד:

And it was told to Rebekah what Esau her oldest son said. She sent and called Jacob her younger son, and said to him, Behold, your brother Esau comforts himself by planning to kill you.

Now, my son, obey my voice; and get up, flee to Laban my brother to Haran;

And dwell with him a few days, until your brother's fury turns away;

Until your brother's anger turns away from you, and he forgets what you did to him; then I will send, and take you from there; why should I grieve for both of you in one day? (Gen. 27:42-45)

Rebekah hopes that this will last only a few days but the story ends differently. Jacob remains in Paddan-aram for twenty years. It is assumed that Jacob never sees Rebekah again.

Classical Interpretations of the Text

Because God's prophecy to Rebekah is written directly in the biblical text, the view of her in early attempts to understand her actions, is usually positive, (unlike other biblical women such as Eve or Lot's daughters). Even though she was considered a deceiver and a trickster by later generations, Rebekah has been looked upon with great favor by most Rabbinic literature. When she comes to Isaac to marry him, she is brought to Sarah's tent (Gen. 24:67). Midrash tells us that Rebekah is brought to Sarah's tent because God was with her, just as God was with Sarah:

ויביאה יצחק האהלה שרה אמו כל ימים שחיתה שרה קיימת

היה ענן קשור על פתח אהלה כיון שמתה פסק אותו ענן

וכיון שבאת רבקה חזר אותו ענן

AND ISAAC BROUGHT HER TO HIS MOTHER SARAH'S TENT -
As long as Sarah lived, a cloud was connected to the opening of her tent; when she died, that cloud disappeared; but when Rebekah came, the same cloud returned. (Gen. Rabbah LX:16)

Rebekah is highlighted in the Midrash for making her own decisions. She is shown as a strong-willed woman who acts on what she believes. The Midrash points out that the decision for Rebekah to go with Abraham's servant is hers, regardless of what others thought:

ויקראו לרבקה ויאמרו לה . . . רבי יצחק אמר מרמזים בה התלכי
התלכי ותאמר אלך הולכת אני על כרחכם שלא בטובתכם.

AND THEY CALLED TO REBEKAH, AND SAID TO HER: WILL YOU GO?. R. Isaac said: They hinted to her, WILL YOU [ACTUALLY] GO? AND SHE SAID: I WILL GO: I go in spite of you, whether you wish it or not. (Gen. Rabbah LX:12)

The Rabbis acknowledge the potential for calling Rebekah a deceiver. She comes from a community of deceivers. Therefore, in order to stress that Rebekah was not like the people from her town, they bring this Midrash. In the eyes of the Rabbis, Rebekah is a righteous woman. The Rabbis acknowledge her upbringing and family traits and give her credit for overcoming them:

כשושנה בין החוחים . . . רבי יצחק פתר קרא ברבקה שנאמר
(בראשית כה) ויהי יצחק בן ארבעים שנה . . . אם ללמד
שחיא מפרן ארם מה ת"ל אחות לבן הארמי אלא אביה רמאי
ואנשי מקומה רמאין וצדקת הזו יוצאת מבנותים למהחיא
דומה לשושנה בין החוחים

As a lily among the thorns, so is my love among the daughters (Song of Songs 2:2). R. Isaac interpreted this verse as speaking about Rebekah. As it says, And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean (Gen. 25:20). Now if the text intends to teach us that she came from Paddan-aram why does the text say, 'The sister of Laban the Aramean'? Only to inform us that her father was a deceiver (rammai) and the men of her place were deceivers (ramma'im) yet this righteous woman came out from among them. To what can she be likened? To 'A lily among the thorns'. (Lev. Rabbah 23:1, also Song of Songs Rabbah 2:4)

The Rabbis do not see Rebekah as deceiving Isaac. Instead, they praise Rebekah for taking action to prevent Isaac from doing anything that could be considered wicked:

(משלי יז) מצדיק רשע ומרשיע צדיק תועבת ה' גם שניהם איר
 יהושע בן לוי לא ממה שהיתה רבקה אוהבת את יעקב יותר מעשו
 עשתה את הדבר הזה אלא אמרה לא יעול ויטעי בהחוא סבא
 על שם תועבת ה' גם שניהם ועל ידי שהצדיק את הרשע

He that justifies the wicked, and he that condemns the righteous, even both of them are an abomination to the Lord (Prov. XVII, 15). R. Joshua b. Levi said: It was not because Rebekah loved Jacob more than Esau that she did this thing, but because she said: 'Let him not go in and mislead that old man,' (so that one might say about him [Isaac]), 'Even they both are an abomination to the Lord.'⁶² (Genesis Rabbah LXV:6)

They consider Isaac "justifying the wicked" by asking for food from Esau in exchange for the blessing. Isaac should have given his blessing freely without making his son cook a

⁶² For had he blessed Esau and not Jacob it would have been a case of 'justifying the wicked and condemning the righteous'. ("Soncino Midrash Rabbah", Judaic Classics Library)

meal for him. By accepting food in exchange for giving his blessing, it is as if Isaac is asking Esau for a bribe to assure his receiving the blessing. According to the Rabbis, Rebekah's plan prevented Isaac from accepting this bribe from Esau, therefore saving him from wrong-doing. She acted out of righteousness.

Rashi follows in the footsteps of the Midrash by supporting Rebekah in her actions. He brings many of the Rabbinic comments on Rebekah to his own commentary and then expands on them. He too praises Rebekah for remaining righteous among her wicked family:

בת בתואל . וכי עדיין לא נכתב שיהיה צד צחואל ואחיות
לצן ומפדן ארם, אלא להגיד שצד, שיהיה צד רשע
ואחיות רשע ומקומה אנשי רשע, ולא למדח ממעשיהם:

THE DAUGHTER OF BETUEL - It doesn't have to be written that she is the daughter of Betuel and the sister of Laban from Padan Aram but it is written to sing her praise, that she was the daughter of a wicked man and the sister of a wicked man and the people from her community were wicked, but she didn't learn from their deeds. (Rashi, Gen. 25:20)

Even though he considers Rebekah to be righteous, Rashi does fault her to a certain extent, for her family background. When he comments on Isaac's prayer to God on behalf of Rebekah's barrenness, Rashi explains that God responds to Isaac's prayer and not Rebekah's because:

ויצטר לו. לו ולא לה, שאין דומה תפלה לדיק בן רשע

לתפלה לדיק בן לדיק

And He responded to him. To him and not to her because there is no comparison between the prayer of a righteous person, (Rebekah), who is the child of an evil person, (Bethuel) and the prayer of a righteous person, (Isaac), who is the child of a righteous person, (Abraham). (Rashi, Gen. 25:21)

In discussing Rebekah's plan to deceive Isaac, Rashi reminds us that she seeks God's permission to act. That is her purpose in adding "before the Lord" to her retelling of Isaac's intent to bless Esau, to Jacob.

לפני ה': ברשותו, שיסכים על ידי

BEFORE THE LORD - With God's permission, so God will agree with what I am doing. (Rashi, Gen. 27:7)

Rashi also confirms that God is part of Rebekah's plan in his comments on Gen. 27:42.

ויגד לרבקה את־דברי עשו בנה הגדל ותשלח ותקרא ליַעקב

בנה הקטן ותאמר אליו הנה עשו אחיך מתגנב לך להרגך

And these words of Esau her older son were told to Rebekah; and she sent and called Jacob her younger son, and said to him, Behold, your brother Esau comforts himself by planning to kill you.

Rashi says that the Holy Spirit was the one who told Rebekah what Esau was thinking to himself:

ויגד לרבקה. ברוח הקודש הוגד לה מה שעשו מהרהר בלבו:

And it was told to Rebekah. By the holy spirit was she told what Esau felt in his heart.

Other commentators also acknowledge God's role in Rebekah's plan. Rashbam and Hizkuni agree that Rebekah willingly accepts the responsibility of Isaac's curse if he finds out their plan, because "she was sure about what God told her, that the older son would serve the younger son."⁶³

Modern Interpretation

Gerhard Von Rad, a German Bible scholar, is relatively neutral in his description of the Blessings Story, showing both the positive and negative attributes of Rebekah's actions. He first praises Rebekah by calling Genesis 27:1-45, "The Cunning Acquisition of the Blessing".⁶⁴ He describes Rebekah as having thought of everything. She was even willing to take on the expected curse should their plans be discovered. But he also discusses the seriousness of the story. There were so many moral difficulties raised by carrying out the plan. Von Rad feels that Jacob lied in verse 20. When Isaac asked him, "How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?," Jacob said, "Because the Lord Your God granted me success."⁶⁵ Jacob and Rebekah also

⁶³ *Torat Chavim*, Gen. 27:13 עלי קללתך

⁶⁴ Von Rad, , p. 273.

⁶⁵ Translation by Von Rad

exploited Isaac's blindness, something prohibited in the Bible. [ולפני עור לא תתן מכשל - Don't put a stumbling block before the blind. (Lev. 19:14) and ארור משנה עור בדרך - Cursed is the one who causes the blind to wander out of the way. (Deut. 27:18)]

Von Rad concludes by raising the issues behind Rebekah's motivation. He asks, "Did Rebekah really intend to further the divine plans which Isaac had culpably neglected?...What if the motives of the actors were much more human and obvious?"⁶⁶ According to Von Rad, motivation is not the issue in this story. The narrator of the text is more concerned with God's sovereignty, than the questions of personal guilt and subjective motives of individual people. The narrator's goal is to "awaken in the reader a feeling of sympathetic suffering for those who are caught up mysteriously in such a monstrous act of God and are almost destroyed by it."⁶⁷

Adin Steinsaltz takes a favorable approach toward Rebekah.⁶⁸ He praises her for her commitment to whatever she believes is right. Steinsaltz compares her personality to Isaac's. Isaac is fundamentally not a person who makes decisions, but a person to whom things happen. While Isaac is hesitant and unsure, Rebekah is decisive and takes action.

Despite her actions, Steinsaltz sees Rebekah as being respectful and admiring of her husband. "With all her

⁶⁶ Von Rad, p. 280.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Adin Steinsaltz, Biblical Images. (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc., 1994), Chapter 5.

resolution of will, Rebekah makes no attempt to dominate her partner, to trample on his personality."⁶⁹ Even though she admires her husband, she acknowledges his limitations, and therefore must act.

According to Steinsaltz, Rebekah manipulates Isaac into blessing Jacob out of her love for him. It is an attempt by Rebekah to shield and protect Isaac from the emotional shock of realizing his own error of judgment of his sons.⁷⁰

J. H. Hertz also justifies Rebekah's actions. He explains that she acts out of necessity because of the prophecy she received from God earlier. "This prophecy appeared on the point of being falsified by Isaac's intention to bestow his chief blessing upon Esau. Knowing how attached Isaac was to the elder son, she must have felt it would be useless to try and dissuade her husband from his intention. She therefore, in desperation, decided to circumvent him."⁷¹

Not all modern commentators are so favorable toward Rebekah. The Interpreter's Bible ignores God's role in Rebekah's actions and uses the Rebekah story instead as an example of how a woman's emotions and selfishness can ruin a marriage. Simpson compares Rebekah and Isaac's marriage to a marriage that has become bitter "because one or both was selfishly obsessed to have his or her own way."⁷² Rebekah is blamed for favoring Jacob much more aggressively than Isaac

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 46.

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 51.

⁷¹ Dr. J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and the Haftorah* (London, Soncino Press, 1967), pp. 97-98.

⁷² C. Simpson, *Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 1: Genesis* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1951), p. 668.

favoring Esau, therefore creating a rift in their marriage. According to the Interpreter's Bible, "She wanted Jacob to have the best of everything, no matter how he got it; and to that end she would not scruple at trickery and unfairness both toward her husband and her son Esau".⁷³ The author compares Rebekah's actions to a mother who encourages her son's self-indulgence or one who schemes to do whatever is necessary to ensure her daughter's social success.

The Interpreter's Bible ignores God's role as the motivation behind Rebekah's plan to get the blessing for Jacob. In fact, Rebekah is accused of being disloyal to truth, to honor and "to the relationship of life to God."⁷⁴ Simpson claims Rebekah's actions go against God. He asserts that Rebekah's "use of God's prophesy" is an excuse to help her favored son succeed, and is "a strange example of the way in which lofty ideas may be made a motive for low acts."⁷⁵

Simpson concludes by using the end of the story to prove that Rebekah's deeds were evil. Esau and Isaac are angry and Jacob is sent away, never to be seen by Rebekah again. "But the consequences of evil may be longer and graver than the one who has instigated the evil can foresee...she carried to her grave the frustration of her own life which had grown out of the false act by which she had tried to lift her preferred child into favor."⁷⁶

Even some earlier women writers do not look favorably

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 681.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 686.

upon Rebekah's actions. Edith Deen sees Rebekah's actions as the act of a desperate mother. She sees no connection between God's oracle to Rebekah and Rebekah's actions. "She plots an act that is deep, dark and disconcerting... She took quick action guided by her will, not God's will...It was her fears that overwhelmed her and she forgot God's part in the affairs of men."⁷⁷ Deen describes Rebekah as deceiving her blind husband and influencing her son to do what is wrong. She sees Jacob's leaving home as punishment for Rebekah's wrongdoing.

Most modern feminist writers see the story differently. The portrayal of Rebekah and other women as deceivers is considered by these biblical critics to be representative of the status that women had in biblical society. Esther Fuchs feels that women needed to carry out deceptive acts because of their "inferior social position and political powerlessness in patriarchal society."⁷⁸ She asserts that Rebekah deceived Isaac not because she was a devious wife, but because legally she was inferior and subordinate to him.

Savina Teubal adds a new dimension to the patriarchy theme which is used as the basis for explaining women's need to deal with problems differently. She theorizes that the society that Rebekah came from was a matriarchal or matrilineal society. It had different customs and practices than the patriarchal society to which Rebekah was brought. The conflicts for Rebekah began then, when she tried to

⁷⁷ Deen, pp. 25-26.

⁷⁸ Esther Fuchs, *Who is Hiding the Truth?* in Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship, p. 137.

maintain her matriarchal upbringing in her new patriarchal country of Canaan. This theory can be used to explain Rebekah's sudden change in personality in Gerar, from a woman who takes charge and makes decisions, to a woman who quietly goes along with her husband's poorly thought-out request. When she first goes with Isaac to Gerar, her quiet manner can be explained as an attempt to adopt to the ways of Isaac's patriarchal society. When she realizes that this behavior is not constructive and causes her to do things that are not right, she returns to her matriarchal background to guide her as she acts. Thus, when challenged with God's oracle to have the younger son rule the older son, Rebekah's matriarchal personality resurfaces to deal with the issue.

According to Teubal, Rebekah's matriarchal upbringing explains why she works so hard to get Jacob his father's blessing. God's prophecy made logical sense to Rebekah and seemed right. Teubal explains that Rebekah's matriarchal society followed the custom of ultimogeniture - succession of the youngest.⁷⁹ Her problem was that Isaac's patriarchal society followed the practice of primogeniture - succession of the eldest. Resolving these two approaches to inheritance was a source of conflict within the couple's marriage. According to Teubal, even though God's oracle to Rebekah confirmed her society's approach to inheritance, Isaac "did not accept the fate decreed by the oracle."⁸⁰ He intended to give Esau the blessing without Rebekah's knowledge. Rebekah's

⁷⁹ Lord Raglan, *Kinship and Inheritance*, in Savina Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess*, p. 44.

⁸⁰ Teubal, p. 44.

actions to obtain the blessing for Jacob, was not only based upon God's oracle but also upon her understanding of the role of inheritance that was followed in her homeland.

CHAPTER 5: TAMAR - תָּמָר

(GENESIS CHAPTER 38)

The Biblical Story

We first learn of Tamar when she is chosen to be the wife of Er, Judah's eldest son. Because Er (עֵר) is bad (רָע), God kills him.⁶¹ This leaves Tamar a childless widow. Judah then follows the laws of levirate marriage as described in Deuteronomy, and arranges for his second son, Onan, to produce offspring through Tamar, in his brother's name:

כִּי־יָשְׁבוּ אֲחִים יַחְדָּו וּמֵת אֶחָד מֵהֶם וּבֶן אֵין־לּוֹ לֹא־תִהְיֶה
אִשְׁת־הַמֵּת הַחוּצָה לְאִישׁ זָר יִבְמָה יְבֵא עָלֶיהָ וּלְקַחָהּ
לֹא לְאִשָּׁה וַיִּבְמָה: וְהָיָה הַבְּכוֹר אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵד יָקוּם עַל־שֵׁם אָחִיו
הַמֵּת וּלֹא־יִמָּחָה שְׁמוֹ מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל:

If brothers live together, and one of them dies, and he has no child, the wife of the dead shall not go outside to a stranger; her husband's brother shall come in to her, and take her to him for a wife, and fulfill the duty of a husband's brother to her.

And it will be, that the firstborn which she gives birth to will rise to the name of his dead brother, so that his name not be erased from Israel. (Deut. 25:5-6)⁶²

⁶¹ Notice the play on words - Er's name and the word for 'bad' are the same two letters in reverse order.

⁶² There is a difference between the Tamar story and the laws of levirate marriage in Deuteronomy. Deut. 25:7-10 continues by describing ways that a man can be released from the obligation of levirate marriage. In the Tamar story, it appears that Judah has no legal way to get out of his obligation. Sama, suggests an early dating of the Tamar story saying that the Tamar story took place before the laws of Deuteronomy were written, which is why the story does not follow these laws. Levirate laws in general pre-date Biblical law. Documents from the Middle Assyrian Empire, Hittite Laws and laws of Nuzi all have variations on levirate marriage (JPS Torah Commentary on Genesis, pp. 264, 266).

Onan does not cooperate and is also killed by God which leaves Judah's youngest son, Shelah. Tamar is told by Judah to live at her father's home as a widow until Shelah grows up. Even though it is implied, Judah never promises marriage or a sexual union to Tamar because he fears that his youngest son will also die. Therefore Judah never fulfills his promise to Tamar.

After many years of waiting, Tamar is told that Judah is going up to Timnah with his friend/fellow citizen (רֵעוּהוּ), Hira. She realizes that Judah will never fulfill his obligation to her. The text implies that by going with his Adullamite friend, Judah becomes a 'citizen' of his friend's community. The more he remains in the company of non-Israelites, the more he begins to assimilate and to forget his own people's laws and customs. This is hinted at early in the story. ט"ו is the verb used to describe Judah in the beginning of the story, when he 'turns aside' to an Adullamite man, Hira:

וַיְהִי בַעַת הַהוּא וַיָּרֶד יְהוּדָה מֵאֶת אָחִיו וַיֵּט עַד־אִישׁ עַדְלָמִי
וּשְׁמוֹ הִירָה.

Now it was at that time that Judah sent down from his brothers and turned aside to the Adullamite man, whose name was Hira. (Gen. 38:1)

The verb often means a physical turning aside but also implies a moral turning aside. This understanding of ט"ו can

be seen more clearly by looking at the use of this verb in the book of Kings:

וְהַשְׁמָעָה בָּאָה עַד־יֹאב כִּי יֹאב נִטָּה אַחֲרֵי אֲדֹנֶיהָ

Then news came to Joab; for Joab had be led astray by Adonijah. (I Kings 2:28)

Hira leads Judah astray, away from his Israelite heritage causing Judah to eventually dismiss his obligation of creating a levirate marriage for Tamar.⁶³

Judah continues to be seen in a negative light as the story continues. No sooner does he finish the mourning period for his wife, then he seems to eagerly set off for the sheep shearing festival:⁶⁴

וַיָּדְבוּ הַיָּמִים וַתָּמָת בַּת־שׁוּעַ אִשְׁת־יְהוּדָה וַיִּנָּחֶם יְהוּדָה
וַיַּעַל עַל־גִּזְזֵי צֹאנוֹ הוּא וְחִירָה רֹעֵהוּ הַעֲדֻלָּמִי תַמְנָתָהּ

And after a long time Shuah's daughter, Judah's wife died; and Judah was comforted, and went up to Timnah to his sheep shearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. (Gen. 38:12)

The use of the word נִנָּחֵם - to be comforted, quickly brings us back to the scene when Jacob is told of his son Joseph's supposed death:

⁶³ Jeansonne, p. 102.

⁶⁴ According to Robert Alter (*Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, p. 219), sheep shearing was the occasion for elaborate festivities with abundant food and drink.

וַיָּקֻמוּ כָּל-בָּנָיו וְכָל-בָּנוֹתָיו לְנַחֲמוֹ וַיִּמָּאן לְהִתְנַחֵם

And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; (Gen. 37:35)

In contrast to Judah's quick recovery from mourning, Jacob refuses to be comforted.

Reading the text carefully, one realizes that when Judah goes to meet Hira at this festival, things are about to change - something important is about to happen. The verb used to describe Judah going to Timna to meet Hira is *עָלָה* - "go up" (Gen.38:13). This is in contrast to the verb used to describe Judah at the beginning of the chapter, when he first goes to meet Hira, *יָרַד* - "go down". In the Bible, *עָלָה* and *יָרַד* often have meanings other than a physical change of elevation. When Judah first leaves his brothers and marries Shua at the beginning of the chapter, his "going down" ascribes a negative sense to his actions. He has wronged his family, and leaves them (*יָרַד* - go down) in disgrace. When he "goes up" to Timna, he is now heading toward something positive - a union with Tamar which will create the heir to King David.

Tamar quickly takes action to right a wrong. Even though she is not a Hebrew,⁴⁵ she understands the critical importance in the Hebrew culture of creating an heir for her family. She realizes that Judah is the only one left to

⁴⁵ Tamar's ancestry is not mentioned but is assumed to be Canaanite by many interpreters.

provide the seed for her child. Knowing how easy it is to lead Judah astray, Tamar devises a strategy. She disguises herself as a harlot and sits where she knows Judah will pass. Judah falls for the trap:

וַיֵּט אֵלֶיהָ אֶל-הַדֶּנֶךְ וַיֹּאמֶר הִבָּה נָא אָבוֹא אֵלֶיךָ כִּי לֹא יָדַע
כִּי כִלְתּוֹ הוּא

*So he turned aside to her by the road and said:
Come now, please let me come in to you - for he did
not know that she was his daughter-in-law (bride)."*
(Gen. 38:16)

The verb (נָטָה) is used here as it was in 38:1 to show how easily Judah is led astray. Tamar knows that it will be easy to deceive Judah into creating an heir for the family.

The text hints to us that what Tamar is about to do is righteous even though it appears on the surface to be immoral:

וַתִּסָּר בְּגָדֶי אֶלְמְנוּתָהּ מֵעָלֶיהָ וַתִּכְסֵּם בַּצִּיצִיף

And she took off her widow's garments, and covered herself with a veil. (Gen. 38:14)

This is reminiscent of Rebekah who covers herself with a veil when she meets Jacob:

⁶⁶ Notice the dual meaning of the word כִּלְתּוֹ. Tamar simultaneously is his daughter-in-law and in effect becomes his bride by her actions.

וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל־הַעֲבָד מִי־הָאִישׁ הַלֵּזֶה הַהוּלֵךְ בַּשָּׂדֶה לִקְרָאתָנוּ

וַיֹּאמֶר הַעֲבָד הוּא אֲדֹנָי וַתִּקַּח הַצִּעִיף וַתְּתַכֶּס׃

She said to the servant, Who is this man walking in the field to meet us? And the servant said, He is my master; so she took the veil, and covered herself. (Gen. 24:65)

Rebekah is considered a Matriarch and highly praised by later generations for her actions. Like Tamar, she too had to resort to deceit to right a wrong. The parallel between the two women goes even further because both women have twins.

Tamar is not haphazard as she carries out her plans, but gives them a great deal of thought. Even though she is justified in what she does, Tamar proceeds at great risk to herself. If her plan succeeds and she becomes pregnant, she will not be able to keep it secret from the community. The penalty for adultery, (Tamar is considered betrothed to Shelah), is death for the woman.⁸⁷ She tries to protect herself by getting proof in advance from Judah, in case she is questioned later on:

⁸⁷ There are many laws in the Bible that refer to the punishment for adultery. These laws are somewhat different than the law applied to Tamar by Judah. The biblical laws call for the death of BOTH the adulterer and the adulteress.

And the man who commits adultery with another man's wife, he who commits adultery with his neighbor's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death. (Lev. 20:10)

And if a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall surely be put to death; they have committed unnatural sin; their blood shall be upon them. (Lev. 20:12)

If a girl who is a virgin is betrothed to a husband, and a man finds her in the city, and lies with her; Then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them with stones that they die; (Deut. 22:23-24)

In the Genesis story, only Tamar is to be killed. It is not clear whether this is so because the laws from Leviticus and Deuteronomy were not in existence at the time of the Tamar story, or if Judah had some special status that exempted him from such a sentence.

וַתֹּאמֶר מִה־תִּתֶּן־לִי כִּי תָבוֹא אֵלַי

And she said, What will you give me, that you may come in to me? (Gen. 38:16)

וַיֹּאמֶר מֶה הָעֲרָבוֹן אֲשֶׁר אֶתֶּן־לְךָ וַתֹּאמֶר חֲתָמִי וּפְתִילִי וּמַטְּי
אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדִי וַיִּתֶּן־לָהּ וַיָּבֹא אֵלֶיהָ וַתַּהַר לּוֹ:

And he said, What pledge shall I give you?

And she said, Your signet, and your bracelets, and your staff that is in your hand. And he gave (them) to her, and came in to her, and she became pregnant by him. (Gen. 38:18)

Judah does find out that Tamar is pregnant and is accused of being a harlot. He immediately calls for her to be burned:**

וַיְהִי כַּמֶּשֶׁלֶשׁ חֳדָשִׁים וַיִּגַּד לִיהוּדָה לֵאמֹר וְגַתָּה תָמָר כְּלָתְךָ וְגַם
הִנֵּה הָרָה לִזְנוּנִים וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה הוֹצִיאֶיהָ וּתְשַׂרְף:

And it was about three months later, that it was told Judah, saying, Tamar your daughter-in-law has played the harlot; and also, behold, she is pregnant by her harlotry. And Judah said, Bring her out, and let her be burned. (Gen. 38:24)

Judah does not seem to give this much thought. In two quick words, הוֹצִיאֶיהָ וּתְשַׂרְף, he sentences Tamar to death.

** Although she is called a harlot, her punishment is similar that of an adulterer. (See preceding footnote.)

Tamar has every right at this point to reveal in public, what Judah has done, but she chooses to remain silent. She continues to risk her life by her silence, because she feels that this is the proper thing to do. She leaves it up to Judah to say that she has been wronged, but she does not leave it totally up to him. Her careful planning enables her to remind Judah indirectly, of his involvement. Tamar sends Judah a message showing him the proof that he is the father, and placing the burden on him to reveal the true story of what occurred.

The words she uses quickly reminds Judah of his sordid past:

לְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-אֵלֶּה לוֹ אֹנֹכִי הָרָה וְתֹאמַר הִכָּרִינִי לְמִי הַחֲתָמָה
וְהַפְתִּילִים וְהַמָּטָה הָאֵלֶּה:

Recognize, please, whose are these, the signet, and the cords, and the staff. (Gen. 38:25)

These are the same words that Judah himself uses when he shows his father Jacob, the bloodied and torn coat of his brother Joseph.

הִכָּרִינִי הַחֲתָמָה בְּנִךְ הוּא אִם-לֹא:

Recognize, please, is this your son's coat or not. (Gen. 37:32)

In the end, perhaps because he is reminded of the wrong that he has done to his brother, in addition to the wrong

that he has done to Tamar, Judah acknowledges Tamar's righteousness. She was not a harlot nor an adulterer because she was justified in her actions:

וַיָּכַר יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר צְדָקָה מִמֶּנִּי כִּי־עָלִיכֶן לֹא־נָתַתִּיהָ
לְשֵׁלָה בְנִי

And Judah acknowledged them, and said, She has been more righteous than I; because I did not give her to Shelah my son. (Gen. 38:26)

Tamar receives the ultimate reward for her deed. Her son, Perez, continues the family line through to King David. (See Ruth 4:18-22)

It is interesting to note that the story of Tamar is situated right in the middle of the Joseph story. In chapter 37, we learn about Joseph and the rivalry he has with his brothers. The chapter ends with Joseph being sold by his brothers to the Midianites, who are on their way to Egypt. Chapter 39 continues the story of Joseph as he arrives in Egypt. He quickly rises in status as the personal attendant of Potiphar, the Pharaoh's chief steward.

While in his master's home, we read about another story which seems, on the surface, to parallel Tamar's story. Potiphar's wife tries to seduce Joseph into laying with her, just as Tamar seduced Judah into laying with her. The Hebrew hints at the parallelism between the two stories. The story of Tamar begins:

וַיָּחִי בְּעַת הַהוּא וַיֵּרֶד יְהוּדָה מֵאֶת אֶחָיו

And it came to pass at that time, that Judah went down from his brothers. (Gen. 38:1)

Chapter 39 begins with the same verb (יָרַד) in verse one:

וַיֹּסֶף הוּרַד מִצְרַיִם

And Joseph was brought down to Egypt. (Gen. 39:1)

This parallel use of verbs suggest the parallel between the stories in these two chapters." While both stories are about women who seduce men, there is a stark contrast between the motives of the two women. The story of Tamar is placed before the story of Potiphar's wife to emphasize the difference between the two women. If one is critical of Tamar for her seemingly immoral actions, the reader is quickly reminded in the next chapter of the actions of Potiphar's wife. Her seduction has no apparent motive other than a selfish one. By placing these two stories in juxtaposition to each other, one can see that motive plays an important part in understanding the actions of personalities in the Bible.

Classical Interpretations of the Text

Although Tamar's actions can be harshly criticized, her relationship with Judah produces a child which begins the

⁴⁰ There are also many parallels that can be seen between chapter 37 and 38 with regard to Judah. For more information, see Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, pp. 3-7, 9-11.

lineage of King David. Therefore it is important that she be seen in a positive light by the Rabbis. Tamar is depicted as praiseworthy and righteous in the Talmud and Midrash. She is often used by the Rabbis as the role model to show how people should behave.

The Talmud describes Tamar's act of covering herself with a veil as a sign of modesty - an admirable trait for a woman according to the Rabbis:

כל כלה שהיא צנועה בבית חמיה זוכה ויוצאין ממנה
מלכים ונביאים מנלן מתמר דכתיב: ויראה יהודה
וחשבה לזונה כי כסתה פניה משום דכסתה פניה
ויחשבה לזונה אלא משום דכסתה פניה בבית חמיה
ולא הוה ידע לה זכתה ויצאו ממנה מלכים ונביאים

Every bride that is modest in her father-in-law's house merits having kings and prophets as her descendants.⁹⁰ Where do we learn this? From Tamar. As it is written: When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a harlot; because she had covered her face (Gen. 38:25). It is not because she covered her face that he thought that she was a harlot, rather, because she always covered her face in her father-in-law's home, so he didn't recognize her. This is why she merited having kings and prophets as descendants. (Meg. 10b)

The Rabbis change Tamar's act of covering herself with a veil so that Judah will not recognize her, from an action related to deceit, to an action related to modesty. Because she was

⁹⁰ All Talmud Hebrew is from the Soncino Talmud (London: Soncino Press, 1984).

⁹¹ King David is described as a descendant of Perez, Tamar's son, in Ruth 4:18. The prophet Isaiah is called the son of Amoz in Isaiah 1:1 and other places. According to Soncino commentary on this Talmud passage, Amoz is the brother of David.

modest, it was appropriate that she became the ancestor of King David and Isaiah.

Despite their praise of her, though, the Rabbis do accuse Tamar of being a harlot. Then, in the same breath, they justify her actions:

תמר זינתה יצוא ממנה מלכים ונביאים . . .
אמר ר'נ בר יצחק: גדולה עבירה לשמה ממצוה
שלא לשמה

Tamar acted as a harlot but gave birth to kings and prophets... R. Nahman ben Isaac said: A transgression performed with good intention is better than a mitzvah performed with evil intention. (Naz. 23b)

According to the Talmud, Tamar was justified in her actions because she had good reason for doing what she did. Her "transgression" of being a harlot was appropriate because she had good intentions - to produce an heir for Judah's family.

Tamar is also praised for her behavior and restraint when her pregnancy is found out and she is ordered, by Judah, to be burned:

נוח לא לאדם שיפיל עצמו לתוך כבשן האש ואל
ילבין פני חברו ברבים מנלן מתמר שנאמר: היא
מוצאת וגו'

It is better for a person to throw himself into a fiery furnace than to shame his friend in public. Where do we learn this from? From Tamar, as it is written: When she was brought out, she sent to her father-in-law, saying, By the man, whose these are, am I with child; and she said, Discern, I beg you, whose are these, the signet, and bracelets, and staff. (Gen. 38:25) (Ber. 43b)

Even at the risk of dying, Tamar did not publicly denounce Judah for his role in her pregnancy. She left it up to him to decide if he would acknowledge his responsibility for her condition. The Rabbis considered such action truly praiseworthy, and use Tamar as a role model to convince people of the importance of not embarrassing others in public.

Both the Talmud and the Midrash comment on the name of the place where Tamar sits and waits for Judah. They see it as being more than a physical description of location:

... וַתֵּשֶׁב בַּפֶּתַח עֵינִים אֲשֶׁר עַל-דֶּרֶךְ תִּמְנָה

. . . and she sat in an open place," which is by the way to Timnah, (Gen. 38:14)

פֶּתַח עֵינִים, literally means 'opening of the eyes.'⁹² The Talmud plays on the literal meaning of the words and uses them to connect Tamar back to Abraham:

אִךְ אֲלֶכְסַנְדֵּר מְלַמֵּד שֶׁהָלַכָּה וַיֵּשֶׁבָה לָּהּ בַּפֶּתַח שֶׁל
אֲבִרָהָם אֲבִינוּ מִקוֹם שֶׁכָּל עֵינִים צוּפוֹת לִרְאוֹתוֹ

R. Alexander says: It teaches that Tamar went and sat at the entrance of our father Abraham, at the place from which all eyes observe. (Sota 10a)

By placing Tamar at the same location where Abraham was, the

⁹² Other translations of פֶּתַח עֵינִים are: 'the entrance to Enaim' or 'at the crossroad'. (JPS Tanakh)

⁹³ Rashi translates it to mean: at the place where the eyes become opened. People open their eyes to carefully examine which road to take. (Rashi, Gen. 38:14)

Rabbis put Tamar in good company thus ascribing the righteousness of Abraham also to her.

The Midrash suggests that Tamar was praying there:

ותכס בצעיף ותתעלף ותשב בפתח עינים אִרְ אמי חורנו
 על כל המקרא ולא מצאנו מקום ששמו פתח עינים ומה הוא
 בפתח עינים אלא מלמד שתלתה עיניה בפתח שכל העינים
 תלויים בו ואמרה יהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלהי שלא אצא
 מן הבית הזה ריקנית

AND SHE COVERED HERSELF WITH HER VEIL, AND WRAPPED
 HERSELF, AND SHE SAT IN PETAH ENAIM (Gen. 38:14).
 Rabbi Ami said: We have gone through the whole of
 Scripture and found no place called Petah Enaim.
 What then is the purpose of Petah Enaim? It teaches
 that she lifted up her eyes to the gate (petah) to
 which all eyes (enaim) are directed and she said:
 'May it be the will before God that I do not leave
 this house empty.' (Gen. Rabbah LXXXV:7)

The Rabbis used midrash to further depict Tamar as a righteous woman. They did this by expanding upon the Tamar story, and showing that she prayed to God so that she may conceive. This interpretation also suggests that God supports what she is about to do.

The Midrash also shows Tamar's righteousness by drawing parallels between her and Rebekah - a woman they have already praised for her righteousness:

ותסר בגדי אלמנותה מעליה ותכס בצעיף שתיים הם
 שנתכסו בצעיף תמר ורבקה ושתייהם ילדו תאומים רבקה
 ותקח הצעיף ותתכס תמר ותכס בצעיף

AND SHE PUT OFF FROM HER THE GARMENTS OF HER WIDOWHOOD, AND COVERED HERSELF WITH HER VEIL (Gen. 38:14). There are two that covered themselves with a veil, Rebekah and Tamar, and the two of them gave birth to twins. Rebekah: And she took her veil, and covered herself (Gen.24:65); Tamar: And she covered herself with her veil. (Gen. Rabbah LXXXV:7)

The Midrash takes this parallel one step further and suggests that Tamar is more righteous than Rebekah, by comparing Tamar's sons to Rebekah's sons. The Rabbis comment on the different way the Hebrew word for twins, *t'omim*, is spelled in the two different stories:

והנה תאומים כבשנה תאומים מלא כאן שניהם צדיקים
ולחלן כתיב תומים חסר אחד צדיק ואחד רשע

BEHOLD, TWINS WERE IN HER WOMB (Gen. 38:27). Here *תאומים* is written fully (with an 'alef'), indicating that both of them (Perez and Zerah) were righteous; whereas in the earlier case *תומים* is written defectively (Gen.25:24), because one was righteous and the other wicked. (Gen. Rabbah LXXXV:13)

Looking at later reactions, Rashi also finds praise for Tamar and her actions. In agreeing with the Rabbis, Rashi comments on the fact that Tamar does not expose Judah's role in her pregnancy even though her life is at risk. He adds his comment to the Midrash:

והיא שלחה אל חמיה. לא רצתה להלבין פניו, ולומר ממך אני
מעוברת, הלא לאיש אשר חלה לו, אמרה, אם יודה מעלמו,
יודה, ואם לאו, ישרפוני ואל חלבין פניו, מכאן אמרו,

נוח לו לאדם שיפלוהו לכבשן האש ואל ילצין פני
חבירו ברבים:

AND SHE SENT TO HER FATHER IN LAW (Gen. 38:25) She did not want to embarrass him by saying, "It is from you that I am pregnant." Instead she said, "By the man whose these are." She thought, "If he will announce it by himself, let him announce it, and if not, let then burn me. I won't embarrass him in public. From here they said, it is better for a person to be burned in a fiery furnace than to embarrass his friends in front of many."²⁴

Rashi tries to give us a sense of what Tamar is thinking as she decides to send Judah's things to him.

Rashi also acknowledges God's role in the union of Judah and Tamar. He brings in Rabbinic commentary and comments on that:

ממני. היא מעוברת. ורז"ל דרשו, שילאה צח קול ואמרה,
ממני ומאחי ילאו הדברים, לפי שכיחה לנועה צבית חמיה,
גזרתי שילאו ממנה מלכים, ומשנבט יכודה גזרתי להעמיד
מלכים בישראל:

FROM ME is she pregnant. And the Sages said: A Bat kol came forth and said, 'From Me and by Me these things occurred'. (Gen. Rabbah LXXXV:12) Because she was modest in her father-in-law's house I have decreed that kings will come forth from her and from the Tribe of Judah I have decreed that kings will be established in Israel, (Sota 10b). [Therefore I have brought it about that these two persons who are to be the ancestors of kings should unite to become so.²⁵]

²⁴ Rashi, Gen. 38:25

²⁵ A.M. Silbermann. Chumash with Rashi Commentary: Genesis (Jerusalem: Silbermann Family, 1934), p. 189.

Other Medieval commentators have very little to say about Tamar and the motivation for her actions. S'forno is the only other commentator in Torat Chayim to remark about Tamar and what she was like. He adds his own comments about Tamar's emotional strength, and then calls on the Sages' writings to pay her further tribute:

היא מוצאת וחיא שלחה. שלא נפל לבה מהשתדל לזכות את
עצמה. אף על פי שהיו מוציאים אותה להשרף, כי היה לבה

כלב הארי. לאיש אשר אלה לו. אף על פי שהיתה באותה
סכנה לא רצתה להלבין פניו. כאמרו ז"ל . . .

AS SHE WAS BEING TAKEN OUT SHE SENT (Gen. 38:25)
*She did not despair from trying to obtain a
favorable judgment even though they were taking her
out to be burned, because she had the heart of a
lion.*

TO THE MAN WHO THESE BELONG TO. Even though she was
in danger she did not want to embarrass Judah
publicly. As the Sages said..."

S'forno also expands on Judah's comment, "She is more
righteous than me." (Gen. 38:26)

צדקה ממני. אף על פי שהיא באה אלי במרמה. ואני לא
ראיתי כלל. כי שלחתי הגדי. מכל מקום היא צדקה במרמתה.
שהיתה לתכלית טוב ורצוי לאל יתברך. שהוא קיום הורע
לא להנאת עצמה. שהרי חזרה לאלמנותה תיכף. יותר ממה

⁹⁶Torat Chayim. Gen. 38:25, S'forno היא מוצאת וחיא שלחה and לאיש אשר אלה לו

שצדקתי אני בקיום אמונתי. שהיתה הכונה בו לכבודי...

SHE IS MORE RIGHTEOUS THAN ME. Even though she came to me deceitfully, and I didn't find her at all when I sent the kid, in every place she is righteous in her deceitfulness because her purpose was good and God desired to bless this. She established a child not for her own pleasure because she immediately returned to her state of widowhood. (What she did was) more righteous than what I did by admitting to the truth. She had the intention of honoring me...⁹⁷

Modern Commentary

According to Edith Deen, Gen. 38:26 confirms Tamar's righteousness with additional proof:

וַיִּכַּר יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר צְדָקָה מִמֶּנִּי כִּי־עָלִיכֶן לֵאמֹתַיִה
לְשֵׁלָה בְנִי וְלֹא־יָסַף עוֹד לְדַעְתָּהּ:

And Judah recognized them, and said, She has been more righteous than I; because I did not give her to Shelah my son. And he did not continue to be intimate with her (to know her) any more.

Deen sees this as "evidence that Tamar was not a promiscuous woman. She had merely acted according to the laws and rather heroically at that."⁹⁸ Tamar did what was necessary to procure an heir for Judah's family and then no longer had any sexual relations with Judah. As S'forno said, Her sexual relationship with Judah was strictly for reproductive purposes and not for her own pleasure. When that task was

⁹⁷ Ibid. ממני צדקה

⁹⁸ Deen, p. 44.

done, she no longer pursued any sexual liaisons with him.

Of course there are those commentators that see the story from a very different and unfavorable perspective. In the Interpreter's Bible, Simpson has nothing but negative things to say about the entire story of Judah and Tamar. He seems unsure as to why this story is even part of the Old Testament canon. "It is like an alien element, suddenly and arbitrarily thrust into a record which it serves only to disturb."⁹⁹ Some of the adjectives he uses to describe the story are: crude and unedifying, and an unlovely narrative. It contains the cloudy medium of human ignorance and passion. Tamar is seen as wistful, having a pathetic yearning for motherhood. He does not limit his criticism to Tamar alone - both Judah's and Tamar's actions are seen as inconsistent and inappropriate. Simpson sees the only redeeming value of the story this way: "Tamar, through her pitiful desire for a child, was used by God's mercy to play a part in history."¹⁰⁰

Von Rad gives Tamar mixed reviews. He acknowledges Tamar's bravery in the context of her actions, or restraint of action when Judah sentences her to death. He uses the legal approach to discuss Judah's sentencing of Tamar when he finds out she is pregnant. This helps us gain a better understanding of the story within the context of the society in which they lived, and why she remained quiet despite her unfair sentence. Judah, as head of the family, assumed the role of judge and was able to pass judgment on Tamar as part

⁹⁹ Simpson, p. 757.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 761.

of his family. It was the custom in the ancient world for the family head to make decisions with no appeal possible.

At first Von Rad praises Tamar as a courageous woman, waiting until the last minute to "play her trump... Tamar, in spite of her action which borders on a crime, is the one justified in the end... It is certain that she did something quite unusual and even repulsive for the ideas of her time... For the sake of her goal she drags herself and Judah into serious guilt. Nevertheless, this path of hers through profound shame and guilt has something splendid about it."¹⁰¹ Although Von Rad is able to find worthiness in Tamar's actions, he does not hesitate to also add his negative reaction amidst the kudos.

Most modern commentators though, are quick to see Tamar's strengths and to focus on them. E.A. Speiser mentions the Tamar story briefly in his commentary on Genesis, but what he does say is highly complimentary. She is credited with taking heroic measures. "In resolutely following the intent of the law, by unorthodox and hazardous means, Tamar thus takes her place alongside Rachel. She has the stuff, it was felt, to be the mother of a virile clan, which is clearly the main theme of the story."¹⁰² Claus Westermann also recognizes Tamar's righteousness. He places her among other women in patriarchal stories such as Hagar, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel, and Lot's daughters, who when "unjustly disadvantaged, seizes the initiative herself, even

¹⁰¹ Von Rad, pp. 361-2.

¹⁰² Speiser, p. 300.

in opposition to established custom and order."¹⁰³

Robert Alter discusses the Judah and Tamar story in great detail in Chapter One in The Art of Biblical Narrative using literary analysis. After the death of Judah's second son, Judah speaks to Tamar and tells her to go to her father's home and remain there as a widow until her third son grows up. Alter points out that Tamar is silent in the text. He explains that the style of the text suggests silent submission, or a lack of any legal options to do differently. The text also hints that what Judah is doing is wrong by calling Tamar "his daughter-in-law." Alter considers this a superfluous addition to her name, and suggests a reason for it. "It reminds us of his legal obligation to provide her a husband from among his sons."¹⁰⁴

During this time, the text shows Tamar's passivity by using only two verbs - one of compliance and one of retreat - to describe what Tamar does:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה לְתָמָר כִּלְתִּי שְׂבִי אֶלמָנָה בֵּית־אָבִיךָ עַד־יִגְדֹּל
שְׁלָה בְּנִי כִּי אָמַר פְּרִימֹת גַּם־הוּא כָאֲחֵיו וַתֵּלֶךְ תָּמָר
וַתֵּשֶׁב בֵּית אָבִיהָ

*Then said Judah to Tamar his daughter-in-law,
Remain a widow at your father's house, till Shelah
my son be grown; for he said, Lest perhaps he die
also, as his brothers did. And Tamar went and lived
in her father's house. (Gen. 38:11)*

¹⁰³ Claus Westermann. Genesis 37-50: A Commentary (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press. 1986), p. 56.

¹⁰⁴ Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, p. 7

But after years of patient waiting, when Tamar finally realizes she has been wronged, she quickly goes into action. This is shown, textually, by a flurry of active verbs:

וְתָסַר בְּגָדֵי אִלְמָנוּתָהּ מֵעָלֶיהָ וְתָכַסּ בְּצִיעֶיהָ וְתַתְעֲלָף וְתָשָׁב
בְּפֶתַח עֵינָיִם

And she took off her widow's garments, and covered herself with a veil, and wrapped herself, and sat in an open place. (Gen.38:14)

She also actively and quickly reverts to her former role as a widow when the task is done:

וְתָקַם וְתָלַךְ וְתָסַר צִיעֶיהָ מֵעָלֶיהָ וְתָלַבֵּשׁ בְּגָדֵי אִלְמָנוּתָהּ

And she arose, and went away, and took off her veil, and put on the garments of her widowhood. (Gen. 38:19)

Alter shows Tamar to be a woman who initially feels she has no control over her situation, explained by the lack of action on her part, during the first part of the story. Alter helps us to see how Tamar becomes transformed into a woman of action, when she realizes that she can no longer allow her life to remain in Judah's hands. Tamar realizes that she is faced with a situation that is morally wrong. She does what is necessary, to do what is right, at the risk of herself appearing to be morally wrong.

CHAPTER 6: LESSER KNOWN WOMEN**LOT'S DAUGHTERS - בנות-לוט**

(Gen. 19:8, 15-16, 30-38)

Lot's daughters are given only a few verses in the Bible, but their actions have an impact on biblical history. They become the mothers of two nations, the Ammonites and the Moabites - nations that are continually coming in contact with the Israelites. Under normal circumstances, what they did would be considered very immoral and extremely improper. They get their father intoxicated, and then lie with him so as to become pregnant. Edith Deen says they are guilty of incest, but does not stop there. She sees the entire family as being corrupt. "The evil influence in Lot's family came because he had selfishly chosen the more fertile valleys from his uncle Abraham. In those valleys dwelt people of low character, who set a bad example for the family. Lot's wife was a native of this area and her evil influence carried on into their daughters."¹⁰⁵

Even the Bible does not look favorably on their union with their father. Unlike Tamar, whose offspring becomes kings and prophets, Lot's daughters produce sons who later head nations that oppose Israel. The older daughter's son, from this sexual encounter, is the father of the Moabites, and the younger daughter's son, is the father of the Ammonites (Gen. 19:37).

The relationship between the Moabites and Ammonites, and the Israelites throughout the Bible, is not a good one. In

¹⁰⁵ Deen, p. 310.

Numbers Chapter 22-24 the King of Moab, Balak, fearful of the Israelites, plots to have them cursed:

וַיִּגַּד מוֹאָב מִפְּנֵי הָעָם מְאֹד כִּי רַב־הוּא וַיִּקְץ מוֹאָב מִפְּנֵי
בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

*And Moab was angry because the people were many;
and Moab was fearful because of the people of
Israel. (Num. 22:3)*

וַיִּשְׁלַח מְלָאכִים אֶל־בִּלְעָם בֶּן־בְּעוֹר פֶּתוּרָה אֲשֶׁר עַל־הַנָּהָר
אֶרֶץ בְּנֵי־עַמּוֹ לִקְרֹא־לּוֹ לֵאמֹר הִנֵּה עָם יֵצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם הִנֵּה
כִּסָּה אֶת־עֵין הָאָרֶץ וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב מִמְּלִי: וְעַתָּה לְכֶ־נָּא אָרְחֵ־לִי
אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי־עֲצוּם הוּא מִמֶּנִּי אוּלַי אוּכַל נִכְחֵ־בּוּ וְאֶגְרָשְׁנִי
מִן־הָאָרֶץ

*He sent messengers to Balaam, the son of Beor, to
Pethor, which is by the river of the land of the
sons of his people, to call him, saying, Behold,
there is a people that come out from Egypt; behold,
they cover the face of the earth, and they are
dwelling opposite me;*

*So now, go please, curse this people for me; for
they are too mighty for me; perhaps I can have us
defeat them, and I will be able to drive them out
of the land; (Num. 22:5-6)*

In Chapter 25, the Moabite women are described as luring the Israelites away from God, causing God's wrath to be directed against them:

וַיָּשָׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּשָׁטִים וַיַּחַל הָעָם לְזִנוּת אֶל־בָּנוֹת מוֹאָב: וַתִּקְרָאן
לָעָם לְזִכְחֵי אֱלֹהֵיהֶן וַיֹּאכַל הָעָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ לֵאלֹהֵיהֶן: וַיַּעֲמֵד
יִשְׂרָאֵל לְבַעַל פְּעוֹר וַיַּסְרֵ־אֶף יְהוָה בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל:

And Israel stayed in Shittim, and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moab.

And they called the people to the sacrifices of their gods; and the people ate, and bowed down to their gods.

And Israel attached itself to Baal-Peor; and the anger of God rose against Israel. (Num. 25:1-3)

Many battles between the two nations and the Israelites are described throughout the Bible. The Ammonites in particular, were often declaring war on the Israelites:

וַיַּעֲבְרוּ בְנֵי-עַמּוֹן אֶת-חֵירָדֵן לְחַלְחֵם גַּם-בִּיהוּדָה וּבְבִנְיָמִן

וּבְבֵית אֶפְרַיִם וְתַצֵּר לְיִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֵד

And the Ammonites passed over the Jordan to fight against Judah, Benjamin, and the house of Ephraim also; so that Israel was very distressed. (Judges 10:9)

וַיְהִי מִיָּמִים וַיִּלָּחֲמוּ בְנֵי-עַמּוֹן עִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל

And it came to pass, that the Ammonites fought a war with Israel. (Judges 11:4)

Sometimes the Ammonites and the Moabites join together to fight against the Israelites. (See I Kings 11:1, II Kings 24:2 and II Chronicles 20:1,10,23)

The Prophets also reflect hostile feelings towards the Ammonites and Moabites:

בֶּן-אָדָם שֵׁים פָּנֶיךָ אֶל-בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן וְהִנָּבֵא עֲלֵיהֶם

Son of man, set your face against the Ammonites, and prophesy against them; (Ezek. 25:2)

לְכֹן חַי־אֲנִי נֹאם יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי מוֹאָב
כְּסֹדֶם תִּהְיֶה וּבְנֵי צִמּוֹן כְּצִמְרָה מִמֶּשֶׁק חֲרוּל וּמִכְרֵה־מֶלֶח
וּשְׁמֶמָה עַד־עוֹלָם שְׁאֲרִית צְמִי יִבְזֹם וְיִתֵּר גּוֹי יִנְחָלוּם.

Therefore as I live, says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Because Moab will be like Sodom, and the Ammonites like Gomorrah, possessing nettle, and salt pits, and a desolation for ever; the remnant of my people shall plunder them, and the survivors of my people shall possess them. (Zephaniah 2:9)

Here we are reminded of the connection between these two nations and Sodom and Gomorrah.

Relations between these two nations and Israel were so poor that Moabites and Ammonites were prohibited from becoming part of the Israelite nation:

לֹא־יָבֹא צִמּוֹנִי וּמוֹאָבִי בִקְהֵל יְהוָה גַּם דּוֹר עֲשִׂירִי
לֹא־יָבֹא לָהֶם בִּקְהֵל יְהוָה עַד־עוֹלָם. עַל־דִּבְרֵי אֲשֶׁר לֹא־קִדְּמוּ
אֶתְכֶם בְּלֶחֶם וּבִמִּים בְּדֶרֶךְ בְּצִאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם וְאֲשֶׁר שָׂכַר עָלֶיךָ
אֶת־בָּלְעָם בֶּן־בְּעוֹר מִפְּתוֹר אֲרָם נִהְרִים לְקַלְלָךְ.

An Ammonite or Moabite shall not come into the congregation of the Lord; Even to the tenth generation shall they not come into the congregation of the Lord forever;

Because they met you not with bread and with water on the way, when you came out of Egypt; and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor of Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. (Deut. 23:4-5, see also Nehemiah 13:1-2)

Sarna feels that this proscription is based upon Israel's wilderness experience and not because of the origin of their ancestors.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, p. 139.

Even though there are numerous problems between the nations, this decree is not upheld. Ultimately there are important marriages that occur between Moabites and Israelites and they are welcomed into Israelite society. Ruth, a Moabitess (Ruth 1:4) embraces the Israelite culture, marries Boaz, and gives birth to Obed, King David's grandfather (Ruth 4:13,16-17). Also, Naamah, the mother of King Rehoboam, was an Ammonitess (I Kings 14:31).

Despite the constant battles between these two nations and Israel, and despite the fact that the Israelites often abandon their own God to worship Kemosh -the god of the Moabites, and Milcom - the god of the Ammonites (Judges 12:3), we see that the God of Israel protects these two nations to a certain extent:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלֵי אֶלְיָתָצַר אֶת־מוֹאָב וְאֶל־תַּתָּנֹר בָּם מִלְחָמָה
כִּי לֹא־אֶתֵּן לָהֶם מֵאֶרֶצוֹ יְרֵשָׁה כִּי לִבְנֵי־לוֹט נָתַתִּי אֶת־עַר יְרֵשָׁהּ׃

And the Lord said to me, Don't distress the Moabites, and don't engage them in battle; because I will not give you from their land to inherit; because I have given Ar to the sons of Lot as an inheritance. (Deut. 2:9)

וְקִרְבַּתְּ מוֹל בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן אֶל־תַּצַּרֶם וְאֶל־תַּתָּנֹר בָּם כִּי
לֹא־אֶתֵּן מֵאֶרֶץ בְּנֵי־עַמּוֹן לָהֶם יְרֵשָׁה כִּי לִבְנֵי־לוֹט נָתַתִּיהֶם יְרֵשָׁה׃

And when you come near opposite the sons of Ammon, Don't harass them, nor engage them; for I will not give you from the land of the sons of Ammon to inherit; because I have given it to the sons of Lot as an inheritance. (Deut. 2:19)

Despite their origins, Lot's grandchildren are still part of Abraham's family and deserve to inherit land. And perhaps, the actions of Lot's daughters were not as terribly shocking and horrible as they appear. If we read the text carefully, we can find an explanation - even a noble and honorable reason - for their actions. Lot's daughters obviously realize that what they are planning is wrong because they feel it necessary to get their father intoxicated in order to proceed. Yet the text does hint at a righteous motivation for their acts:

וַתֹּאמֶר הַבְּכִירָה אֶל־הַצְעִירָה אָבִינוּ זָקֵן וְאִישׁ אֵין
בָּאָרֶץ לְבוֹא עָלֵינוּ כְּדָרֵךְ כָּל־הָאָרֶץ:

And the firstborn said to the younger, Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us as the way of all the earth; (Gen. 19:31)

After witnessing the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot and his daughters first go to Zoar, and then leave Zoar in fear. Lot's daughters have not only witnessed the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, but perhaps also the destruction of the city they fled to. (Later Jewish sources explain that Zoar was one of five cities that were destroyed.¹⁰⁷) The daughters think that they and their father are the only human beings left on earth. They fear that if they do not bear children through their father, then human beings will eventually disappear completely from the earth.

Early commentary on this biblical story also see it from

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

this point of view. The Midrash says:

ותאמר הבכירה אל הצעירה אבינו זקן וגו' שהיו סבורות
שנתכלה העולם כדור המבול

AND THE OLDER SAID TO THE YOUNGER OUR FATHER IS OLD
(Gen. 19:31) *They thought that the whole world was
destroyed, as in the generation of the Flood. (Gen.
Rabbah LI:8)*

Rashi brings in this Midrash in his explanation of the daughter's actions. He supplements the Midrash by adding an explanation for the urgency of the task. The older daughter mentions that "our father is old" in her talk to the younger daughter. According to Rashi, the older daughter is also thinking:

אבינו זקן. ואם לא עכשיו אימתי, שמה ימות או יפסוק
מלכוליד:

*If not now, when? Perhaps he will die or will stop
being able to father children.¹⁰⁸*

The text gives us further proof that the daughters were justified in their actions. The dialogue hints at the need for the daughters to act as they did, by linking this text with the story of Noah and the flood. Lot's daughters felt that their entire world had been destroyed as it had been with the flood. The oldest daughter says:

¹⁰⁸ Rashi, Gen. 38:31

לֵךְ נִשְׁקָה אֶת־אֲבִינוּ יִין וְנִשְׁכְּכָה עִמּוֹ וְנַחֲיָה מֵאֲבִינוּ וְרָע:

Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may keep our father's seed alive. (Gen. 19:32)

In the story of Noah God tells Noah to take on the ark:

גַּם מֵעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם שְׁבָעָה שְׁבָעָה זָכָר וְנִקְבָּה לַחַיִּית וְרָע
עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ:

Of birds also of the air by seven pairs, the male and the female; to keep seed alive upon the face of all the earth. (Gen. 7:3)

Both verses use the same expression - "to keep seed alive."

Just as the people in Sodom and Gomorrah were corrupt and needed to be destroyed, so too were the people living in Noah's time. Just as God made arrangements to keep perpetuating life after the destruction of the flood, so too did Lot's daughters plan to repopulate the earth after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Sometimes the Midrash had differing opinions as to how righteous Lot's daughters really were:

רבי חונא אמר מתחלת עיבורו של מואב לא היה לשם זנות
אלא לשיש איר לוי אם תחלתו של מואב לשם זנות גם סופו היה
לשם זנות איר לוי אם תחלתו של מואב לשם זנות גם סופו היה
לשם זנות ואם מתחלת עיבורו לשם שמים אף סופו לשיש

R. Hanina b. Papa said: From the beginning, the conception of Moab was not because of immorality

(harlotry) but from a pure motive (in the name of the Heavens)...;

R. Simon said: If the first conception of Moab was because of immorality (harlotry), also the last actions too were for the same reason...

R. Levi said: If the first conception of Moab was because of immorality (harlotry), also the last actions too were for the same reason. But if his first conception was from a pure motive, so too were his last acts...(Gen. Rabbah LI:10)

They argue whether or not Lot's daughters acted "in the name of the heavens" or out of immorality. That argument is then used to understand the merits of Moab.

The Rabbis of the Talmud recognize the sanctity within the daughters' deed of incest:

אמר רבה בר חנה אמר רבי יוחנן מאי דכתיב: כי
ישרים דרכי ה' וצדיקים ילכו בהם... משל ללוח ושת
בנותיו הן שנתכוונו לשם מצוה צדיקים ילכו בהם היא
שנתכוון לשם עבירה ופושעים יכשלו בהם

Rabbah b. Bar Hana said in the name of R. Johanan: What is meant by the biblical text: for the ways of the Lord are right, and the just walk in them; but the transgressors shall stumble in them. (Hos. 14:10) ...The parable applies to Lot and his daughters. For them (the daughters), who intended to perform a mitzvah, this applies: and the just walk in them. He (Lot), who intended to commit a sin, this applies: the transgressors shall stumble in them. (Hor. 10b)

Even though what the daughters did was not proper, the Rabbis feel that the ends justified the means.

The Talmud supports the acts of Lot's daughters by

acknowledging the story as one that should "be read and translated in public" (Meg. 251-b). Even though you might think that what the daughters did was unacceptable, and should not be read, the Rabbis acknowledge the righteousness of the daughters and say the story should be read AND translated so that everyone understands it.

Ironically, the Rabbis don't give as much credit to the women of their own time:

ר' תנחומא בר רבי חייא משם ר' הושעיא תורגמנא
 אין כל שבת ושבת שאין קורין בה מאי טעמיה (משלי יח)
 פרשתו של לוט בכל תושיה יתגלע איר אחא יתגלעו אין
 כתיב כאן אלא יתגלע האנשים נתרחקו והנשים נתקרבו:

R. Tanhum b. R. Hiyya said in the name of R. Hoshaya, his interpreter: Not a Sabbath passes without this chapter on Lot being read. What is the reason? Because it is written, At every [congregation of] wisdom he is revealed-or, repelled (Prov. 18:1). R. Aha commented: It is not written, ' They are repelled,' but ' He is repelled ': men were repelled [by this reading], but women were attracted. (Gen. Rabbah LI:9)

The Rabbis show their hesitancy in supporting its reading, even though they acknowledge that the story should be read so people understand it. This Talmudic passage implies that the men in the community are more righteous because they distance themselves from such a lustful story, even though they are allowed to hear it. The women, on the other hand, are irresistably drawn to the details of illicit sex.

Rashi also expressed mixed opinions about Lot's

daughter's. He began by being sympathetic to their situation, but also offered harsh criticism of the older sister:

ותשכב את אביה, וצלעירה כחיצ ותשכב עמו,
לעירה לפי שלא פתחה בזנות, חלל
לחוחה למדחה, חיסך עליה הכחוז ולא פירש גנותה,
אלל זכירה שפתחה בזנות, פרסמה הכחוז במפורש.

AND SHE LAY WITH HER FATHER - For the younger daughter it is written, "And she lay with him" (Gen. 19:35), (and not "And she lay with her father"). (Gen. 19:33 says, "and the firstborn went in, and lay with her father".)

This is because the younger daughter did not begin the harlotry, her (older) sister taught it to her. Therefore the text does not expound on her disgrace. But the daughter that did begin the harlotry, the text explains it in detail.¹⁰⁹

Rashi continued by praising the younger daughter over the older daughter. As a proof text he uses the naming of their children in verses 37-38:

ותלד הבכירה בן ותקרא שמו מואב הוא אבי־מואב עד־היום
והצעירה גם־היא ילדה בן ותקרא שמו בן־עמי הוא
אבי בני־עמון עד־היום.

And the firstborn bore a son, and called his name Moab; the same is the father of the Moabites to this day.

And the younger, she also bore a son, and called

¹⁰⁹ Rashi, Gen. 19:33

his name Benammi; the same is the father of the Ammonites to this day. (Gen. 19:37-38)

In his commentary, Rashi called on the Midrash to substantiate his argument:

מואב. זו שלא היטה לנועה פירשה שמאזניה הוא,
אבל לעירק קרחתו בלשון נקיה, וקבלה שכר צימי
משה, שנאמר בצני עמון אל חתגר צם (דברים ב. יט)
כלל, ובמואב לא הזכיר אלא שלא ילחמו צם, אבל
לנערן החיר לו:

The one who wasn't modest said that her son was born "from my father". (The Hebrew for Moab - מואב, is a play on the word 'from my father' - מאב.) But the younger daughter called her son with clean (innocent) language so she received a reward in the time of Moses. As it is written: And when you come near opposite the sons of Ammon, harass them not¹¹⁰, nor contend with them; for I will not give you of the land of the sons of Ammon any possession; because I have given it to the sons of Lot for a possession. (Deut. 2:19).

And the Lord said to me, Distress not the Moabites, neither contend with them in battle; for I will not give you of their land for a possession; because I have given Ar to the sons of Lot for a possession. (Deut. 2:9)¹¹¹

Radak disagreed with Rashi and other commentators who justified why Lot's daughters felt they needed to produce children. He did not find any reason to exonerate them. According to his commentary, the daughters were acting

¹¹⁰ 'Harass them not' is added to God's directions regarding the Ammonites, the younger daughter's offspring, but is not mentioned for the Moabite, the older daughter's offspring.

¹¹¹ Rashi, Gen. 19:37

strictly for selfish reasons:

ואיש אין בארץ לבוא עלינו. [רוב המפרשים פירשו] כי חשבו
 כי כל הארץ כסדום ועמורה שלא נשאר איש ואישה. וזה
 רחוק שהרייצאו הם מצוער שלא נהפכה וכן יש להם לחשוב כי
 שאר הארץ גם כן לא נהפכה. גם שמעו מאביהן כי סדום
 ובנותיה מרעת יושביה נהפכה. וטוב הוא מה ששמעתי בשם
 ר' יוסף קרא כי אמרה הבכירה לא נמצא בארץ שירצה לקחת
 אותנו לנשים כי יאמרו מאנשי ההפכה אלו. אין ראוי להתחבר
 עמם.

THERE IS NO MAN IN THE LAND TO COME TO US: (*Many say*), 'because they thought that the entire land was like Sodom and Gomorrah and that no man or woman remained'. This is far (from the truth) because they went out from Zoar which was not destroyed so they had to know that a place remained that was not destroyed. They also heard from their father that Sodom and the daughters of the evil inhabitants were destroyed. I also heard something good in the name of R. Yosef Kara, that the older daughter said, 'We will not find anyone in the land who will want to marry us because they will say that we are from the people who were destroyed', so they would not desire to join with them.¹¹²

Hertz agrees with Radak and is not willing to make up excuses for Lot's daughters. However, he does not agree with the commentators who state that Lot's daughters believed that the destruction had been universal, and therefore felt it was their responsibility to repopulate the world. According to Hertz, "This explanation is untenable, seeing they had just left Zoar. (The text does not say that Zoar was destroyed

¹¹² Torat Chayim. Radak, Gen. 19:31

even though this is an interpretation that has been passed down.) Hertz says their conduct does not admit of any extenuation; they were true children of Sodom."¹¹³

Speiser does not agree. He defends Lot's daughters by saying they had every reason to believe that they were the last people on earth. "From the recesses of their cave somewhere up the side of a canyon formed by the earth's deepest rift, they could see no proof to the contrary."¹¹⁴ Speiser feels that Lot's daughters deserve praise, rather than blame, because they were resolute enough to adopt the only means they knew to perpetuate the future of the race. In addition, they made sure that their father was not a conscious party to their deeds.

Savina Teubal also justifies the actions of Lot's daughters, but from a very different point of view. Teubal explains that many women in the Bible are misunderstood by later generations because of a lack of understanding of the society in which these women lived. According to Teubal, Genesis is the story of a society that was slowly changing from a matriarchal to a patriarchal society. "The matriarchs symbolize the pre-history of the Hebrews, and the patriarchs, the beginnings of Israelite history."¹¹⁵

Teubal takes issue with the label "incest" often used to describe this story. Today, some modern readers consider the relationship between Lot and his daughters to be incestuous.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Hertz, p. 69.

¹¹⁴ Speiser, p. 145.

¹¹⁵ Teubal, p. 3.

¹¹⁶ Westermann, p. 314.

But, in ancient societies, incest was defined differently than it is today. In addition to many biblical stories in which marriages between close relatives are considered acceptable, ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian history also have records of such marriages. According to Teubal, very early biblical society was based on a matriarchal system. Therefore "kinship was acknowledged only when group members could claim to belong to the same mother's bloodline."¹¹⁷ If two people were not of the same maternal bloodline, they were not considered family, and therefore could marry.¹¹⁸ Sexual relations between such people was not considered incestuous. (The laws of prohibition against incest in Lev. 18:6-16 occurred much later, when the matriarchal society was no longer in effect and patriarchal norms took over.) In this matriarchal system, Lot was a member of his mother's line, and his daughters were members of their mother's line (Lot's wife). Therefore, according to the matriarchal system described by Teubal, no incest occurred.

Another hint that the remnants of matriarchy were still strong is that Lot's daughters were the ones to name their children - signs of a matriarchal society, according to Teubal. Other examples of mothers who named their children are: Eve who named Cain - Gen. 4:1, and Leah and Rachel who name all their sons and their maidservants sons. In a patriarchal society, the fathers name the children. Some biblical fathers who name their children are: Abraham who

¹¹⁷ Teubal, p. 59.

¹¹⁸ The classic example of this is Sarah and Abraham. Twice Abraham tells Sarah to reveal that she is his sister. They had the same father but probably had different mothers. According to a matriarchal system then, their marriage would not be considered incestuous.

named Isaac according to God's instructions - Gen. 21:3, Isaac who named Jacob - Gen. 25:26 and Judah who named Perez and Zerah. It is interesting to note that both Isaac and Rebekah named Esau - Gen. 25:25, and Benjamin was renamed by his father after Rachel died- Gen. 35:18.

It is obvious that naming was a source of power in ancient societies - only those with power named the new child. As in the case of Leah and Rachel, the maidservants were not allowed to name their children. In Egypt, when the Israelites were slaves, Moses was not named by his parents, but by Pharoah's daughter. In instances where women are involved in naming their children, we can assume that there is at least some vestige of matriarchy remaining which allows them that privilege.

Lot's daughters can be seen as risk-takers for righteousness. Knowing that what they were about to do was improper, they felt that the importance of preserving human kind outweighed the risk of getting their father drunk and getting pregnant from him. They paid the consequence - their sons were always at war with the Israelite people, and in later generations, Lot's daughters were harshly criticized for their actions.

DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD - בנות צלפחד

מחלה ונצה חגלה מלכה ותירצה

(Numbers 26:33, 27:1-8, 36:1-12, Joshua 17:3-6)

It was not only the women of Genesis who had to take risks to achieve righteous goals. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah - the daughters of Zelophehad - were women who took great risk to do what was right. They are from the book of Numbers, and a different part of biblical history. Joseph had brought the descendants of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs down to Egypt. Moses had brought them out to wander in the wilderness for 40 years before coming to the promised land. The daughters of Zelophehad are part of the story of the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt.

We know that Zelophehad's daughters were very important because they were given names in the text. (Many biblical women remain unnamed - such as Lot's daughters¹¹⁹). Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah played a crucial role in the development of inheritance laws for women¹²⁰, which still has implications in Jewish law to this day.

In Numbers Chapter 26, Moses was told by God to apportion shares of the promised land to the Israelites, according to ancestral tribes and population. The land was to be apportioned among those able to go to war:

¹¹⁹ Many of these unnamed women play very significant roles in the biblical stories. By choosing to leave them unnamed, however, the biblical text differentiates them from named people.

¹²⁰ Several Talmudic passages use the story of the daughters of Zelophehad as the basis for inheritance laws for women. See Baba Batra 110a, 116b, 118a, 118b, 119a, 120a, 122b.

שאו את־ראש | כל־עדת בני־ישראל מִבֶּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמַעְלָה
לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם כָּל־יָצָא צָבָא בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל.

Take a head count of the entire community of Israel, from the age 20 and older, according to their father's house, each person that can be part of the army of Israel. (Num. 26:2)

Zelophehad's daughters realized that there were no eligible men in their family who fell into this category, they would not be given any land in accordance with Moses' rules. They joined together and approached Moses and Elazar and the entire community to explain their predicament:

אֲבִינוּ מָת בַּמִּדְבָּר וְהוּא לֹא־הָיָה בְּתוֹךְ הָעֵדָה הַנּוֹעֲדִים
עַל־יְחֹנָה בְּעֵצַת־קִרְחַ כִּי־בִחָטְאוֹ מָת וּבָנִים לֹא־הָיוּ לוֹ.
לָמָּה יִגְרַע שֵׁם־אֲבִינוּ מִתּוֹךְ מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ כִּי אֵין לוֹ בֶּן תְּנַחֲלֵנוּ
אֲחֹה בְּתוֹךְ אֲחֵי אֲבִינוּ.

Our father died in the wilderness and he was not among the community who joined together against God, the community of Korah. He died from his own sin and he had no sons. Why should our father's name be removed from among his family just because he didn't have a son. Give us property among our father's brothers. (Num. 27:3-4)

Approaching Moses was done with great risk. It may not be readily apparent, to today's reader, that what these women did was extremely brave and potentially dangerous. In today's modern world, their actions would seem very logical and understandable. Yet, what they did made them vulnerable on two levels. The first is obvious - in Patriarchal biblical society, women did not have a say in these matters. Women

just accepted the laws that men decreed. Would Moses take their request seriously? Would the community ostracize them for speaking out?

The second is not so obvious. It can only be appreciated by seeing the story in perspective. The Israelites had a difficult time as they wandered in the desert. They frequently complained to Moses about their situation. At first, God was understanding. When the Israelites complained about not having enough food, God sent them quail and bread (Ex. 16:12). And when they complained to Moses about not having enough water to drink, God sent them water (Ex. 17:5-6). God eventually lost patience though, with the building of the Golden Calf. God's mercy had run out. God said to Moses:

וְעַתָּה הִנֵּיחָה לִי וַיַּחֲרִאֲפִי בָהֶם וְאֶכְלֶם

And now, leave me alone, that my anger will burn against them, and I will consume them. (Ex. 32:10)

God was not happy when people complained about God and/or Moses and often punished those who challenged their authority:

וַיִּגַּף יְהוָה אֶת־הָעָם עַל אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ אֶת־הָעֵגֶל

And God sent a plague on the people because of what they did with the calf. (Ex. 32:35)

God continually reminded the Israelites that they must

follow the laws that God had set down for them, or else:

וְאִם־לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ לִי וְלֹא תַעֲשׂוּ אֶת כָּל־הַמִּצְוֹת הָאֵלֶּה: וְאִם־בִּקְדָּתִי
תִּמְאָסוּ וְאִם אֶת־מִשְׁפָּטִי תִגְעַל נַפְשְׁכֶם לְבִלְתִּי עֲשׂוֹת אֶת־כָּל־מִצְוֹתִי
לְהַפְרֹכֶם אֶת־בְּרִיתִי: אֲפִי־אֲנִי אַעֲשֶׂה־זֹאת לָכֶם וְהִפְקַדְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם
בַּהֲלָה אֶת־הַשְׁחָפֶת וְאֶת־הַקְדַּחַת מְכַלּוֹת עֵינַיִם וּמְדִיבַת נֶפֶשׁ
וְזָרְעֶתֶם לָרִיק וְרָעַכֶם וְאָכְלֻהוּ אֹיְבֵיכֶם:

And if you don't listen to me and don't do all these commandments, and if you reject my laws and if you cast away my judgments without doing all my commandments to break my covenant, then this is what I will do to you. I will bring upon you disease, consumption and fever that destroys the eyes and causes the breath to pine. Your seed will be empty, your enemies will eat it. (Lev. 26:14-16)

The God of the Israelites was a God who was constantly trying to persuade the people to obey the commandments and rules that God had laid out for them. If they did not obey, punishment often followed.

Sometimes though, the reasons for God's punishment were not completely clear and seemed undeserving:

וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי־אַהֲרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אֵשׁ מִחֹתָתוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ וַיִּשִּׂמוּ
עָלֶיהָ קֹטֶרֶת וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם:
וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמָתוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה:

And the sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire pan, and they put fire in them, and put incense on it and offered a foreign fire before God which God had not commanded them to do. And fire came out from before God and consumed them and they died before God. (Lev. 10:1-2)

It seems that Nadav and Avihu were killed because what they did was not among the commandments that God had commanded. It was clear though, that God did punish when God felt the need to, and God's punishments were often very harsh.

Close relationships to important people did not seem to protect protesters and complainers. Nadav and Avihu were Aaron's sons. Even Miriam, Moses sister, faced God's wrath just for speaking poorly about Moses and his wife:

וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמִשְׁחָה עַל־אֲדֹנָתָם הָאִשָּׁה הַכֻּשִׁית אֲשֶׁר לְמֹשֶׁה
כִּי־אִשָּׁה כֻּשִׁית לָקָח וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֲרַק אֲדֹנָיִם בְּמִשְׁחָה דִּבֶּר יְהוָה הֲלֹא
גַם־בָּנוּ דִּבֶּר וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה

Miriam and Aaron spoke about Moses concerning the Cushite woman that he married. They said, Does God only speak with Moses, doesn't God also speak with us? And God heard. (Num. 12:1-2)

Again, God became angry at those who challenged Moses' authority and sent punishment. Miriam was stricken with leprosy because she felt that both she and Aaron were just as worthy as Moses to be God's prophets:

וַיִּחַר־אַף יְהוָה בָּם וַיִּלֶּךְ וַתַּעֲנֶן סָר מֵעַל הָאֵהָל וַחֲנַח מִרְיָם
מִצִּרְעָתָה כַּשָּׁלֵג

God's anger burned with them and God left. And the cloud went from the tent and there was Miriam with leprosy like snow. (Num. 12:9-10)

Aaron escaped punishment this time. Perhaps, because he had already suffered greatly when his sons were killed. Perhaps, the death of his sons was punishment enough for Aaron's part

in slandering Moses.

Korah and his followers were the greatest challengers and threat to Moses authority. Korah felt that Moses had too much control over the people and roused 250 Israelites to rebel with him against Moses and Aaron's leadership:

וַיִּקְהֲלוּ עַל-מֹשֶׁה וְעַל-אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם רַב-לָכֶם כִּי כָל-הָעֵדָה
כָּלֵם קְדָשִׁים וּבְתוֹכָם יְהוָה וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל-יְהוָה:

They gathered against Moses and Aaron and said to them, You are too powerful, because the entire community is holy and God is among them too. Why do you raise yourselves up above God's community?
(Num. 16:3)

This was a tremendous and significant threat to Moses' authority. To deal with this threat, Moses created a contest to prove to the people who had the greater authority. Both groups were to prepare offerings to God and God would show who was more powerful by accepting that group's offering. As Korah gathered his community against Moses and Aaron to prepare their offerings, God became furious:

וַיִּדְבֹר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל-אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר
הִבְדְּלוּ מִמִּדּוּד הָעֵדָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶכְלָה אֹתָם כְּרִגְעַ:

God spoke to Moses and Aaron saying, Separate yourselves from amongst this community so that I can destroy them in an instant. (Num. 16:20-21)

Moses pleaded with God not to destroy everyone. God agreed but took extremely harsh action against Korah and his people:

וּתִפְתַּח הָאָרֶץ אֶת־פִּיהָ וּתְבַלַּע אֹתָם וְאֶת־בֵּיתֵיהֶם וְאֶת כָּל־הָאָדָם
 אֲשֶׁר לְקֶרֶחַ וְאֶת כָּל־הָרֶכֶשׁ וַיֵּרְדּוּ הֵם וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם חַיִּים
 שָׁאֵלָה וְתָכַם עֲלֵיהֶם הָאָרֶץ וַיֵּאָבְדוּ מִתּוֹךְ הַקָּהָל:

The ground opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households and all their property, all the people who were with Korah. They, and all they had, went down alive to Sheol. The earth covered over them and they were lost from among the community. (Num. 32-33)

This did not stop the people from complaining. They continued to criticize Moses, and God continued to punish them. God sent a plague to them because they protested God's punishment of Korah and Korah's people. Fourteen thousand and seven hundred additional people died because of that plague. (Num. Chapter 17).

Now, with all this history behind them, it was the daughters of Zelophehad's turn to approach Moses. They knew that God had just commanded Moses regarding the law concerning the division of land among the sons of the clans. And they knew that God became very angry at people who did not follow God's laws. They were very aware of the recent Korah rebellion and its disastrous results. We are reminded of Korah twice in this passage - first, in the census that Moses took, and secondly, when the daughters of Zelophehad approach Moses.

Korah's descendants are included among all those listed in the census, and the story of Korah and the rebellion is retold:

וּבְנֵי אֱלִיאָב נִמְוָאֵל וְדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם הוֹאֲדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם קְרוּאֵי [קְרִיאֵי]
 הָעֵדָה אֲשֶׁר הָצוּ עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן בְּעִדְת־קֹרַח בְּהַצֹּתָם עַל־יְהוָה
 וַתִּפְתַּח הָאֲרֶץ אֶת־פִּיהָ וַתִּבְלַע אֹתָם וְאֶת־קֹרַח בְּמוֹת הָעֵדָה בְּאֹכַל
 הָאֵשׁ אֵת חֲמִשִּׁים וּמֵאֲתָיִם אִישׁ וַיְהִי לָנֶס׃

And the sons of Eliav; Nemuel, and Datan, and Aviram. They are the Datan and Aviram, who were called to the congregation, who strove against Moses and against Aaron along with Korah, when they strove against the Lord;

And the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed them and Korah, when that group died, when the fire devoured two hundred and fifty men; and they became a sign. (Num. 26:9-10)

This story of the rebels became a reminder to the people of what happens when someone challenges Moses', and therefore God's, authority.

Knowing these risks, the daughters still felt they should approach Moses about their family's right to the land that God promised their people, because based upon Moses' explanation of how the land was to be divided up, they realized that their family would be deprived of the land. They knew that the risks they were taking by approaching Moses could invoke the wrath of Moses and of God, yet they knew they had to do what was right.

The daughters of Zelophehad approached Moses cautiously and carefully. Here the reader and Moses are again reminded of the Korah rebellion. This time, the daughters used the story of Korah to emphasize that their situation was different from that of Korah. They explained to Moses that

their father had not been involved in the rebellion by Korah and his followers, and asked Moses to change God's rules regarding the inheritance of land:

אָבִינוּ מֵת בַּמִּדְבָּר וְהוּא לֹא־הָיָה בְּתוֹךְ הַעֲדָה הַנוֹעֲדִים
עַל־יְהוָה בַּעֲדַת־קֹרַח כִּי־בִחָטָאוֹ מֵת וּבָנִים לֹא־הָיוּ לוֹ
לָמָּה יִגְרַע שֵׁם־אָבִינוּ מִתּוֹךְ מִשְׁפַּחָתוֹ כִּי אֵין לוֹ בֶּן
תִּנְחַלְנוּ אֲחֻזָּה בְּתוֹךְ אֶחָי אָבִינוּ

Our father died in the wilderness and he was not among the group that joined together against God, with Korah's group. He died from his own sin. And he had no sons. Why should our father's name be removed from among the families just because he didn't have any sons. Give us part of land from our father's brothers. (Num. 27:3-4)

Instead of becoming angry and feeling threatened, Moses realized that the daughters' request was deserving of consideration. They and their descendants were worthy of the land that God promised to the people. Moses brought their case before God. God, also, did not get angry. Instead, God recognized their righteousness:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר כֵּן בְּנוֹת צִלְפֶּהֶד דִּבְרַת נְתָן תַּמָּן
לָהֶם אֲחֻזָּה נַחֲלָה בְּתוֹךְ אֶחָי אָבִיהֶם וְהַעֲבַרְתָּ אֶת־נַחֲלַת אָבִיהֶן
לָהֶן

And God spoke to Moses saying, The daughters of Zelophehad speak correctly. You should surely give them part of the inheritance from among their father's brothers. Pass on the inheritance of their father to them. (Num. 27:6-7)

The daughters were not only preserving their father's name. They were also establishing property rights for their father's generations to come. In the end, they not only survived the risk, but were acknowledged and rewarded for their righteousness.

Classical Interpretations of the Text

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah are looked upon rather favorably in Rabbinic tradition. The Rabbis praised the daughters of Zelophehad by finding opportunities to link other biblical texts to them in a positive way:

למה היו של ה' כנגד ה' נשים משבט מנשה שנטלו חלק בארץ
אלו בנות צלפחד חמש כמ"ד (במדבר כז) כן בנות צלפחד דוברים
נתון תתן להם אחוזת נחלה וגו' וכן היו חמש שנא' (שם) ואלה
שמות בנותיו מחלה נעה וחגלה ומלכה ותרצה וכן יעקב הזכיר
בברכת יוסף שנא' (בראשית מט) בנות צעדה עלי שור אלו בנות
צלפחד שנטלו חלק בארץ

AND FOR HIS PEACE OFFERING: TWO OXEN, FIVE RAMS,
FIVE HE-GOATS, AND FIVE YEARLING LAMBS (NUM. 7:17)
Why were there five of each type? In reference to the five women from the tribe of Manasseh who received a share in the land. They were the five daughters of Zelophehad; as you read, And God spoke to Moses saying, The daughters of Zelophehad speak correctly. You should surely give them part of the inheritance from among their father's brothers. (Num. 27:7). And there were five of them; as it says, And these are the names of his daughters: Mahlah, Noah and Hoglah, and Milcah, and Tirzah (ibid). Jacob also reminded us of them in Joseph's blessing; as it says, Daughters have

stepped forward by the wall (Gen. 49:, 22) and this refers to the daughters of Zelophehad who received a share in the land. (Num. Rabbah XIV:7)

To explain the significance of why five animals were needed for offerings to God, the Rabbis suggest that this number was used in honor of the five daughters of Zelophehad. The Rabbis also remind us that these daughters are important enough to be forementioned in Jacob's blessing to Joseph before he dies. The 'daughters who have stepped to the wall' (Gen. 49:22), are the daughters of Zelophehad, who are from the tribe of Menasseh, one of Jacob's sons.

Through the story of the daughters of Zelophehad, the Rabbis take the opportunity to praise other Israelite women in the Bible. The Rabbis acknowledge that women were often there to do what was right before God, even when the men were not:

ותקרבנה בנות צלפחד. אותו הדור היו הנשים גודרות מה
שאנשים פורצים שכן את מוצא שאמר להן אהרן (שמות לב)
פרקו נזמי הזהב אשר באנוי נשיכם ולא רצו הנשים ומיחו
כבעליהן שנאמר ויתפרקו כל העם את נזמי הזהב וגוי והנשים
לא נשתתפו עמהן במעשה העגל וכן במרגלים שהוציאו דבה
(במד' יד) וישובו וילינו עליו את כל העדה ועליהם נגזרה
גזירה שאמרו לא נוכל לעלות אבל הנשים לא היו עמהם בעצה
שכתוב למעלה מן הפרשה (שם כו) כי אמר ה' לחם מות ימותו
במדבר ולא נותר מהם איש כי אם כלב בן יפונה איש
ולא זו סמוך אשה על מה שלא רצו ליכנס לארץ אבל

הנשים קרבו לבקש נחלה בארץ לכך נכתבה פרשה
למיתת דור המדבר שממש פרצו האנשים וגדרו הנשים.

THEN DREW NEAR THE DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD (Num. 27:1). In that same generation the women built the fences¹²¹ which the men broke down. So you find that Aaron said to them: Break off the golden rings, which are in the ears of your wives (Ex. 32:2), but the women did not want to and opposed their husbands; as it is said, And all the people broke off the golden rings which were in their ears (Ex. 32:3), the women did not participate with them in making the Calf. It was the same with the spies, who brought out an evil report: And the men... when they returned, made all the congregation to murmur against him (Num. 14:36), and against this congregation the decree was issued, because they had said: We are not able to go up (Num. 13:31). But the women were not with them in their counsel, as it is written in an earlier section, For the Lord had said of them: They shall surely die in the wilderness. And there was not left a man of them, except for Caleb the son of Jephunneh (ibid. 26:65). The text says 'a man' but not 'a woman'. This was because the men did not want to enter the Land. The women, however, drew near to ask for an inheritance in the Land. Consequently the present section was written down next to that dealing with the death of the generation of the wilderness, for it was there that the men broke down the fences and the women built them up. (Midrash Rabbah - Numb.XXI:10)

Just as the women at Sinai refused to follow the men into doing what was wrong, the women in the wilderness stood their ground to maintain righteousness.

The Midrash continues, extolling the virtues of the daughters of Zelophehad:

יצאו ממנו נשים חכמות וצדקניות מה חכמתן שלפי שעה דברו
שהיה משה עוסק בפרשת נחלות לאלה תחלק הארץ אמרו לו

¹²¹ Soncino says this is in the moral sense. (Judaic Classic Library. Midrash Rabbah.)

אם כבן אנו נירש כבן ואם לאו תתיכם אמנו מיד ויקרב משה
את משפטן לפני ה' צדקניות היו שלא נישאו אלא להגון להם

Wise and righteous women came from him. How were they wise? They spoke at the right moment, for Moses was busy with the subject of portioning the inheritances, saying: Unto these the land shall be divided (Num. 26:53). They said to him: 'If we have the status of a son let us inherit like a son; if not, let our mother perform the levirate marriage immediately.' MOSES BROUGHT THEIR CAUSE BEFORE THE LORD (27:5). They were righteous inasmuch as they married none but such as were worthy of them.

The Rabbis also explain that God knows that the daughters of Zelophehad were wise - even wiser than Moses:

משה אמר הדבר אשר יקשה מכם וגו' באו בנות צלפחד והפליא
ממנו ויקרב משה את משפטן לפני ה' כן בנות צפחד דוברות
כך הוא הדין א"ל הקב"ה ולא אמרת הדבר אשר יקשה מכם
וגו' הדין שאין אתה יודע הנשים דנין אותו

Moses said, That which is too difficult for you, bring it to me, and I will hear it. (Deut. 1:17) The daughters of Zelophehad came and astounded Moses, so Moses brought their case before God who said, Yes, the daughters of Zelophehad speak correctly (Num. 27:7). This is the judgment by God. Didn't you (Moses) say, that which is too difficult, bring before me? The judgment that you do not know, the women will judge it. (Num. Rabbah XXI:12)

Another Midrash explains that Moses brought the case of the daughters of Zelophehad before God, to await the revelation of the Divine Will. This is what the daughters had wanted. By responding to their request, God was showing God's love for them as people. The Midrash explains that

while human beings may see a difference between men and women, in God's eye, they are equal. "God's love is not like the love of a mortal father; The latter prefers his sons to daughters, but He that created the world extends His love to all His children. His tender mercies are over all his works."¹²²

Rashi has a different take on love. He sees the love that the daughters of Zelophehad have for the land and compares it with their ancestor, Joseph. He links Joseph's love for the land with this and compares his righteousness with theirs. This explains why the genealogy of the daughters is traced back to Joseph in Num.27:1.

למשפחת מנשה בן יוסף. למכ נאמר, וכלל כזר נאמר בן
מנשה, אלא לך, לומר יוסף חזק את הארץ שנאמר והעליחם
את עצמותי וגו' (בר' ג כה). וצויותיו חזבו את הארץ, שנאמר
לנו חנה אחוזה, וללמדך שהיו כולם לדיקים, שכל מי שמעשיו
ומעשה אצותיו סתומים, ופרע לך הכחוש באחד מהם ליחסו
לשבת, הרי זה לדיק בן לדיק

THE FAMILY OF MENASSEH THE SON OF JOSEPH. (Num. 27:1) *Why is this said? Didn't it already say, Son of Menasheh? It says this to tell you that Joseph loved the land. Joseph made his sons of Israel swear, saying, "When God has noticed you, carry my bones up from here (to the promised land)". (Gen. 50:24) And his daughters loved the land. As it is written, Give us a share...(Num. 27:4). This is to teach you that all of them were righteous. Everyone whose deeds and the deeds of their fathers is just mentioned (without explanation), and the text details for you one of them (in another place)*

¹²² Midrash (source unknown) as quoted in Hertz, p. 691.

to sing their praise, then this is a righteous person, the child of a righteous person.

According to Rashi, Joseph loved the promised land so much, that he made his sons promise to bring his bones up from Egypt when they were allowed to return to Canaan. The daughters of Zelophehad maintained that love of the land from their ancestor, Joseph.

Rashi also credits the daughters for being wise. In their wisdom they challenge Moses with their knowledge of other laws of inheritance as well:

למה יגרע שם אבינו. אנו במקום בן עומדות. ואם אין הנקבות
חשובות זרע. תתיבם אִמֵּנו ליבם (בבא בתרא ק"ט).
... מגיד שחכמניות היו:

WHY SHOULD OUR FATHER'S NAME BE DONE AWAY WITH (Num.27:4). We are standing in a place of a son, and if females are not as important as male seed (with regard to inheritance), then let our mother marry her deceased husband's brother...It tells us that they were women of wisdom.

Rashi is talking about the laws of levirate marriage. The daughters know that this law would not apply here because it is only allowed when there are no children at all, sons or daughters. Rashi goes on to praise the daughters intelligence which enabled them to knowledgeablely argue the law with Moses.

Rashi points out that this story is written from the daughters' point of view, rather than from Moses' point of view, which is unusual. This is done in view of the fact that they merited such recognition because of their righteousness

and wisdom:

ראויה כיחזק פרשה זו להכתוב על ידי משה,
אלא שזכו בנות זלפחד ונכתבה על ידן (סנהדרין ח').

AND MOSES BROUGHT THEIR CAUSE (NUM. 27:5) *This portion was worthy of being written by Moses but because the daughters of Zelophehad merited it, it was written by them.* (San. 8a/BB 119a)

Commenting on Rashi, Silbermann adds, "Like most laws in the Torah, it should have been spoken to the people by Moses without his having waited until some incident made its promulgation necessary." Instead, he explains, it was given through the daughters of Zelophehad because it was their complaint which gave occasion for stating it.¹²³

Modern Commentary

The story of the daughters of Zelophehad is different from the stories about the other women mentioned in earlier chapters. The actions of the other women could be viewed as immoral or unethical. Therefore, one can find commentary which focuses on that aspect of their deeds. This is not the case with Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah. Their actions are easily understood and their motivation is agreed on by most commentators. Steinsaltz describes the daughters as wise, insistent and eloquent. He says that they were acting not merely for their own personal interest, but in the

¹²³ Silbermann, p. 132.

best interest of their entire clan.¹²⁴

Many of the modern commentators see this story as a legal one which set the precedent for property ownership. They bring in a later addition to the story, Num. 36:1-9, to explain their reasoning. Members of the Menasseh tribe came to Moses to complain about the property transfer to Zelophehad's daughters. They reminded Moses that if the daughters would marry people from other tribes, then their property, which is part of the land appropriated to the tribe of Menasseh, would be lost to the tribe into which the daughters marry. Moses, with God's intercession, amends the law:

זֶה הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר-צִוָּה יְהוָה לְבָנוֹת זֶלּוֹפֶהָד לֵאמֹר לָטוֹב בְּעֵינֵיהֶם
תִּהְיֶינָה לְנָשִׁים אֶךְ לְמִשְׁפַּחַת מֹשֶׁה אֲבֵיהֶם תִּהְיֶינָה לְנָשִׁים
וְלֹא-יִתָּסֵב נַחֲלָה לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמֶּשֶׁה אֶל-מֶשֶׁה כִּי אִישׁ בְּנַחֲלָת
מֹשֶׁה אֲבֹתָיו יִדְבְּקוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

This is the word that God commanded to the daughters of Zelophehad, saying, Become wives to whoever is good in your eyes, but you should marry only to the family of your father's tribe. Inherited property of the children of Israel will not pass around from tribe to tribe because each person of the children of Israel and his property must remain bound as part of their ancestors tribe. (Num. 36:6-7)

This modification to the new laws of inheritance ensured that property rights remained within the domain of the tribe, regardless of who inherited the property. Thus, the story of

¹²⁴ Steinsaltz, Biblical Images, p. 260.

the daughters of Zelophehad was all about property rights and inheritance. Swindler explains the biblical laws of women's inheritance, which developed from this story. Normally, a woman could not inherit property in Israel. If her father had no sons, she could only receive his inheritance if she married within the clan. Swindler does not see this as an issue of women's equality. He explains that "the women simply served as blood links to pass property from male to male within the family line."¹²⁵

J. Weingreen also sees the story as a property rights issue.¹²⁶ He feels that the reason the daughters mention the Korah story to Moses, is to assure him that their father did indeed have rights to property - the assumption being that those who followed Korah did not have property rights because of their actions.

Snaith sees the story from a very different angle. He feels that the story had nothing to do with the general rules and laws of inheritance. According to Snaith, the theory of property in the Bible is that all land belongs to God, and people are only temporary residents.¹²⁷ He feels it is primarily a story told to account for the fact that the tribe of Menasseh held land west of the Jordan. Settlement east of the Jordan is explained in Numbers 32:33 but there is no explanation for the settlements west of the Jordan. Snaith feels that the western land was the property given to the

¹²⁵ Leonard Swindler, Biblical Affirmations of Woman (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), p. 141.

¹²⁶ J. Weingreen, *The Case of the Daughters of Zelophehad*. Vetus Testamentus 16 (1966): p. 515.

¹²⁷ N. H. Snaith, *The Daughters of Zelophehad*. Vetus Testamentus 16 (1966): p. 125.

daughters of Zelophehad.

Sterring takes a feminist approach to the story. She sees it as one of the most fascinating women's stories in the Bible. According to Sterring, the daughters' motive is not personal, but to "preserve their deceased father's name and to cherish his memory."¹²⁸ In discussing the reason why the daughters mention Korah's rebellion, Sterring disagrees that it is related to property rights. "Nowhere in this pericope or elsewhere are we told that the explicit result of the rebellion was an exclusion from the right to a share in the land."¹²⁹ Instead, she sees the motive behind the women's story as one of protection. They disassociate themselves and their father from Korah's people so that they will not be looked upon as challenging Moses divinely established order, as Korah did. Sterring says this is an example of indirect female strategy. They try to protect themselves from the fate that befell Korah.

Sterring praises the daughters of Zelophehad for their unselfishness. Women who were single in a patriarchal society were often inadequately cared for and lacked resources and protection. That is why widows and orphans were so often mentioned in the Bible as groups of people in need of care. Despite this, Sterring notes that the daughters did not ask for charity. They asked, instead, for their father's lawful inheritance. Because of their righteousness, the daughters get more than they ask for. Not only do they

¹²⁸ Ankie Sterring, *The Will of the Daughters*, in Athalya Brenner *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy* (Sheffield England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), p. 89.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

get their father's land, but their case sets legal precedent for other women in the same predicament. And this law was established not by Moses, but by God.

Sterring brings the narration in Numbers 36 to show that despite the societal changes and advances brought about by the actions of the daughters of Zelophehad, they are still subject to the authority of patriarchy. The men of the clan protested the new laws of inheritance set down by God. They complained to Moses that if the daughters would marry outside the tribe, the land originally designated for their tribe would be lost. The law was therefore amended to prevent women from marrying non-tribesmen if they wanted to inherit their fathers land. Sterring says this is typical of patriarchal society. "Whenever menfolk feel threatened and fear that their safety is undermined one way or the other, they try to minimize the damage as much as they can by way of instituting countermeasures."¹³⁰ Despite the daughters success in achieving property rights, they still were under the ultimate authority of patriarchy.

Sterring traces the story of the daughters of Zelophehad further, into the book of Joshua, Chapter 17 to further show that while advances were made by these women, they had to continue to work to achieve their goals. In the text, the sons of the tribes are listed first, as recipients of their inheritance:

וַיְהִי הַגּוֹרֵל לַמָּטָה מִנְּשֵׁה כִּי־הוּא בְּכוֹר יִסָּף לַמְּכִיר בְּכוֹר מִנְּשֵׁה

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 94.

אבי הגלעד כי הוא היה איש מלחמה ויהי לו הגלעד והבשן.

ויהי לבני מנשה הנותרים למשפחתם לבני אביעזר ולבני־חלק

ולבני אשריאל ולבני־שכם ולבני־חפר ולבני־שמידע אלה

בני מנשה בן־יוסף הזכרים למשפחתם.

Then came the lot for the tribe of Manasseh; for he was the first born of Joseph; for Machir the firstborn of Manasseh, the father of Gilead; because he was a man of war, therefore he had Gilead and Bashan.

There was also a lot for the rest of the sons of Manasseh for their families; for the children of Abiezer, and for the children of Helek, and for the children of Asriel, and for the children of Shechem, and for the children of Hephher, and for the children of Shemida; these were the male children of Manasseh the son of Joseph by their families. (Joshua 17:1-2)

Then the daughters received their inheritance:

ולצלפחד בן־חפר בן־גלעד בן־מכיר

בן־מנשה לא־היו לו בנים כי אִם־בנות ואֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת

בנותיו מחלה ונצה חגלה מלכה ותרצה.

ותקרבנה לפני אֶלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן וּלְפָנָי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בּוֹ־נֹן וּלְפָנָי

הַנְּשִׂאִים לֵאמֹר יְהוָה צִוָּה אֶת־מֹשֶׁה לְתַת־לָנוּ נַחֲלָה בְּתוֹךְ

אֶחָיו וַיָּתֵן לָהֶם אֶל־פִּי יְהוָה נַחֲלָה בְּתוֹךְ אֶחָי אֲבִיהֶן.

But Zelophehad, the son of Hephher, the son of Gilead, the son of Machir, the son of Manasseh, he didn't have any sons, but daughters; and these are the names of his daughters, Mahlah, and Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah.

And they came before Eleazar the priest, and before Joshua the son of Nun, and before the princes, saying, God commanded Moses to give us an

inheritance from among our brothers. So he gave them inheritance from among the brothers of their father, according to God's word.

Sterring points out that while the sons automatically received their inheritance, the daughters had to ask again, before it was granted to them. They had to approach Eleazar, and ask him for the property that Moses and God had already granted them earlier.

Some women commentators see the story of the daughters of Zelophehad as an inspiring narrative for women. Sterring says it shows that societal norms which seem rigid and unchangeable, can be altered with proper forethought and wisdom. By having confidence that making the change is the right thing to do, and approaching it properly, change can be made. Antonelli feels that Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah are important role models for women. Their wisdom, acknowledged even by the Rabbis, was used for the good of all women. They were very knowledgeable in law and were able to argue on legal terms. Antonelli bases this on Rashi's addition to the conversation between Moses and the daughters. When Moses first told them they could not inherit, they showed their knowledge of the law by mentioning the laws of levirate marriage. Antonelli also says that the women are a good example of how to be successfully persuasive. "By couching their demands for equal rights in a concern that their 'father's name not be diminished', they spoke in a language cleverly guaranteed to evoke male empathy rather than male defensiveness."¹³¹ She concludes by saying that the

¹³¹ Judith Antonelli, *In the Image of God* (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc., 1995), p. 382.

daughters of Zelophehad should be used as a role model for Jewish women today who are trying to change *Halakhic* rules that are unfair to women. "If Jewish women today emulate the wisdom and the strategies of the daughters of Zelophehad, perhaps male rabbis will emulate the wisdom of Moses by taking women's protests seriously and 'running to God' for some answers that are free of misogynist social prejudices."¹³²

¹³² Ibid.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS

Changes Through Time

The Bible has been in existence since the end of the second millennium, B.C.E.¹³³ Yet, despite its antiquity, it still remains a viable and relevant text to millions of people living today, in the 20th century. One of the reasons for its longevity is the style in which the Bible is written. The text is written in a way that is open to multiple interpretations. The sages tell us:

יש שבעים פנים בתורה

*There are 70 faces to the Torah.*¹³⁴

Each person who reads the Bible can find his or her own personal meaning in it, and each society who looks at the text can find a way to enable the writings to guide its life.

By looking at the various individuals and groups that have commented on the Bible throughout history, the multi-faceted nature of the Bible becomes very apparent. This is particularly true when we look specifically at women in the Bible. The differences in attitudes towards women among various societies and cultures, becomes evident. Each group projects its own biases and background onto its understanding of the biblical text as they interpret the women's stories.

Interestingly, the Rabbis of the Midrash and Talmud seem to separate their feelings towards women living in their own

¹³³ Encyclopedia Judaica, vol. 4, p. 833.

¹³⁴ Bamidbar Rabbah 13:15,16

time from their perception of the women in the Bible. According to Talmudic law, which governed the lives of Jews during that period, women were considered to be in a different category from men. For example, women were generally grouped with children and slaves when it came to issues of Jewish observance. Different obligations regarding mitzvot were placed upon men than were placed upon women. Women were exempt from many time bound commandments - which men considered to be the most holiest of practices. Rachel Adler describes these male rituals as "positive symbols which, for the male Jew, hallow time, (and) hallow his physical being."¹³⁵ Women were not given the opportunity to experience the special religious feelings that these symbols evoked. Neither were women counted a part of the minyan - the ten men required to hold a prayer service (San. 17b). Additionally, women were not obligated to study Torah, and some Rabbis specifically prohibited them from doing so (Sota 20a).¹³⁶ Women were also not allowed to be witnesses or to testify in a Jewish court (Shavuot 30a, Rosh Hashana 22a).¹³⁷

Despite the Rabbinic attitude toward women in their own time, the Rabbis were very favorable toward the women in the Bible. Their praise and appreciation of biblical women probably came about for two reasons. First, the Bible was seen as the word of God - the God of the Israelites, the ancestors of the Jewish people. All Israelites and "Jews",

¹³⁵ Rachel Adler, *The Jew Who Wasn't There: Halakhah and the Jewish Women*, in Susannah Heschel, ed., *On Being A Jewish Feminist* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), p. 13.

¹³⁶ "R. Eliezer says, Whoever teaches his daughter Torah teaches her obscenity." (Sota 20a)

¹³⁷ This Mishnah groups women with gamblers, usurers, pigeon flyers (for wages), those who traffic in produce of the Sabbatical year and slaves as those who cannot testify.

including the Israelite/Jewish women and the women associated with Israelite/Jewish men, were part of the text by God's choosing. Therefore they were holy. Secondly, the women in the Bible were important. Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel were the Matriarchs, the mothers of the Jewish people. It was important for the Rabbis that these, and other important biblical women, be seen in a positive light, to honor their role in Jewish history.¹³⁸

As history moved forward, the view of women in the Bible changed. During the medieval period, there seemed to be less interest in the women and their actions. Other than Rashi, very few medieval commentators had much to say about what the women did. As we approached modern times, commentary on women in the Bible became more prominent again. In the early modern period, images of biblical women often emerged as more evil, more immoral and more deceptive than previously depicted. They were viewed more negatively than they were by previous generations. This was probably due to the increasingly misogynistic world that developed during that period. This attitude towards women in the general society greatly influenced the way people approached women in the biblical text.

As attitudes towards women changed, and as women scholars entered the field of Bible study during the past twenty years, a new view of biblical women was offered. Women approached the text from a different perspective. In

¹³⁸ This is part of my own motivation for writing this paper. I too felt it was important to find ways to praise the women of the Bible. For me though, it was also important to elevate women in the Bible so that modern women can find the text more meaningful for themselves.

some instances, feminist scholars pointed out that many of the stereotypical, negative suppositions about women that came from biblical interpretations, were really not in the biblical text itself. A careful reading of the text showed that these ideas originated from outside the text. Biases were projected into the text by interpreters who either used the text for their own agendas, or who couldn't help but be influenced by their own society and cultural norms. We also find that there is a great deal more information about the various women in the Bible, given by the text, than the general population has been aware of.

Reading the text from the point of view of the women in the narratives enables us to see a different side of the women and to better understand their actions: Eve took the fruit from the tree to gain knowledge; Rebekah helped Isaac obtain his father's blessing to fulfill God's prophecy; Tamar disguised herself as a harlot to ensure the continuation of Judah's family line; Lot's daughters lay with their father to ensure the continuation of humanity; and the daughters of Zelophehad approached Moses to obtain the inheritance that was rightly theirs. Understanding that their motivations were just and righteous, these women can now become role models just as the men of the Bible have been.

A Personal Approach to the Text

One of the goals of gathering various commentaries from different sources into one collection, is to show the diverse ways that people have approached specific biblical texts.

With this as background, it enables us to add our own commentary to the vast ocean of biblical interpretations on these texts. It is very easy to read the Bible from a personal perspective. That is what makes Bible study so exciting and interesting. But, while there is beauty in being able to reinterpret the text in various ways so we can find meaning in it for ourselves, there is also danger. When we read the Bible through present day eyes, we are susceptible to being horrified by some of the actions of the biblical characters. It is easy to ask in disbelief: How could Lot's daughters have sexual relations with their father? How could Rebekah deceive her husband as she did?

For the Bible to remain meaningful, it is important not only to see ourselves in the text, but to also take a step back and see the Bible in context. Sometimes, there is no place for our 20th century values and morals in the interpretation of Biblical text. Many of these stories that upset us or make no sense to us, can be better understood by ignoring our own personal biases. By learning about what the surrounding cultures were like at the time these stories took place, we are given a new awareness of the text. Putting the story in context gives us more perceptive insights as to the lessons that the Bible is trying to teach. This is where the importance of Bible scholarship and Bible research becomes apparent. Understanding subjects such as Patriarchy and Mesopotamian society, enables us to make more sense of the biblical text. By combining personal and scholarly approaches to the Bible, we can continue to make this sacred

book meaningful and important in our lives.

Other Women in the Bible

The women mentioned in this paper are just a few of the many women in the Bible who can be called 'Risk-takers for Righteousness.' In the first two chapters of Exodus alone, there are five women who risk their own safety to do what is right: The midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, ignored Pharaoh's command to kill all boy babies born to Hebrew women (Ex. 1:15-22); Moses' mother, Yocheved, hid her new born son from the Egyptians for three months (Ex.2:1-2); Moses' sister, Miriam, hid at a distance to ensure her brother's safety, and then risked exposure to talk to Pharaoh's daughter about the baby that was found in the reeds (Ex. 2:4, 7-10); Pharaoh's daughter saved Moses knowing that he was a Hebrew child (Ex. 2:5-10). In the book of Joshua, Rahab, a Canaanite harlot living in Jericho, risked her life in order to protect Israelite spies - enemies of her people. The list goes on and on. I encourage you, as you read the Bible, to study the stories of the other women in the Bible, and to reexamine how they are portrayed from a different perspective - as Risk-takers for Righteousness.

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