

Women in the Old Testament and the Social Values of Ancient Israel:

Marriage, Motherhood, and Agency in the Narratives of Sarah, Rebekah, and Ruth

Introduction

The portrayal of women in the Old Testament provides an important lens through which the social structures and cultural values of ancient Israel can be examined. Although the world of the Hebrew Bible was predominantly patriarchal, women appear throughout biblical narratives as influential figures whose actions shape family lineage, inheritance, and covenant history. Their stories reveal the expectations placed upon women in ancient Israelite society while also demonstrating how individuals could exercise agency within these social frameworks.

Ancient Israelite society was organised primarily around kinship relationships and extended family structures. Marriage alliances, inheritance rights, and the continuation of family lineage were fundamental concerns, and women played crucial roles within these systems through their responsibilities as wives, mothers, and household managers.¹ Because the stability of the household depended heavily on the production of heirs, fertility was particularly valued. Consequently, biblical narratives frequently highlight women whose ability—or inability—to bear children becomes central to the unfolding of God's covenant promises.²

This essay explores how portrayals of women in the Old Testament reflect the social values of ancient Israel, particularly in relation to family structure, marriage, and motherhood. The narratives of Sarah, Rebekah, and Ruth provide especially valuable case studies because they represent different aspects of women's roles within Israelite society. Sarah's story illustrates the importance of fertility and covenant lineage; Rebekah's narrative demonstrates the influence women could exercise within household structures; and Ruth's story highlights loyalty, kinship responsibility, and the integration of vulnerable individuals into community life.

These narratives reveal that women in the Hebrew Bible were not merely passive participants within patriarchal systems. Instead, they frequently acted with initiative and strategic awareness, influencing the development of family relationships and even the course of Israelite history. Tikva Frymer-Kensky argues that biblical narratives often portray women as active participants whose decisions shape the destiny of their families and communities.³ By examining the stories of Sarah, Rebekah, and Ruth through both textual analysis and historical contextualisation, this essay demonstrates that women played essential roles in maintaining family stability and covenant continuity within ancient Israel.

¹ Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 32–35.

² Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Waco: Word Books, 1987), pp. 55–57.

³ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 2002), p. 12.

Historical Background: Social and Family Structures in Ancient Israel

Ancient Israelite society was organised around the extended household, commonly referred to as the *bet 'ab* or “father’s house.” This household unit typically consisted of a patriarch, his wife or wives, children, and other relatives or servants who lived and worked together. Authority rested primarily with the male head of the household, who controlled property, inheritance, and family decisions.⁴

Marriage functioned not simply as a personal relationship but as an important social and economic alliance between families. Marriages were frequently arranged and often occurred within extended kinship networks in order to maintain property and strengthen family ties. Women typically moved into their husband’s household, where they assumed responsibilities related to domestic management, food production, and childrearing.⁵

Within this social framework, fertility was considered essential for the survival of the household. Producing children—especially sons—ensured the continuation of family lineage and the inheritance of land. Barrenness therefore represented a serious social and emotional crisis. As Gordon Wenham observes, the recurring motif of barren matriarchs in Genesis highlights the theological significance of fertility within Israel’s covenant tradition.⁶

Despite the patriarchal structure of Israelite society, women possessed important forms of influence within the household. Athalya Brenner notes that biblical narratives often depict women negotiating power through persuasion, initiative, and strategic action.⁷ Although they rarely held formal authority, their ability to shape family relationships could have lasting consequences for inheritance patterns and social stability.

The stories of Sarah, Rebekah, and Ruth illustrate how women operated within these social structures while also shaping the future of their families and communities.

Sarah: Covenant, Fertility, and Matriarchy

The narrative of Sarah in Genesis emphasises the central importance of fertility and lineage within ancient Israelite society. As the wife of Abraham, Sarah occupies a crucial position in the biblical narrative because the covenant promises made to Abraham depend upon the continuation of his family line. However, Sarah’s initial barrenness creates a significant obstacle to the fulfilment of these promises.⁸

In the cultural context of the ancient Near East, infertility was often viewed as a source of personal distress and social shame. Women were expected to produce heirs who would

⁴ Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *The Social World of Ancient Israel: 1250–587 BCE* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), pp. 24–29.

⁵ Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, pp. 70–74.

⁶ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, p. 56.

⁷ Athalya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), pp. 67–69.

⁸ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, pp. 60–62.

continue the family lineage and secure inheritance rights. Sarah's inability to conceive therefore represents not only a personal struggle but also a theological challenge to God's promise that Abraham would become the father of many nations.⁹

One of the most significant episodes in Sarah's story occurs when she gives her servant Hagar to Abraham in order to produce a child. This practice reflects a custom found in ancient Near Eastern legal traditions in which a barren wife could provide a female servant as a surrogate mother.¹⁰ The resulting child would legally belong to the wife rather than the servant.

Sarah's decision demonstrates both the social pressure placed upon women to produce heirs and the degree of agency they could exercise within these constraints. However, the arrangement leads to tension when Hagar becomes pregnant, highlighting the complex dynamics of surrogate motherhood within patriarchal households.¹¹

Ultimately, the narrative resolves this crisis through divine intervention when Sarah gives birth to Isaac in her old age. This miraculous event emphasises that the continuation of Abraham's covenant line depends not merely on human effort but on divine action.¹² Sarah thus becomes the matriarch through whom God's promise is fulfilled, illustrating the connection between motherhood and covenant identity.

Rebekah: Marriage, Household Influence, and Inheritance

The story of Rebekah provides insight into Israelite marriage customs and the influence women could exercise within family structures. Her narrative begins with the arrangement of her marriage to Isaac in Genesis 24. Abraham sends his servant to find a wife for Isaac among his relatives, demonstrating the importance of kinship ties in marriage negotiations.¹³

Rebekah's introduction in the narrative highlights qualities such as hospitality, generosity, and diligence. When Abraham's servant requests water, she not only provides it but also draws water for his camels, a task that required considerable effort. Her actions portray her as an ideal candidate for marriage within the cultural expectations of the time.¹⁴

Like Sarah, Rebekah initially experiences barrenness before eventually giving birth to twin sons, Jacob and Esau. The rivalry between these brothers becomes central to the narrative and ultimately determines the future of Israel's lineage.¹⁵

Rebekah's most significant role occurs when she orchestrates the plan that allows Jacob to receive Isaac's blessing instead of Esau. By guiding Jacob in deceiving Isaac, she ensures that

⁹ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, p. 42.

¹⁰ Matthews and Benjamin, *The Social World of Ancient Israel*, p. 43.

¹¹ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 12–13.

¹² Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), pp. 28–30.

¹³ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, pp. 140–145.

¹⁴ Susan Niditch (ed.), *Women in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 56.

¹⁵ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, p. 202.

the younger son receives the inheritance and leadership of the family. Although this act raises ethical questions, the narrative suggests that Rebekah's actions align with a divine prophecy that "the elder shall serve the younger."¹⁶

Susan Niditch notes that biblical narratives often portray women as mediators in family conflicts and inheritance disputes.¹⁷ Rebekah's intervention therefore reflects a broader pattern in which women influence key decisions within the household.

Through Rebekah's story, the biblical text demonstrates that women could exercise significant authority within family structures, particularly in matters related to inheritance and the continuation of lineage.

Ruth: Loyalty, Vulnerability, and Social Integration

The Book of Ruth presents a narrative that emphasises loyalty, kinship responsibility, and the protection of vulnerable individuals within Israelite society. Unlike Sarah and Rebekah, Ruth is a foreigner from Moab who becomes integrated into the Israelite community through her relationship with Naomi.¹⁸

After the deaths of their husbands, Ruth and Naomi face economic hardship and social vulnerability. Widows in ancient societies often lacked the financial security provided by male relatives, making them dependent upon the support of extended family or the wider community.¹⁹

Ruth's famous declaration of loyalty to Naomi demonstrates her commitment to maintaining family bonds despite these challenges. Her willingness to leave her homeland and remain with Naomi highlights the importance of kinship loyalty in Israelite culture.²⁰

When Ruth begins gleaning in the fields of Boaz, the narrative illustrates the social laws that protected the poor and foreign residents within Israelite society. Landowners were required to leave portions of their harvest for those in need, reflecting the community's responsibility to care for vulnerable individuals.²¹

The story culminates in Ruth's marriage to Boaz through a practice similar to levirate marriage, in which a relative marries a widow in order to preserve the lineage of the deceased husband. This arrangement restores Naomi's family line and provides security for Ruth.²²

¹⁶ Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, p. 98.

¹⁷ Niditch, *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 64.

¹⁸ Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 22–25.

¹⁹ Matthews and Benjamin, *The Social World of Ancient Israel*, p. 121.

²⁰ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, pp. 38–40.

²¹ Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, p. 114.

²² Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, pp. 190–194.

Importantly, the narrative concludes by revealing that Ruth becomes the great-grandmother of King David. Her story therefore highlights the inclusion of outsiders within Israel's history and emphasises the role of loyalty and kinship responsibility in maintaining social cohesion.²³

Women, Social Expectations, and Agency in Ancient Israel

The narratives of Sarah, Rebekah, and Ruth not only illustrate specific family stories but also reveal broader patterns regarding the expectations placed upon women in ancient Israelite society. While the patriarchal structure of Israel meant that men formally controlled property, inheritance, and public leadership, women nevertheless played vital roles in maintaining social stability within the household. Their actions demonstrate that female agency often operated through relational influence, strategic decision-making, and participation in established cultural practices.

In many ways, the household functioned as the primary arena in which women exercised influence. Because the family unit was central to the organisation of Israelite society, decisions made within the household could have far-reaching consequences. Carol Meyers emphasises that the domestic sphere in ancient Israel was not merely a private space but the centre of economic production and social organisation.²⁴ Women's labour in agriculture, food preparation, and textile production contributed directly to the survival of the household economy. As a result, wives and mothers occupied positions of practical importance even if they did not hold formal authority.

The stories examined in this essay illustrate this dynamic clearly. Sarah's actions regarding Hagar, for example, demonstrate how women could initiate solutions to family crises within accepted cultural norms. Although the surrogate arrangement ultimately created conflict, it nevertheless reflects a widely recognised method of securing an heir when a wife was unable to conceive. Such practices were known in several ancient Near Eastern legal traditions, indicating that Sarah's decision was socially intelligible within her cultural context.²⁵ Her story therefore reveals both the pressures associated with infertility and the strategies available to women seeking to protect their family's future.

Rebekah's narrative highlights a different form of agency—strategic intervention in matters of inheritance. In Genesis 27, Rebekah orchestrates the deception that enables Jacob to receive Isaac's blessing rather than Esau. While modern readers may interpret this action as morally problematic, the narrative itself presents the event as part of the unfolding divine plan. The earlier oracle received by Rebekah had declared that the elder would serve the younger, suggesting that Jacob's eventual inheritance was anticipated from the beginning.²⁶ Rebekah's

²³ Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, pp. 166–167.

²⁴ Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 142–145.

²⁵ Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *The Social World of Ancient Israel: 1250–587 BCE* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), pp. 47–48.

²⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), pp. 205–207.

actions therefore function as a means through which divine purpose is realised within the narrative.

Scholars have noted that such portrayals reflect a broader pattern in biblical storytelling. Tikva Frymer-Kensky observes that women in the Hebrew Bible often act as “catalysts for change” whose decisions alter the direction of family history.²⁷ Although they operate within patriarchal systems, their initiative frequently determines which individuals inherit authority and how covenant promises are fulfilled.

Ruth’s story provides yet another example of female agency, though in a different social context. Unlike Sarah and Rebekah, Ruth enters the Israelite community as a foreign widow with limited social protection. Her vulnerability highlights the precarious position of widows in ancient societies, where economic survival often depended upon male relatives. Nevertheless, Ruth’s loyalty to Naomi and her willingness to seek security within Israelite customs demonstrate a proactive response to these challenges.

The scene at the threshing floor in Ruth 3 illustrates Ruth’s initiative particularly clearly. Following Naomi’s instructions, Ruth approaches Boaz and symbolically requests his protection by asking him to “spread his cloak” over her. Within the narrative, this gesture represents a request for marriage and for the restoration of Naomi’s family line.²⁸ While Naomi guides the plan, Ruth herself must carry out the action, demonstrating courage and determination in a socially delicate situation.

Importantly, Boaz responds positively to Ruth’s request, praising her loyalty and willingness to preserve family lineage. This interaction highlights the importance of kinship responsibility, a key value within Israelite society. According to Robert Hubbard, the narrative portrays Boaz as fulfilling his obligation to protect vulnerable members of the community while also acknowledging Ruth’s moral character.²⁹

Another significant feature of Ruth’s story is the way it challenges ethnic boundaries. As a Moabite, Ruth belongs to a group often viewed negatively in biblical literature. Nevertheless, her loyalty and faithfulness ultimately lead to her inclusion within Israel’s royal lineage as the great-grandmother of King David. This development emphasises the possibility of social integration within Israelite society and suggests that moral commitment could transcend ethnic distinctions.

Phyllis Trible interprets the Book of Ruth as a narrative that celebrates compassion and solidarity within a patriarchal world³⁰ Rather than focusing primarily on male heroes, the story highlights the relationship between Ruth and Naomi and portrays their mutual support as central to the restoration of the family. This emphasis underscores the importance of female

²⁷ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 2002), p. 115.

²⁸ Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 155–160.

²⁹ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, pp. 178–181.

³⁰ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 166–169.

relationships within biblical narratives and suggests that women's experiences were integral to the social fabric of ancient Israel.

When the stories of Sarah, Rebekah, and Ruth are examined together, they reveal a complex picture of women's roles within biblical society. On the one hand, these women operate within a system in which male authority structures dominate inheritance and public leadership. On the other hand, their actions demonstrate that women were active participants in shaping the future of their families and communities.

These narratives also emphasise the connection between women's experiences and the broader theological themes of the Hebrew Bible. The covenant promises made to Abraham, for example, depend upon Sarah's eventual motherhood. Similarly, the formation of Israel's tribal history is influenced by Rebekah's role in securing Jacob's blessing. Ruth's inclusion in the genealogy of David further illustrates how the actions of individuals on the margins of society can become central to Israel's historical identity.

In this sense, the stories of these women contribute to the theological narrative of the Old Testament by demonstrating that divine purposes are often accomplished through unexpected individuals. Their experiences highlight the interplay between human agency and divine providence within biblical storytelling.

Moreover, these narratives encourage readers to reconsider simplistic assumptions about the status of women in ancient Israel. Although the society described in the Hebrew Bible was undeniably patriarchal, the stories themselves frequently present women as intelligent, resourceful, and morally significant figures. Their decisions influence inheritance patterns, preserve family lines, and contribute to the unfolding history of Israel.

By analysing these narratives within their historical and cultural contexts, it becomes possible to appreciate the complexity of women's roles in the Old Testament. Rather than existing solely on the margins of biblical history, figures such as Sarah, Rebekah, and Ruth occupy central positions within the narrative tradition. Their stories reveal the social expectations placed upon women while also illustrating the ways individuals could navigate and shape those expectations.

Narrative Portrayal and Literary Function of Women in the Old Testament

In addition to reflecting historical social structures, the narratives of Sarah, Rebekah, and Ruth also serve important literary functions within the broader storytelling of the Hebrew Bible. Biblical narratives often develop theological themes through the experiences of individual characters, and the portrayal of women frequently contributes to this narrative strategy. The stories of these three women demonstrate how female characters are used to advance plot development, create tension within family relationships, and reveal the unfolding of divine purposes in Israel's history.

One significant literary feature of these narratives is the recurring motif of unexpected reversals. In many Old Testament stories, circumstances that initially appear to threaten the continuation of family lineage are ultimately transformed into moments of fulfilment. Sarah's barrenness, for

example, represents a major obstacle to the covenant promise that Abraham would become the father of a great nation. The narrative repeatedly emphasises the improbability of Sarah conceiving a child in her old age. Yet the eventual birth of Isaac reverses these expectations and demonstrates that divine promises can be fulfilled despite seemingly impossible circumstances. The story therefore uses Sarah's experience to highlight a central theological theme of the book of Genesis: the faithfulness of God in sustaining the covenant.

A similar narrative pattern appears in the story of Rebekah. The rivalry between Jacob and Esau introduces tension within the family and raises questions about which son will inherit Isaac's blessing. According to social custom, the eldest son would normally receive the primary inheritance and leadership role within the family. However, the narrative subverts this expectation by presenting Jacob as the chosen heir. Rebekah's role in securing Jacob's blessing is therefore not merely a family drama but a literary device that reinforces the theme of divine election. The younger son becomes the bearer of the covenant promise, illustrating a recurring biblical motif in which God's purposes challenge conventional assumptions about status and privilege.

The Book of Ruth likewise employs narrative tension and reversal, though in a different context. At the beginning of the story, Naomi and Ruth experience a series of losses that appear to leave them without hope for the future. The deaths of their husbands deprive them of economic security and social protection, creating a situation of vulnerability that threatens the survival of Naomi's family line. However, as the narrative progresses, these circumstances gradually change through a sequence of events that ultimately restore stability to the household.

Ruth's decision to remain with Naomi becomes the turning point in the narrative. Her commitment initiates a chain of events that leads to her encounter with Boaz and eventually to marriage and the birth of a child. The conclusion of the story transforms what began as a tale of loss into one of renewal and restoration. This narrative structure emphasises the theme that loyalty and faithfulness can lead to unexpected blessings, even in situations of hardship.

Another important literary feature in these stories is the emphasis on dialogue and personal interaction. Biblical narratives often reveal character motivations through conversations rather than through extended description. In the story of Sarah, dialogue between Sarah and Abraham, as well as between Sarah and Hagar, exposes the emotional tensions surrounding infertility and family relationships. These interactions allow readers to observe the personal struggles that accompany the larger theological themes of the narrative.

Similarly, Rebekah's conversations with Jacob demonstrate her decisive role in shaping the outcome of the inheritance dispute. Through dialogue, the narrative reveals her strategic thinking and determination to ensure that Jacob receives the blessing. This use of conversation helps portray Rebekah as an active participant in the events rather than as a passive observer.

The Book of Ruth contains some of the most memorable dialogue in the Old Testament. Ruth's declaration of loyalty to Naomi is one of the defining moments of the narrative and expresses the depth of her commitment. The conversations between Ruth and Boaz also play a crucial

role in developing the themes of kindness, generosity, and social responsibility that characterise the story.

These literary elements demonstrate that the portrayal of women in the Old Testament is not limited to their historical roles within ancient society. Instead, female characters often function as key narrative agents whose actions drive the development of the plot and reveal important theological ideas. Through their experiences, the biblical text explores themes such as covenant faithfulness, divine providence, and the restoration of family relationships.

By examining these narratives from a literary perspective, it becomes clear that the stories of Sarah, Rebekah, and Ruth are carefully constructed to highlight both human decision-making and divine guidance. Their portrayals contribute to the broader message of the Old Testament by illustrating how individual lives can become part of a larger story of covenant, faith, and community.

Comparative Thematic Analysis

When the narratives of Sarah, Rebekah, and Ruth are considered together, several important themes emerge regarding the social values of ancient Israel.

First, marriage functions as a central social institution that connects families and preserves lineage. Sarah and Rebekah enter marriages arranged through kinship networks, while Ruth's marriage to Boaz restores family continuity through a legal and social process.

Second, fertility and motherhood are portrayed as essential components of family identity. Each woman's story revolves around the production or preservation of lineage, reflecting the importance of inheritance and covenant continuity in Israelite society.

Third, these narratives demonstrate that women could exercise agency within patriarchal structures. Sarah negotiates the problem of barrenness, Rebekah shapes inheritance decisions, and Ruth navigates social vulnerability through loyalty and initiative.

Together, these stories reveal that women played active roles in shaping family and community life, even within a social system that formally privileged male authority.

Conclusion

The narratives of Sarah, Rebekah, and Ruth provide valuable insight into the social values of ancient Israelite society. Through their stories, the Old Testament reveals the central importance of marriage, motherhood, and family lineage within Israel's cultural and theological framework.

Sarah's narrative highlights the significance of fertility and the fulfilment of covenant promises through motherhood. Rebekah's story demonstrates how women could influence inheritance

and family leadership within patriarchal households. Ruth's narrative emphasises loyalty, kinship responsibility, and the protection of vulnerable individuals within the community.

Together, these portrayals illustrate that women in the Old Testament were not simply passive participants within male-dominated systems. Instead, they acted as decision-makers, negotiators, and caretakers whose actions shaped the development of Israel's history.

Understanding these narratives within their historical context allows modern readers to interpret biblical texts more responsibly and appreciate the complex roles women played in ancient Israelite society.

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