

was not the submission or obedience seen as appropriate for women in her society, but rather the gift of sharp insight—the particular insight of the poor and outcast who can see through a situation because they have few illusions to defend. Her gift was also the gift of courage—the courage of those who have little more to lose and therefore can act in commitment and from faith on behalf of others, for the sake of life, wholeness, and liberation. Indeed, these highly political and encouraging words describe the quality of Jesus' ministry to this woman and to her daughter.

Thus, behind whatever ecclesiastical significance the church has found in this story, there appears to be a christological point: It sets forth who Jesus is as the Christ of God. The hallmarks of that identity, here as elsewhere in the gospel tradition, are qualities and actions of life and freedom, made known in painful human interaction. Elsewhere those who see themselves as the privileged people in social or religious terms are shown struggling to comprehend this Christ who so often offends them, while the "poor"—the economically poor and socially outcast, the sick, the oppressed, the rejected—respond joyfully to the good news of God's reign. Here Jesus himself must learn about being that sort of Christ from one of the poorest of the poor and most despised of the outcast—a Gentile woman on her own before God and humankind. Her gifts and her ministry become the vehicle of the gospel to Jesus and to us. And we who hear and tell her story say, "So be it."

Feminist Interpretation of the Bible
ed. L. M. Russell

6

"Mother in Israel": A Familiar Figure Reconsidered¹

J. Cheryl Exum

After a great military victory led by a woman, jubilation gives rise to a song, which celebrates the exciting events and captures them for posterity.

In the days of Shamgar, son of Anath,
in the days of Jacl, caravans ceased
and travelers kept to the byways.

The peasantry ceased in Israel, they ceased
until you arose, Deborah,
arose as a mother in Israel.

(Judges 5:6-7)²

What does it mean to call Deborah, of whom we do not know that she had children, a "mother in Israel"? Commentators, if they treat this part of the verse at all, are not in agreement. I want to use the concept "mother in Israel" as both my starting and end point to examine a familiar role, one that so often defines and determines the meaning of a woman's life in biblical times, at least according to (mostly male) biblical scholars. First, however, a word about my method and intention.

I do not wish to defend the Bible or deny its patriarchal bias. Like the wider theological enterprise, both the Bible and the history of biblical scholarship stand in need of feminist critique. Scholars have begun to examine the biblical material from a nonandrocentric perspective, and much remains to be done.³ A variety of methods should aid us in this task. Sociological and anthropological studies shed light on women's status in biblical times.⁴ Literary approaches reveal attitudes toward women and reflect a variety of opinions

about their contributions, real or idealized, to the community of faith. My approach here involves primarily a literary method of close reading, which pays careful attention to the portrayal of women in selected texts. Within the admittedly patriarchal context of the biblical literature, we find strong countercurrents of affirmation of women: stories that show women's courage, strength, faith, ingenuity, talents, dignity, and worth. Such stories undermine patriarchal assumptions and temper patriarchal biases, often challenging the very patriarchal structures that dominate the narrative landscape [57].

In the interest of space, I have chosen to look at the figure of mother, not only because motherhood so often defines "woman's place" but frankly also because mothers are not to me the most interesting among the large cast of women in the Bible. I have chosen the figure in part, then, because of her ordinariness—mothers are not major characters. With the exception of Deborah, the women to be discussed here derive their significance from the fact that they gave birth to famous sons. But close examination reveals that these mothers are not so ordinary after all, and their influence is far-reaching. A striking paradox emerges in these stories of mothers: Whereas the important events in Israelite tradition are experienced by men, they are often set in motion and determined by women. This is especially clear in the patriarchal stories of Genesis 12–36, where the famous sons represent Israel personified and their mothers are responsible for Israel's becoming what it becomes. Since space demands even further selectivity, not all biblical mothers, or even all the more important ones, can be considered⁵; rather, I have selected a few, some well-known, some obscure to the point of being nameless. These examples come from three important biblical periods: the patriarchal and matriarchal period, the beginnings of the exodus, and the period of the judges. I hope that my necessarily limited comments upon them will be suggestive of what could and should be done on a larger scale. Unfortunately we cannot continue into the period of the monarchy, where the same patterns and paradox prevail (the classic example is Bathsheba), nor beyond into the exile and restoration to explore the disruption of the pattern, and ultimately into New Testament times, where the familiar themes are reapropriated (Luke 1:5–25) and reshaped (Matt. 1:18–25; Luke 1:26–56). Also, by starting with the matriarchs, we pass over the existentially most important woman and one of the most fascinating figures, Eve, "mother of all living," source of the human condition as we know it.⁶

The Mothers of All Israel

The stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs in Genesis 12–50 are stories about a promise, the threefold promise to Abraham of numerous descendants, the land of Canaan, and the role as mediator of God's blessing to all humanity—a promise passed from Abraham to his son, to his son, and so on down the male line. Numerous obstacles threaten the promise, postponing its fulfillment: for example, the barrenness (11:30; 16:1; 29:31) or potential loss (chs. 12; 20; 26) of the matriarch; the fact that the patriarch and his wife are too old to bear children (17:17; 18:12); or the command to Abraham to sacrifice his son, "your only son Isaac, whom you love" (Gen. 22:2; never mind that Abraham has another son, Ishmael). Every listener to these stories knows the outcome in advance, for the patriarchs are personifications of the collective memory of Israel, and the hearers are the heirs to the promise. The delight is in the telling. In the figures of the patriarchs, Israel sees itself and its special relationship to God, and in these stories Israel reveals itself, holding up for our scrutiny both positive and negative aspects of its character.

What, then, is the role of the matriarchs? Obviously, to bear the children of the promise—thus the importance of the "right" wife: Sarah, not Hagar, must be the mother of the rightful heir; Isaac and Jacob may not have Canaanite—that is, "foreign"—wives (24:3; 27:46; 28:1). Not only must the "right" woman be the mother of the chosen people, the "right" son must be the bearer of the promise (Isaac and not Ishmael, Jacob and not Esau). In the patriarchal world, males are the significant figures: Abraham follows the divine call to the promised land; Sarah is "taken" with him (notice how Sarah is objectified and repeatedly "taken" in Genesis 12). Women are simply ignored in numerous scenes: the Genesis narrators are interested in Abraham's faith, not Sarah's (Genesis 22); Jacob wrestles with God in "face to face" combat (Gen. 32:30), while Rachel's "mighty wrestlings" are with her sister (Gen. 30:8). Typically, the matriarchs are omitted from recitals of faith (Deut. 26:5; Josh. 24:2–13; 1 Sam. 12:8–11; Psalm 105—notice what this psalm does with Genesis 12 and 20; but cf. Isa. 51:2). On the other hand, when the matriarchs appear as actors, they come to life as fully developed personalities, whose struggles and determination are deftly sketched and whose joys and sorrows become real for us. In such stories, they are not appendages of the patriarchs but rather persons in their own right—women participating in a patriarchal culture but

sometimes pictured as standing over against it. This is our paradox: Though frequently ignored in the larger story of Israel's journey toward the promise, the matriarchs act at strategic points that move the plot, and thus the promise, in the proper direction toward its fulfillment. We must confine our attention to the most important examples, though for a full appreciation of the matriarchs and their contributions, all the stories that deal with them, as well as those that ignore them, need to be considered [133].

The major events in the lives of the matriarchs center around their sons. The barren matriarch is a common theme, since barrenness provides a threat that the needed son might not appear and offers an opportunity for the deity to intervene (cf. also Judges 13, discussed below, and 1 Samuel 1). In Genesis 16, Sarah speaks for the first time and thus for the first time comes to life as a character. She initiates the action and controls it throughout the six verses in which she appears. In contrast to what has gone before, Abraham is the passive figure here: he obeys Sarah (RSV, "hearkened to the voice of" Sarah, v. 2) and acknowledges her authority over the situation ("your maid is in your power," v. 6). For the first time we see things from Sarah's point of view.⁷ This, however, presents a rather complex situation because the narrator of our tale is our source for Sarah's point of view, and the narrative point of view is androcentric, uncritical of patriarchy.

To be childless in a patriarchal society represents a loss of status. Sarah, who recognizes the ultimate responsibility of the deity, is the first to offer a concrete solution to the major obstacle to the promise, the absence of an heir. She gives her Egyptian maid Hagar to Abraham, not simply so that Abraham might have an heir (he could take another wife to bear him children but does not; he takes another wife only after Sarah is dead, 25:1), but rather because, according to this custom, Hagar's child would be considered Sarah's. That this particular means of obtaining children is for the woman's sake and not the man's is also clear from Genesis 29—30, where Rachel and Leah give their maids to Jacob even though he already has sons. Sarah's plan backfires, however, when the pregnant Hagar becomes arrogant, thus presenting a different kind of challenge to Sarah's status, her superior status as primary wife. Again, Sarah must act, this time to guarantee her position. She treats Hagar harshly, and Hagar flees (another threat to the promise, that Hagar the Egyptian might become the mother of Israel, is thus thwarted). God, however, in one of the few theophanies to a woman, instructs Hagar to return and submit to Sarah (which poses the threat anew).

The story gives us poignant insight into the plight of both Sarah and Hagar. Hagar in particular deserves to be approached from a

feminist perspective, which views her as a paradigm of the oppressed woman who has the courage to seek freedom (an odd reversal of the exodus paradigm, for here an Egyptian flees oppression by Israel). She becomes the mother of a great nation characterized by its refusal to be submissive.⁸ Yet although the story is told with sympathy for Sarah and sensitivity toward Hagar, a feminist critique recognizes its painful limitations. Both Sarah and Hagar are victims of a patriarchal society that stresses the importance of sons and of a narrative structure that revolves around the promise of a son. Sadly, but not surprisingly in such a context, they make victims of each other. The story describes the privileged woman's exploitation of her subordinate. Sarah uses Hagar (how Hagar feels about being given to Abraham as a wife is not stated), and Hagar apparently covets Sarah's position (the oppressed seeking to change places with the oppressor), so that Sarah must oppress Hagar in order to assert herself. It is a vicious circle in which women are played off against each other in the quest for status, a situation we shall see reflected in the conflict between Rachel and Leah. When a critical feminist perspective is brought to bear upon the narrative, Sarah's anger at Abraham, "May the Lord judge between you and me" (not "between Hagar and me"; Gen. 16:5), becomes an indictment of the patriarchal system, which pits women against women and challenges their intrinsic worth with patriarchal presuppositions about women's role [55, 56].

Genesis 17 and 18 give increasing attention to Sarah ("I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations," 17:16) and the promised birth of her son. Finally Sarah bears the long-awaited heir. Genesis 21 resolves once and for all the threat posed to the promise by the presence of Hagar and Ishmael. Earlier, Sarah had acted to secure her own position; now she moves to protect Isaac's inheritance by having Hagar and Ishmael sent away. Though Abraham is displeased, Sarah's position receives divine approval (the threat must be removed, and God here works through Sarah to remove it): "Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your descendants be named" (21:12; cf. 25:6, where Abraham expels his other sons). On a feminist reading, both women suffer: One is cast out, becoming the mother of a great nation excluded from the covenant; the other stays within the patriarchal hearth and almost loses her only child to the father. Sarah does not appear in the story of the near sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. It is, after all, a test of Abraham, just as Genesis 12:1—3 was the call of Abraham. On Abraham's faith, not Sarah's, hangs the whole divine experiment. Sarah's death, recorded in Genesis 23:2, receives elaboration in a later midrash, which relates that she dropped dead upon hear-

ing what Abraham was prepared to do (Fanhuma, Par. Uayira 23).

Isaac is comforted after his mother's death by his marriage to Rebekah (Gen. 24:67), a brief but touching testimony to the bond between mother and son. We must skip the wonderful introduction to Rebekah in Genesis 24, where she reveals her generosity and initiative, in order to focus on her pivotal role in obtaining for Jacob the patriarchal blessing. Like Sarah, Rebekah is at first barren; but when Isaac offers an intercessory prayer, she conceives twins (Gen. 25:21–24). The struggle between Jacob and Esau begins even before their birth, and the anxious mother-to-be seeks a divine oracle (without benefit of either patriarchal or priestly intercession). She receives an answer to which she alone is privy: "The elder shall serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23). Thus Rebekah knows from the outset—as we know and as the ancient listeners knew—how things will turn out. And thus she loves Jacob (Gen. 25:28).

Is it coincidence that Rebekah is listening when Isaac reveals his intention to bless Esau (Gen. 27:1–5)? Immediately she sets her plan into motion; her favorite son has only to follow her instructions ("Obey my word," vs. 8, 13). But Jacob fears that discovery of the ruse by his father might bring him a curse rather than a blessing, an understandable reluctance given the seriousness of the curse, which, once uttered, proceeds immutable toward its realization. Rebekah's response, "Upon me be your curse, my son," demonstrates her remarkable resolve. What has Jacob to lose? It is Rebekah who risks everything. She prepares the food that Isaac loves so that Jacob can present it to him. She dresses Jacob in Esau's clothes and outfits him with animal skins so that he will both smell and feel like his older brother and thereby deceive his blind father. With all the details taken care of by his mother, Jacob proceeds to carry out the ruse and succeeds in getting for himself the coveted blessing—only moments before his brother returns, ready to claim what is rightfully his. Clearly, Jacob owes his success to the timely and decisive action of his strong-willed and resourceful mother.

Justifiably angry, Esau determines to kill Jacob. Rebekah (typically well informed) learns of the plan and again acts decisively, this time to preserve Jacob's life. Again she gives him all-important instructions ("Obey my voice," v. 43); Jacob must flee to her brother Laban until Esau's anger has subsided and she sends for him. She even manages (27:46–28:5) to get Isaac to send him away, with a blessing, to take a wife from Rebekah's family. Israel (Jacob) sets out on his journey toward fulfillment of its destiny, on a course charted by his mother.

Jacob acquires two wives, and he loves one more than the other (Gen. 29:30). This situation gives rise to a variation of the barren-

ness motif: only the favored wife is initially barren; God blesses the other with fertility, a compensation for being unloved by her husband. Genesis 29–30 describes a child-bearing contest between the rival sisters through which Israel is built up (the twelve sons of Jacob represent the twelve tribes of Israel, and the promise of numerous descendants is on its way toward fulfillment). We are again aware of the androcentric perspective, which values a woman for her ability to produce sons (the daughter Dinah receives only passing mention, 30:21).

Leah believes that by mothering Jacob's firstborn son she will gain the patriarch's affection: "Surely now my husband will love me" (29:32). In quick succession she bears three more sons. Rachel envies her sister's fruitfulness and vents her frustration on Jacob (30:1). Like Sarah's anger at Abraham (16:5), the woman's dissatisfaction with her position receives recognition, but the real source of the problem, the patriarchal system, remains unrecognized, and the matriarchs can only aim their frustration at the patriarchs. Both women now give their maid to Jacob in order to obtain children, and Bilhah and Zilpah each bear two sons. Whereas the narrative encourages us to feel sympathy for Leah, who is not loved, and for Rachel, who longs for a child but has none, it also invites us to laugh. While there is something ludicrous in the preoccupation with producing sons, the real butt of our laughter is none other than the patriarch himself, whose sexual services are traded for some aphrodisiacs. Imagine Jacob coming in from a day's work in the fields to be met by his triumphant unloved wife with the words, "You must come in to me, for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes" (30:16). Is this any way to treat the great patriarch of Israel? Not unexpectedly, Leah bears another son and, later, a sixth. She seems to have given up her expectation of winning Jacob's love (29:32) for the more modest goal of gaining his respect, "Now my husband will honor me, because I have borne him six sons" (30:20).

When at last (Gen. 30:22) "God remembered Rachel" and "hearkened to her and opened her womb," the contest between the sisters comes to an end. But this occurs only after Rachel took the initiative to solve the problem of barrenness with the mandrakes (perhaps they were effective?). Eleven of the twelve tribes are now accounted for. Later in the Genesis narrative, Rachel will bear the twelfth. But because she dies in childbirth, this last son is not the source of joy (see Gen. 35:16–20).

This rapid survey has centered on a recurrent theme in the patriarchal stories: Because of its mothers, Israel becomes a people numerous and blessed. Sarah guarantees Isaac's inheritance against the threat of Ishmael. Rebekah sees to it that Jacob obtains the

blessing. And Rachel and Leah, in their competition to provide Jacob with sons, build up the house of Israel. At the same time, reviewing these stories makes us aware of the limitations placed upon the matriarchs by the patriarchal system that the Bible takes for granted. Bearing sons is of utmost importance, and the matriarchs' major accomplishments are for the sake of their sons. Israel is personified in its sons, not its mothers.

The Mothers of the Exodus

Here we shall concentrate on the mothers of Moses, not only his natural mother but also his adoptive mother, the daughter of Pharaoh, and the contribution they make to the exodus event. They are mothers of the exodus because of the role they play as mothers of its great leader, Moses. But as we consider their story, we should keep in mind that the exodus has three figurative mothers as well: Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives who defy Pharaoh's command to kill male Hebrew babies, and Moses' sister, whose resourcefulness at a strategic moment determines Moses' future and who later becomes a leader of the exodus in her own right. The liberation of Israel from bondage in Egypt begins in the courageous actions—and disobedience—of women. It begins when women refuse to cooperate with oppression, relying on wisdom to foil the designs of a foolish Pharaoh and thereby bringing life out of threatened death.

In Exodus 2, two daughters determine the course of history, the daughter of Levi (as Moses' mother is called in v. 1) and the daughter of Pharaoh. Their actions are subversive. Whereas the disobedience of the two midwives takes the form of noncompliance (they act by choosing not to act in accordance with Pharaoh's edict), Moses' mother and Pharaoh's daughter openly disobey Pharaoh's command to expose male infants in the Nile (Ex. 1:22).⁹ Pharaoh's daughter, as the counterfoil to her oppressive father, does, in fact, precisely the opposite: She takes the baby out of the Nile!

Though Moses' mother does not speak at all in the narrative, her actions display more than words could tell us of her concern to save her child. First she hides him. When that is no longer possible, she takes elaborate care to prepare a little ark (rsv, "basket") for her son in which to set him afloat on the Nile (note the ironic contrast: Pharaoh wanted the baby in the Nile, but not like this!). The only other ark in the Bible is Noah's, and the connection between Noah and Moses as saviors who are saved from drowning is inescapable. Whereas Noah builds the ark that saves humanity from destruction, Moses' mother builds the ark that, by saving its future leader, enables the delivery of Israel from bondage. Much activity is attributed

to her in Exodus 2:2-3: She does not simply wait for some miracle to save her son; rather, one might say, she sets the stage for something miraculous to happen. All, apparently, without counsel or assistance from her husband.

As if by design, Pharaoh's daughter comes to bathe in the Nile and spots the ark. When she discovers the crying infant inside, she has compassion (kshv, "took pity on him"). Significantly, we know the motivation of the women in this story: that of Moses' mother and sister to save their own flesh and blood is self-evident; the midwives act out of desire to live according to the will of God (the meaning of "fear of God"), and Pharaoh's daughter is moved by compassion, an emotion that extends beyond ethnic boundaries. She recognizes the child as Hebrew (2:6) and in violation of her father's edict saves him from the Nile. Prompted by the sister's clever, timely suggestion ("Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?"), she not only determines to keep the infant but even hires a Hebrew woman to nurse him. There is wonderful irony in the fact that Moses' mother is paid to nurse her own child. Paying wages is the princess's idea and may be her way of attesting the right of possession to the child.¹⁰ Thus she accentuates what Moses' sister had only intimated; she claims the child as her own, offering protection in the house of the oppressor to the future liberator of his people (another delicious irony). At the end of the story, he becomes her son and she names him Moshe, "the drawer out," a name that augurs his future role as leader of the exodus.

Though she gives a name, Pharaoh's daughter has none. Nor are other characters identified in this story, with the exception of Moses, Shiphrah, and Puah (the magnitude of the midwives' deed, comparable in its own way to Moses' deliverance of the people, demands that we not forget their names). Moses' mother is later identified as Jochebed (Ex. 6:20; Num. 26:59). While she and Pharaoh's daughter do not participate in subsequent events (nor does Moses' father, incidentally), Moses' sister takes on a major role in the exodus.

The similarities between Moses' mothers and the matriarchs are readily apparent. The action of mothers determines the future for Israel, but it is a future lived out primarily by sons. Women have a significant role in Exodus 1:15-2:10, but the goal of the story is the birth of a son who will become the great leader of his people. Though his life will again be saved by a woman (Ex. 4:24-26), Moses will soon take over center stage, even to the point of overshadowing God in the exodus narrative. Our paradox remains: Without Moses there would be no exodus, but without these women there would be no Moses!

I have dealt at length in another study¹¹ with the women in the prologue to the exodus, which in part justifies my brevity here. I must confess that I was never satisfied with the results. The reason, I believe, has to do with disappointment that the narrative quickly and thoroughly moves from a woman's story to a man's story. While a feminist critique might want to seize onto the affirmative dimension of our paradox, accenting the important consequences of women's actions for the divine plan, it must also acknowledge that being mothers of heroes—albeit daring, enterprising, and tenacious mothers—is not enough; acting behind the scenes is not enough. The exception in the exodus story is Moses' sister, later identified as Miriam, whom I have not discussed here because she is not a mother. In addition to her leadership role in the exodus (see, for example, Numbers 12, where she commands enough authority to challenge Moses, and Micah 6:4, which places her on an equal footing with Moses and Aaron), she shares with Deborah (see below) the designation as prophet and the attribution of a famous victory song (Exodus 15). She deserves, in addition to our admiration, greater critical attention.

Two Mothers from the Period of the Judges

The mother of Samson (Judges 13) differs from the mothers considered thus far in that she does not do anything to affect either her son's or Israel's destiny. In a sense, she is the most "ordinary" mother, and yet her story is a wonderful one, which affirms her as a person and as a mother. It does so in two ways: by refusing to let her husband steal the limelight in spite of all his efforts, and by attributing to her a goodly share of theological insight.¹² Her story is also unusual. Although she has the central role, her husband is named while she is not. Like other famous mothers, she is at first barren, but there are no indications that she regards her situation as critical. We are not told that she is old, as was Sarah, nor does she complain about childlessness, as does Rachel (Gen. 30:1). She does not pray for a son, as does Hannah (1 Sam. 1:11), nor does her husband pray for her as Isaac prayed for Rebekah. Nor does she take extraordinary measures to obtain children, like Sarah, Rachel, and Leah, who gave their maids to their husbands, or like Rachel, who used aphrodisiacs.

The woman alone is the recipient of a theophany in which she learns she will bear a son and receives instructions about him (Judg. 13:3–5). Her husband, Manoah, knows only what she tells him about this event, and, interestingly, she leaves out some important infor-

mation (that their son may not be shaved and that he will begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines). The essentials, however, what she must do and the boy's destiny as a Nazirite, are all there.

Manoah's prayer that the man "come again to us, and teach us what we are to do with the boy that will be born" (v. 8) is odd, since his wife has already informed him. In my opinion, what Manoah is really asking for here is to be included in an encounter with the man in which he, too, receives special information. Notice, however, that though Manoah's prayer is granted, it does not happen in the way Manoah has requested. The messenger appears (v. 9) not "to us" but again to the woman alone, a point underscored by the words "but Manoah her husband was not with her." Rather than having the messenger appear to him, Manoah must be brought to the messenger by his wife (posing for us the question whether Manoah would ever have seen the messenger were it not for the woman's intervention). Finally, Manoah gets the audience he wants, but—unlike his wife, who behaves with the proper reserve before such an honored emissary (v. 6)—he is brimming with questions. Ironically, however, for all his efforts, he receives even less information from the messenger than he had received from his wife. The messenger merely turns the issue back to the woman: "Of all that I said to the woman let her beware" (v. 13). By denying Manoah as much knowledge about the child as his wife, the narrative stresses her importance. It also portrays her as more perceptive than Manoah.

Together Manoah and his wife prepare an offering, which provides the occasion for the messenger's divine identity to be revealed. Up to this point, the couple have referred to him as a "man of God," a title sometimes used for a prophet. The text singles out Manoah's lack of perception ("For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the Lord," v. 16), followed by his recognition of the messenger's identity (v. 21). Nothing is said about the woman's not knowing the messenger's divine status. On the contrary, she sensed it from the start, "His countenance was like the countenance of the angel of God—very terrible" (v. 6). The response of husband and wife to the revelation further reflects their different comprehension of the situation. Good theologian that he is, Manoah realizes that one cannot see God and live (cf. Ex. 33:20; Judg. 6:22–23; Gen. 16:13–14; Ex. 19:21; Gen. 32:30). His wife, however, is a better theologian, for she recognizes the divine purpose behind the events and is therefore able to assure her husband that they will not die (in theophanies, it is usually the deity who gives this assurance). This lovely story puts Manoah in his place; he neither knows as much about his child's destiny nor understands the divine intention as

well as his wife. To its patriarchal society, to Manoah, and to us, it teaches that the figure of the mother and her importance may not be overshadowed by the father.

From an obscure mother, we turn to the most famous woman of the period and one of the few examples of a strong, independent woman in the Bible. Deborah boasts an extraordinary number of accomplishments. Although the exact duties of the judges are not clear, some appear to have exercised legal and administrative functions while others were charismatic military leaders. Deborah combines these two important offices in addition to holding a third one, that of prophet. People came to her for judgment, which suggests she was well known for her legal decisions (Judg. 4:5). She also led an Israelite coalition to victory in a strategic battle against the militarily superior Canaanites (see Judges 4 and 5). A review of the book of Judges reveals Deborah as one of the few unsullied leaders. She is followed by a series of male judges who display unexpected weaknesses and serious faults (Gideon, Jephthah, Samson).

Deborah's general is Barak, and not a few commentators accentuate his role while playing down hers. Some call him a judge (the text does not) and point out that Barak leads the troops, while Deborah merely summons him.¹³ Deborah's function, however, might be compared with that of another judge and prophet, Samuel, who anoints Saul king and sends him off to fight the Lord's battles (see esp. 1 Sam. 10—15). Deborah commissions Barak. In her capacity as prophet, she summons him with a message from the Lord, sending him into battle with a promise of victory. Barak appears accountable to Deborah in the way that Samuel holds Saul accountable to him (and the Lord). Some interesting similarities also exist between Deborah and the Canaanite goddess of war, Anat, who has a subordinate to carry out her commands.¹⁴ It is important to note that Barak refuses to go into battle unless Deborah accompanies him, which she does (Judg. 4:9, 10). Moreover, Deborah prophesies that the victory will not bring glory to Barak but rather to a woman (4:9). That woman, we discover later on, is not Deborah but another courageous woman, Jael.¹⁵

By virtue of the song attributed to her in Judges 5, Deborah may also be considered a singer of tales and a skilled poet. In 5:12 she is called to sing; 5:1 tells us she sang the song.¹⁶ Whatever the song's origin, Deborah is remembered as its source and inspiration, and appropriately it is known by the title "The Song of Deborah." An acknowledged literary masterpiece, the poem, in addition to praising Deborah and describing the battle, devotes considerable

attention to two other women, Jael and Sisera's mother, placed in striking juxtaposition at the conclusion.

Judges 4:4 identifies Deborah as an *isheth lappidoth*, a phrase usually rendered "wife of Lappidoth" but which may be translated "fiery woman" (cf. the NEB footnote, "spirited woman"), a description that fits her admirably. If Lappidoth was her husband, it is interesting to note that the narrative has nothing else to say about him. Though we cannot be sure the text calls her a wife, it does call her a mother, and thus we return to the question raised at the beginning of this chapter: What does it mean to call Deborah a mother in Israel? Her accomplishments described in Judges 4—5 include counsel, inspiration, and leadership.¹⁷ A mother in Israel is one who brings liberation from oppression, provides protection, and ensures the well-being and security of her people.¹⁸

Even though she is not a biological mother like the others, I have included Deborah in this brief look at mothers because her presence as a leader and hero among a biblical cast of mostly male leaders and heroes calls attention by contrast to the more usual position of women bound by patriarchal strictures. Yet the other women we have looked at, while acting behind the scenes in more traditional roles, emerge as important characters. In the sense that they too ensure the welfare and fortune of their people, the patriarchs and the mothers of the exodus are also "mothers in Israel." Our paradox, that women often play crucial roles but are rarely major characters, calls for a bifocal approach to the biblical material: on the one hand, to appreciate the contributions of women which the Bible records, and on the other hand, and at the same time, to be critical of the Bible's androcentric perspective. Such an approach enables us to read the stories of a Deborah or a Miriam as a critique of a patriarchal culture that produced too few independent female leaders, and it allows us to praise the strengths of those women who appear in stereotyped, subordinate roles.

12. See the discussion of laws and customs affecting women in first-century Palestine in Chapter XVIII ("Appendix: The Social Position of Women") of Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Fortress Press, 1969), pp. 359-376.

6: "Mother in Israel": A Familiar Figure Reconsidered

1. Research for this study was conducted with the support of a grant from the Penrose Fund of the American Philosophical Society.

2. Translation of the Song of Deborah is difficult and debated. Here I follow the RSV; for different views see, e.g., David Noel Freedman, *Pottery, Poetry and Prophecy: Studies in Early Hebrew Poetry* (Eisenbrauns, 1980), p. 150; J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges* (Westminster Press, 1981), pp. 81-82, 85-86.

3. Besides the works listed in Additional Resources, see Samuel Terrien, "Toward a Biblical Theology of Womanhood," *Religion in Life* 42:322-333 (1973); reprinted in Ruth T. Barnhouse and Urban T. Holmes, eds., *Male and Female: Christian Approaches to Sexuality* (Seabury Press, 1976), pp. 17-27; Frederick E. Greenspahn, "A Typology of Biblical Women," *Judaism* 32: 43-50 (1983). For a provocative statement on "Reading as a Woman" influenced by the work of feminist literary critics, see Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 43-64.

4. See, for example, Carol Meyers, "Procreation, Production, and Protection: Male-Female Balance in Early Israel," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51:569-593 (1983).

5. See pp. 42-66 of *Women Recounted: Narrative Thinking and the God of Israel* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982), by James G. Williams, who treats, in addition to those discussed here, Zipporah, Hannah, and the woman of Shunem (1 Kings 4).

6. On Eve, see especially Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. 72-143.

7. On point of view, see Adele Berlin's *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), for a discussion of a number of biblical women.

8. John Van Seters's *Abraham in History and Tradition* (Yale University Press, 1975), p. 193, puts it nicely: "The son to be born to her will have a destiny that will be anything but submissive and his defiance will be her ultimate vindication." Notice again, however, that the mother's importance derives from her son.

9. Following M. Cogan, "A Technical Term for Exposure" (*Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 27:133-135 [1968]), in taking the verb to mean "abandon, expose" (RSV, "cast into").

10. B. S. Childs, "The Birth of Moses," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84: 112-114 (1965).

11. J. Cheryl Exum, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live': A Study of Exodus 1:8-2:10," in Tolbert, pp. 63-82.

12. I have demonstrated how the literary structure of Judges 13 supports the emphasis on the woman in "Promise and Fulfillment: Narrative Art in Judges 13," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99:43-59 (1980). For a different evaluation of the woman, see Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History* (Seabury Press, 1980), pp. 181-184.

13. See the amended text of 1 Samuel 12:11; also Hebrews 11:32.

14. P. C. Craigie, "Deborah and Anat: A Study of Poetic Imagery," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 90:374-381 (1978).

15. For a detailed, insightful treatment of the portrayal of the women in Judges 4 vis-à-vis the men, see D. F. Murray, "Narrative Structure and Technique in the Deborah-Barak Story (Judges IV 4-22)," *Vetus Testamentum Supplements* 30:166-183 (1979).

16. Judges 5:1 had Deborah and Barak as the subject, but the verb is third person feminine singular. Debates about whether or not she really composed or sang the song are useless exercises in historical literalism.

17. Craigie, pp. 377-378, takes the title as a reference to Deborah's emergence as a military leader.

18. The only other appearance of the title "mother in Israel" is in reference to a city, 2 Samuel 20:19, where it appears to have the same range of meanings. On the mother and "mother in Israel," see also Claudia U. Camp, "The Wise Women of 2 Samuel: A Role Model for Women in Early Israel?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43:24-28 (1981).

7: Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea

1. I believe it cannot be emphasized strongly enough that the Hebrew Bible and the culture from which it emerged do *not* represent the origins of patriarchy. For further discussion of this issue and its implications, see Judith Plaskow, "Blaming the Jews for the Birth of Patriarchy," in Evelyn T. Beck, ed., *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* (Persephone Press, 1982), pp. 250-254.

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2. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 11-29.

3. The following outline draws on Andrea Dworkin, *Our Blood and Pornography*; Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature* (Harper & Row, 1978); Laura Leder-