

By the same author:
Colour Terms in the Old Testament
(*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*, 21)

Athalya Brenner

THE ISRAELITE WOMAN

SOCIAL ROLE AND LITERARY TYPE IN BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

JSOT

1985

JSOT press

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For Shalom (Brenner)
and Judy (Brenner-Hill)

First published by JSOT Press 1985
Reprinted 1989

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Published by JSOT Press
JSOT Press is an imprint of
Sheffield Academic Press Ltd
The University of Sheffield
343 Fulwood Road
Sheffield S10 3BP
England

Typeset by Sheffield Academic Press
and

printed in Great Britain
by Redwood Burn Ltd
Trowbridge, Wiltshire

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Brenner, Athalya

The Israelite woman: social role and literary type
in biblical narrative.—(The Biblical seminar,
ISSN 0266-4984; 2)

1. Women in the Bible

I. Title
220.8'3054

II. Series
BS680.W7

ISBN 0-905774-83-3

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Chapter 9

MOTHERS OF GREAT MEN (THE HERO'S MOTHER)

a. *The Matriarchs*

Women of consequence who appear in the Book of Genesis are, in their order of appearance: the Ancestress, Eve; Sarah and her handmaid Hagar; Lot's wife and daughters; Rebecca; Leah and Rachel; Zilpah and Bilhah, maids to Leah and Rachel respectively; Dinah, Jacob's daughter who is raped by Shechem and avenged by her brothers; Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law who seduces her father-in-law; and Potiphar's wife, who tries to rape Joseph in Egypt. For the moment, our discussion focuses upon those matriarchs who feature in the stories of Genesis as complementary pairs—namely, Sarah and her maid; the two pairs of sisters, Lot's daughters and Leah and Rachel; and the latter's two maids.

Within the framework of their patriarchal and polygamous society, these women had to live together as co-wives and competitors. However, their presentation as mirror images or shadows of each other, in the sense that each member of a given pair has certain properties which the other lacks but tries to obtain for herself, has literary reasons inasmuch as it reflects socio-psychological conditions. If combined into one person, each pair would have formed a complete and balanced personality. Each member of a pair dramatizes a concept of incomplete, often indecorous, womanhood. Because they are depicted in terms of two conflicting sides of the same female entity, the two women involved are doomed to an almost constant struggle from the beginning of their story until its end—unless the one can get rid of the other.

Sarah is Abraham's beloved and only wife. She is good-looking and a lady of property, but is old and cannot conceive. Hence, she gives her personal maid Hagar to her husband for the purpose of producing a male heir. Juridically, this son will be considered Sarah's own, and the problem of family continuity will be solved. So far Sarah has

behaved prudently. In her kind of society an individual has no power if he/she is not protected by the family. Therefore, family continuity is a supreme value that ought to override matters of personal happiness or fulfillment. Nevertheless, once Hagar becomes pregnant, Sarah is incapable of accepting the consequences of her own decision.

Despite her social superiority and her husband's love, Sarah does not feel confident enough to face the new situation. Hagar, for her part, does not behave properly. While she is Sarah's legal subordinate, inferior to her in status (Hagar is a slave and a foreigner) and probably in beauty, she exploits her pregnancy to disobey her mistress. According to the first story which relates to the Sarah-Hagar conflict (Genesis 16), Abraham is emotionally and legally helpless. Despite the fact that Hagar carries his own child, he hardly becomes involved in the power struggle between the two women. Sarah cleverly causes Hagar to run away, so that now she is an escaping slave as well as a rebellious one. However, Hagar receives a divine revelation in the desert, and comes back. According to the second story (Genesis 21), the conflict does not occur until Sarah has given birth to Isaac. But even now that she has become a biological mother, she is not satisfied. She makes Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham's first-born son, away so that her own son will be his father's sole heir. Fortunately her action, which should be condemned as cruel and selfish, fits in with God's intention to make Isaac the carrier of his promise to Abraham.

The portrayal of the two women (in both stories) carries a clear message. Each of them is insecure in her lot. Their chief aim in life is to become biological mothers; and for this aim they are prepared to sacrifice everything, including the interests of the family unit and Abraham's feelings. Sarah does not feel secure until she gets rid of her inferior rival altogether. The implication is that women cannot cooperate even when they share a common purpose, for they let personal ambition and competition supersede other, greater values.

Leah and Rachel are two sisters who are married to the same man (Jacob). Leah is neither good-looking nor beloved by her husband, but she enjoys the position of first and chief wife. She is older than her rival sister, but fertile. Rachel is good-looking and beloved by her husband, but is a second (chronologically) and secondary (status-wise) wife. She is younger, but barren. Again, neither one is satisfied with her lot. Rachel says she is dead unless she conceives (Genesis 30.1) and, like Sarah, gives her maid to her husband. When she finally gives birth to Joseph she explicitly states that one biological

son is not enough (30.21) and later dies in childbirth. Leah, who stops conceiving after having produced four healthy sons (29.35), is still not satisfied: she gives her maid to Jacob, so that her status as biological mother can be enhanced by her becoming a legal/adoptive mother as well (30.9). The two sisters are forever locked in combat. They compete for status and for their husband's love (see the incident of the aphrodisiac plant, 30.14-16), but mainly for male children. One gets the impression that even Jacob's love is sought after not for its own sake, but as a means for begetting more male heirs. Within the world of these women, it is possible to achieve personal security only through an abundance of sons. Love is secondary to a personal need which goes far and beyond a 'natural' maternal urge, and which is never wholly fulfilled. Thus, despite the fact that they are sisters, they cannot develop any kind of mutual intimacy, and their whole being is wrapped up in the conflict. The interests of the family, which is the basic unit for communal and individual survival, do not enter into the picture.

On the other hand, when the family is threatened from the outside, then the sisters cooperate with each other. When Jacob convinces his wives that their father Laban has used up their bride-price instead of keeping it for the children, they agree to cooperate with him against their father (ch. 31). They do so not out of love—nothing about their emotions is recorded, apart from the rage they feel towards the father-grandfather who robs his own kind—but out of the wish to preserve their sons' inheritance. When they feel that continuity is threatened, here as well as when the family is about to encounter Esau (ch. 32), they unite. Otherwise, each values her and her sons' interests more than anything else. Therefore they can be reconciled only temporarily; once immediate dangers are overcome, conflict and competition return.

Lot's daughters do cooperate with one another, for they believe that they and their father are the last persons on earth and that the human race is in danger of extinction (ch. 19). The older, more dominant daughter initiates the action and convinces her sister (who is socially her inferior) to follow her example. They are prepared to break two taboos—respect for a parent and incest—in order to secure the birth of the all-important male heirs. It seems that, unless they were convinced of the gravity of the imagined danger, they would not have cooperated for the achievement of their important aim.

The female pairs (Sarah and Hagar; Lot's daughters) and double pairs (Leah and Rachel and the respective maidservants) are

described, in each case, as mothers or hopeful mothers-to-be. Despite differences in personality, circumstances, and setting they all conform to one literary type. In fact, they all belong to the 'Matriarch' or 'Hero's Mother' type that is an integral part of every narrative which belongs to the 'Birth of the Hero' paradigm. The recurrent features of such a paradigm—and all or only several of these features might appear in any given Birth story—are as follows. The mother-to-be is barren until a relatively advanced age (Sarah, Rachel; also Rebecca, Genesis 25; Samson's mother, Judges 13; Samuel's mother, 1 Samuel 1; and others). She usually receives an ironic divine promise to assure her of an imminent change in her sad plight (Sarah, Hagar, Rebecca, Samson's mother, Samuel's mother). The woman competes with and is humiliated by a maidservant, sister, or co-wife (Sarah, Jacob's wives, Samuel's mother) who is usually inferior to the heroine from the aspect of social status or the husband's affection, or both. The competition is so strong that both women involved cannot control it, to the point that all other values, including the welfare of the family unit, are overshadowed by it. The women continue to quarrel and bicker until they conceive. They are unable to experience personal security, even though they might enjoy an elevated position within the family, unless they do. They cannot cooperate with one another unless an external danger has to be faced. The inferior woman at first seems to be the lucky one: she is the first to conceive and bear a son (Hagar, Leah, Rachel's maid, Hannah's rival co-wife). The son or sons born to the socially inferior women are, however, false heirs. Finally, there occurs the birth of the true heir, an event which brings fulfilment and at least a semblance of security to his biological mother.

The authors who made use of this literary paradigm and depicted the women involved according to it convey to us, from their male viewpoint, some sharply severe comments on female behaviour and the female psyche. The implications of such stories are that women cannot be friends even when they share an important common purpose, namely the continuity and preservation of the family unit. They are incapable of feeling personal security until they become biological mothers. Shortly after that happy event they start to plot and scheme in order to further their son's ends, and are again insecure as long as their rivals, and rivals' sons, stay within the same household. Even when they are sisters rivalry, jealousy, and insecurity are so great that any possibility of empathy or affection between sisters is excluded. Men are seen as different, much more mature

socially. Abraham and Lot are economic rivals, and are hence forced to part company. They do so with the utmost decorum and with no hard feelings (Genesis 13). Later Abraham saves Lot from a military danger (ch. 14). The behaviour of these two men, whose conflicting economic interests are irreconcilable, nevertheless remains gallant and friendly. David and Jonathan are bosom friends, although they are both aware of their political rivalry: they manage to keep their emotions intact and to be of service to one another even when this is to their personal detriment (Jonathan saves David from his father Saul, 1 Samuel 19). Men are capable of chivalry and can be depended upon to notice broader issues (although, to be fair, even blood brothers might become bitter enemies—Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau). The difference between female and male behaviour is that while men are capable of honourable conduct towards other men even when they are under an emotional stress, women let personal considerations supersede any decent relationship with members of their own sex. This is the verdict delivered, in passing, no doubt, for it is just one of the many facets in the stories about the Matriarchs, on woman's nature.

Here we might stop, chuckle, and murmur: There is very little that is new under the sun. Traditional opinions and conventions change very slowly. The characterization of the female as a battle-axe who is unable to get along with other women, especially where her menfolk (lovers, husbands, sons) are concerned, is as commonplace today as in the Book of Genesis. Many people regard such female behaviour as normative and inbred, almost 'natural' in the sense that it is inherently female.

It is refreshing, therefore, to find an implicit criticism of this stereotype of female social behaviour in the Book of Ruth. The subject of the book is, again, the birth of a male heir. In this case the newborn is King David's grandfather. The story exhibits many features which belong to the 'Birth of the Hero' paradigm. There are two women, Naomi and Ruth. Naomi, the mother-in-law, is older and therefore socially superior. Ruth is doubly inferior, for she is the daughter-in-law and a foreigner. They do not have any children—Naomi's are dead and she is too old to conceive, and Ruth has been childless until now. The plot is complicated further by the need to find a prospective father. This element, although it does not appear in most of the stories we have discussed, is indispensable to 'Birth' stories in which the female protagonist conforms to the 'Temptress' type (which is discussed in the next chapter). Ruth follows Naomi,

feeds, comforts and obeys her. Then she acts according to Naomi's directives, seduces Boaz and manages to compromise him, so that he promises to marry her (ch. 3). The marriage takes place and a son is born (ch. 4). Legally, we learn, Naomi is spoken of as the baby's adoptive mother (4.16). This newly born male heir, and not the land Naomi has previously owned (4.3), is the best and only security as far as she is concerned. At this point Ruth remains in the wings, so to speak, as if she has relinquished any hold on her biological son in favour of her manipulative mother-in-law. And here comes the surprise. The neighbours say to Naomi that the heir will be a comfort to her for 'your daughter-in-law, who loves you . . . is better to you than seven sons' (4.15)!¹

This is the one and only place in the Old Testament where the possibility of alternative female motives is put forth. The author seems to be saying to us that a woman is capable of acting out of devotion and selfless love for another woman. This constitutes a departure from the stereotyped portrayal of females which we have encountered in Genesis. However, the love is not mutual. Naomi is not presented as acting out of love for Ruth: she is dutiful and certainly correct in her dealings with her daughter-in-law, but uses her for her own ends—the recreation of Elimelech and his house. Ruth, on the other hand, is motivated not only by duty but also by personal love and loyalty to her mother-in-law. Despite the exceptional circumstances, Ruth's behaviour is presented as a feasible mode of conduct, one that should be emulated. The fact that Naomi and Ruth do not have to compete for a husband, because of Naomi's age and inability to conceive, is not important. It is important, though, that as a pair they are similar to the pairs of women which recur in the narratives of Genesis and elsewhere; but this pair, which could have been doomed to constant struggle, manages to avoid such conflict because Ruth's devotion excludes this kind of conduct. Further, we have seen that the real bone of contention is always the male heir, not the husband. If this does not happen here it is because Ruth puts her devotion to Naomi, and, thus, the interests of the family unit, above her own need to enjoy her new authority as a biological mother. Ruth has a secure and full personality which makes the battle unnecessary. Therefore she can afford to love another woman and act according to this love. In her case, then, the production of a male heir is not an exclusive motivating force. We shall return to Ruth's story in the next chapter (Chapter 10, section a).

To conclude: The type of matriarch which is described in terms of

the 'Birth of the Hero' paradigm proves that love between women, in contradistinction to love between males, or male and female, is impossible. Ruth, however, shows us that two women of the same family can cooperate to their mutual benefit, while one of them even loves the other. These two biblical views are diametrically opposed to one another; and the pictures each draws of woman's social behaviour within certain conditions and circumstances are widely different. Ruth's case is a departure from the 'norm', which is reflected in the motivation and behaviour attributed to the 'Hero's Mother' type.

b. *The birth of Moses (Exodus 2.1-10)*

Men hardly feature in the story of Moses' birth. The nameless biological father (2.1; elsewhere, but not here, he is identified as Amram) and the legal-adoptive father (the Pharaoh in whose palace Moses grows up) remain in the background. Even Moses himself, the axis around which all action revolves, is only a pawn: he is a helpless baby who does not participate actively in the forward movement of the plot. The actual heroines are the three anonymous women who attend Moses: his biological mother, his sister who puts him into the Nile and later arranges for his feeding; and the adoptive mother, Pharaoh's daughter. Similarly, in the previous chapter, and within a separate story, the Hebrew midwives manage to disobey the Pharaoh and save the Hebrew children—while no such male attempt is reported!

The story is a concise legend—and legend it probably is, for it contains several legendary elements. The heroes are anonymous, and it remains for other Old Testament passages to fill in the gaps and supply them with names. The difficulties attending the birth of the future hero correspond to hardships recounted in similar birth stories within biblical literature and outside it. Leaving the infant to the mercy of the elements, especially water, is quite common in this type of tale: similar adventures befell Sargon the Great, king of Sumner and Akkad,² King Oedipus, and others. The act of salvation is performed by a person of royal blood—this, again, is a common theme. Giving the child a name which recalls the event of salvation is another regular feature of this type of birth story (although, in our case, the etymology for the name is erroneous folk etymology). What distinguishes the story from other representatives of its kind on the one hand, and from the stories of Genesis we have discussed above on the other hand, is the tripartite division of labour. This time the

role of parenthood is not assigned to two persons, one a biological parent and the other a saving/adoptive parent, but to three persons—or, specifically, to three women.

Had the story been constructed differently, with two parent figures instead of three, would it have still been effective? From the point of view of literary plausibility, the biological mother might have successfully executed the role now assigned to the sister. This would have made sense, especially since the mother's own services as wet nurse are soon required and called for, so that she comes back to the scene. Nevertheless, placing the sister in an intermediary position between biological and adoptive mothers makes even more sense. After the apparent removal of the biological mother, her reinstatement and reunion with her child through her assumed role as paid nurse is made even more poignant, ironical, and miraculous through the activities of a third person. Thus it seems that the expansion of the dual motherhood pattern which recurs in Genesis into a tripartite scheme is psychologically effective.

It is virtually unimportant for our analysis whether the biblical account of Moses' birth is a historically authentic story, or indeed, whether it contains strong historical elements. Even if the sister did exist, and did carry out the activities that are attributed to her, our argument—that the story could have been structured upon the dual motherhood pattern, and that if it were not then there must have been a reason for the expansion of the model—still stands. In addition, the sister's figure and actions could have been minimized or dropped altogether, as fiction, historical fiction included, allows. On the other hand, the sister's role could have been invented, or exaggerated, because it serves a purpose which is central to the story.

So, we come back to our question. Why did the storyteller deviate from the conventional model suitable for the description of the 'Hero's Birth'? It is as if the author wanted to convey to us that the danger to the male heir and future hero, who is the pivotal centre of the tale, is so great that two mother figures cannot overcome it without additional support. Two mothers are not enough, and therefore three figures have to pool all their resources in order to succeed. The greater the danger for the infant, the greater the miracle of salvation; and both danger and salvation indicate that the destiny of the child on whom all this care and effort are bestowed will be extraordinary indeed. Thus, a 'matriarchal' theme is expanded so as to draw our attention to the idea that this new hero, Moses, whose birth legend we have just read, will be an even more significant

person than previous heroes (Genesis). In other words, the change made in the structural pattern of the story serves a purpose: it points to the future eminence of the newborn male son. On the other hand, the expanded pattern does not enhance the role of the women involved, for now the act of salvation is divided into three parts instead of the previous two.

c. Mary and Elizabeth (Matthew 1.18-25; Luke 1.5-80 and 2.1-7)

How are Old Testament traditions of the Hero's Mother type reflected in the New Testament? Fortunately, the two versions of Jesus' birth story (in Matthew and in Luke) allow for a double comparison: the two New Testament stories can be compared to each other, then to Old Testament material pertaining to the same subject.

According to Matthew, Mary, a betrothed virgin, finds herself pregnant by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1.18). Joseph is a good man: he wants to dissolve the marriage contract (in accordance with Old Testament law, Deuteronomy 22.19 onwards and Numbers 6) quietly in order not to shame Mary in public. From the beginning, then, difficult circumstances attend the Hero's Birth, although the difficulties are of a different kind from those of Old Testament narratives, as is the case in many birth stories of great biblical men. Here, of course, the miraculous element which enhances the significance of the birth is taken to the ultimate limit—the Holy Spirit itself is involved; and the element of difficulty is supplied not by the barrenness or advanced age of the mother, but by the apparent transgression of sexual mores by Mary, and the regular attitude towards women suspected of adultery. (As Joseph's behaviour shows, others might not have been as merciful as he was.)

In this story (Matthew 1) the adoptive or earthly father Joseph, not the mother, receives a divine revelation in dream form. God reveals to him, as he did to Abraham, that a son will be born, and that this son's destiny will be extraordinary. The difference between the Old Testament model (the promise to Abraham) and its New Testament counterpart (the promise to Joseph), is, nevertheless, considerable. Whereas Abraham is Isaac's biological father, Joseph is his son's legal or earthly father only; and this difference in circumstances entails a different kind of message. The revelation to Joseph has an important function: it helps to dispel Joseph's anxiety about Mary's pregnancy

and cancels out his plan to dissolve the engagement. There is no mention in our source of a similar revelation to Mary herself. But, how else would she know of her baby's parentage? After reading the stories of Sarah, Hagar, Rebecca, Samson's mother, and Hannah, one expects Mary to experience such a revelation, which is an important structural part of the Hero's Birth story. In fact, although the element of revelation to the prospective mother is absent here, it appears in the birth account in Luke. Luke 1.26 onwards records a divine revelation to Mary through an angel, as in the case of Hagar and Samson's mother.

To return to the story in Matthew. Once Joseph is convinced of Mary's innocence and God's plan, the rest of the tale runs smoothly. He supplies Mary with legal protection by taking her home as a wife. He does not have intercourse with her until after the birth, so that the infant's exceptional parenthood cannot be disputed later. In due course Jesus is born and named by his earthly father. This, again, is modelled upon traditions associated with Abraham, who names his children himself. In the case of other births, the women and/or their friends determine the names of the newly born infants. It seems that the parallels to Abraham's traditions are not accidental—the author tells us in his implicit fashion that, like Abraham, Joseph is the 'father' of a totally new religious heritage.

The exceptional circumstances of Jesus' birth are expressed, then, through two main themes: the irregular masculine parenthood; and the difficulty caused by Joseph's conventionally righteous, although merciful, morality. Thus the dual element which informs many Old Testament tales of heroes' birth—double motherhood, biological and legal (or triple motherhood, as in the case of Moses)—is here transformed into dual fatherhood, divine and legal-earthly. Could we conclude that the story in Matthew is a change in an Old Testament traditional pattern? It seems that the specifically patriarchal model has here undergone a process of patriarchalization; alternatively, it has not been utilized at all, although we would have expected the author to utilize it. Therefore, Mary's role is dissimilar to that of the matriarchs in Genesis and elsewhere. She is nothing but a glorified vessel—a vessel for a most precious cargo, but still a vessel.

The story (or stories) in Luke 1.5-2.7 is (are) much richer in detail and more complicated in structure than the narrative in Matthew. Old Testament motifs, especially those recurrent in Genesis, are very much in evidence. Our task here will be to identify these motifs, to

see how and when they are reworked and developed, and what intrinsic purposes they serve.

The story in Luke 1.5-80, much like that in Matthew, displays strong affinities with Old Testament traditions about Abraham. It seems that the author used tales about Isaac's birth as a model and point of departure for his own narrative. Another interesting feature is the juxtaposition of Elizabeth and Mary as a complementary pair. Unlike pairs of matriarchs in Genesis and elsewhere (Hannah and Peninah, 1 Samuel 1), the two New Testament women are not presented as rivals: they are kinswomen (Luke 1.6), but not married to the same man. They are both destined to bear famous men, and the pregnancy of Elizabeth serves as a sign and omen for Mary's (1.36-37). Elizabeth is of priestly stock, married, old, and barren; Mary is a laywoman, betrothed but unmarried, young, and fertile. Thus Mary is socially inferior to her kinswoman. Structurally, the situation is analogous to that of Sarah and Hagar, Leah and Rachel, perhaps also Hannah and Peninah. When Mary visits Elizabeth, the older woman is quick to admit, without bitterness or envy, that the son of the younger woman will be superior to her own son (1.39-45). This straightforward acceptance is an improvement on the bitter struggles embarked upon by various matriarchs in order to improve their sons' lot—it is an act of faith unadulterated by suspicion. However, the superiority of a younger son (or a son born to a socially inferior woman) is a common biblical motif designed to stress the idea that divine blessing is a matter of choice, not of birth and/or social status. Thus Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Joseph, Moses, Jephthah, Samuel, Saul, David, and Solomon all belong to the same tradition of younger sons who are superior to their elders. The inability of the mothers to accept the divine decision without bickering is an integral part of the Old Testament paradigm of the 'Hero's Mother'. By contrast, Elizabeth displays the highest level imaginable of unquestioning faith. Both she and Mary (like Naomi and Ruth) are presented as devoid of competition and intrigue in regard to each other as well as to their environment. Unlike some of their earlier counterparts, their acceptance of their respective fates is gracefully and serenely complete. In that sense they represent an improved female breed. The implication is that their children will follow their mothers' example and cooperate, in contrast to the children of Sarah, Leah, Rachel, and the handmaids who, like their mothers, valued their own personal aspirations more highly than the welfare of family or community.

The future sons of Elizabeth and Mary, like their mothers, are the beginning of a line that will be better and greater than that of their predecessors.

Both Elizabeth and Zechariah are devout, and belong to the priestly aristocracy (Luke 1.5-6). Hence they are inherently suitable for becoming the parents of an exceptional child. Like Sarah and Abraham, they are both advanced in years (1.7), a detail that enhances the improbability of conception and the miraculous eventuality of John's birth. Both Abraham and Zechariah receive a divine revelation concerning the imminent event. Abraham responds sceptically to the divine promise of an heir from Sarah, so much so that he would prefer Ishmael to be the recipient of the divine promise (Genesis 17.17-18). Zechariah employs similar logic (Luke 1.18) and refuses to accept the validity of the divine message (Luke 1.18). Whereas Abraham is not punished for his doubts, Zechariah is struck dumb by way of punishment for his disbelief (1.19-22). He remains in this condition until after the birth, and until he agrees to the name his wife has chosen for the baby (John, Hebrew *Yôhānān* = 'God will show/has shown grace', 1.64). Thereupon he is seized by holy inspiration and utters a prophetic hymn of praise and gratitude (1.68-79), just like Hannah after Samuel's birth (1 Samuel 2.1-10). From the literary-functional aspect, Zechariah's punishment and subsequent inspiration serve to illuminate the theological concepts of obedience and total faith in Providence, undoubtedly the product of repeated contemplation of Abraham's traditions. Similar religious sentiments inform the literary treatment of Elizabeth's. Unlike Sarah, she does not laugh, although the circumstances of both are very much alike. Rather, her belief is so complete that she stays in seclusion throughout her pregnancy, so as to guard the grace bestowed upon her (1.23-24). On the other hand, she does not receive a direct divine revelation: in that she is like Sarah, but unlike other mothers of heroes to be (Hagar, Rebecca, Hannah). The hymn (1.46-55) which is attributed by many versions to Mary could syntactically refer to Elizabeth's alleged authorship as well. However, authorship of a hymn still does not indicate that its author has been graced by a divine revelation. This grace is reserved for Mary (1.26-38), Elizabeth's seemingly inferior but actually superior shadow. Within the Abraham traditions revelations are affected through God himself, an angel, angels, or 'men'; here the carrier of the promise is always the angel Gabriel (vv. 19, 26). Mary is believing almost from the start—a

departure from Sarah's behaviour, and a token of her well-deserved chosen state. Her visit to Elizabeth (1.39 onwards) might be interpreted as a display of the tiniest doubt, but even this is quickly dispelled.

Now for the birth scenes themselves. That of John, with the neighbours in attendance, is reminiscent of Obed's birth in Ruth (ch. 4). The naming of the child by the mother follows a well attested Old Testament tradition (Leah, Rachel, Samson's mother, Hannah), but constitutes a departure from the Abraham stories (where Abraham himself names his children, Genesis 16.14, 21.3). Zechariah's consent for the name is required nonetheless. Can we surmise again that this signifies a degree of patriarchalization of an ancient female prerogative—the woman still makes the decision in such a matter but, unlike similar cases in the Old Testament, her choice has to be approved by the child's father? The delivery itself is smooth, with no danger to mother or child.

Mary's delivery (2.1-7) is depicted in different terms and constructed after another Old Testament model. By royal decree, Mary and Joseph have to leave Nazareth in order to be registered in Bethlehem, Joseph's native town (vv. 1-5). This serves to stress the descent of Joseph (the baby's legal father) from the House of King David, and links the story with the tales of Tamar and Ruth. As a result of this untimely homecoming Jesus, instead of being born in the comfort of home, is endangered: his mother undergoes the risk of travelling close to the time of confinement and, on their arrival, the couple do not manage to find any lodgings (vv. 6-7). The literary device employed is transparent—the greater the danger for mother and infant, the more miraculous the birth seems and the more glorious is the destiny of the child. Structurally, the manger the baby is put in is the equivalent of Moses' rush basket. In both cases the infant is under threat from the local king and the elements of nature, and in both he survives to become a unique prophet. As mentioned above, the apparent abandonment of the infant-hero is well attested in many 'Hero's Birth' stories. Here the motif is modified somewhat—the baby is not abandoned, but suffers a degree of discomfort and risk. A triple prophecy delivered by the shepherds (2.8-20), Simeon (2.21-35), and Anna (2.36-38) reinforces the promise of Jesus' destiny. The prophetic utterances are the structural equivalent of a revelation to both parents together (as in the birth story of Samson, Judges 13).

d. *Summary*

Old Testament stereotyped stories (especially in Genesis) depict patriarchs singly or in pairs. When paired off the women are described as bitter rivals who cannot get along and who, instead of cooperating, jealously compete with each other. Exceptions to this general rule occur in the stories of Lot's daughters, and of Naomi and Ruth.

The paired-off presentation of Elizabeth and Mary is constructed after that of Naomi and Ruth. Other affinities with Old Testament traditions are related to stories about Abraham and Moses. The older traditions are treated as models, to be drawn upon, developed and articulated according to the convictions and aims of New Testament authors. A characteristic feature of the New Testament narratives is the relatively larger role assigned to father figures within the framework of such 'Hero's Birth' legends.