

father to son this threefold promise is passed on: God repeats it to Isaac (Gen. 26.3-5) and to Jacob (Gen. 28.13-14; 35.11-12).² One of the major themes of the Pentateuch, the 'promises to the fathers' is the axis about which the stories in Genesis 12-35 revolve.³ In the stories about Abraham, for example, numerous obstacles threaten the fulfillment of the promise: the apparent sterility (Gen. 11.30; 16.1) or potential loss (chs. 12; 20) of Abraham's wife Sarah; the fact that Abraham and Sarah are too old to have children (17.17; 18.12); and the divine command to Abraham to sacrifice his son, 'your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love' (22.2).

In the stories of Jacob, too, the theme of the promised blessing continues to figure prominently.⁴ Having stolen the patriarchal blessing, Jacob flees his brother's wrath (and the promised land). Any doubts we might have about the efficacy of a *stolen* blessing are immediately resolved when God appears to Jacob in a theophany at Bethel and gives him the threefold promise (28.13-14). While Jacob is in Paddan-aram (chs. 29-32), the blessing is mediated through him to Laban (30.27), and on his return to Canaan, a mysterious stranger, whom Jacob later recognizes as God, wrestles with him on the banks of the Jabbok and blesses him (32.28-29). As the stories of Jacob's adventures draw to a close, God appears to the patriarch once more to reiterate the promise (35.10-12).

These lively stories of the patriarchs' struggles and trials, in which they inevitably come out on top, were, no doubt, savored by the ancient audience, who, as heirs to the promise, knew the outcome in advance. The ancestral stories were recorded in later times to explain who Israel is and

2. As my subject is the matriarchs, I treat here only Genesis 12-35, and not the Joseph story of chs. 37-50, where the matriarchs have no role. The blessing is passed on to Jacob's twelve sons, who are the eponymous ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen. 49).

3. The 'promises to the fathers' is the traditional—and, indeed, appropriate—label for what has been identified as one of the major themes of the Pentateuch; see Noth (1972: 54-58); Westermann (1980); Clines (1978: 29-47).

4. For detailed analysis of the role of the blessing in the Jacob cycle, see Fishbane (1979: 40-62).

Chapter 4

THE (M)OTHER'S PLACE

There has been a basic contradiction throughout patriarchy: between the laws and sanctions designed to keep women essentially powerless, and the attribution to mothers of almost superhuman power (of control, of influence, of life-support).
Adrienne Rich

If, in speaking of a *woman*, it is impossible to say what she is—for to do so would risk abolishing her difference—might matters not stand differently with respect to the *mother*, motherhood being the sole function of the 'other sex' to which we may confidently attribute existence?
Julia Kristeva

The stories of Genesis are stories of the fathers, patriarchal stories. The first of the patriarchs, Abraham, is introduced in Genesis 11 and becomes in Genesis 12 the personification of Israel and bearer of the promise.¹ To Abraham God promises land (the land of Canaan), numerous descendants (as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sand on the seashore, Gen. 15.5; 22.17), and a blessing that Abraham can confer upon others ('I will bless those who bless you, and those who slight you I will curse', Gen. 12.3). And from

1. In this chapter and the next, I use the names 'Abraham' and 'Sarah' throughout. The biblical text uses 'Abram' and 'Sarai' until ch. 17, where God changes their names to 'Abraham' and 'Sarah'. I deliberately alternate between the singular and plural forms, 'the biblical narrator/s', to indicate recognition of multiple traditions behind the narrative voice of the final form of the text. Since my interest in this analysis is the final form of the text, I do not distinguish documentary sources in this material, an enterprise I consider questionable in any event.

how it got that way. The issue of their historical reliability, a much debated question in some areas of biblical scholarship, has little relevance for our inquiry into the portrayal of the matriarchs.⁵ What is relevant for our investigation is the fact that later generations selected these particular events to write about and that they interpreted them to justify their position in the world and to account for what they viewed as their uniqueness among the nations. In the previous Chapter, considerable attention was given to the status of woman as man's other. If the fathers are the significant figures in the patriarchal world of Genesis, and as personifications of Israel represent Israel's 'self', what, we may ask, is the place of the 'other', the mother's place? What role do the biblical writers assign to the matriarchs in the stories of Israel's origins? And, since Genesis is the product of a patriarchal world view, in what ways do these stories of Israel's mothers serve male interests?

Where women do not appear in the narrative is as important as where they do appear. The matriarchs' 'stories' (in the sense I spoke of women's stories in Chapter 1) provide a striking example of the incomplete and fragmented nature of biblical women's stories. They are no more than parts of the larger and more coherent stories of their husbands and sons.⁶ The matriarchs' secondary status as characters (not to mention their secondary social status) can be seen from the following synopsis of Genesis 11–35, where references to the matriarchs are indicated in boldface (with occasional comments about places where we might have expected them to be mentioned). Events in the patriarchs' lives are summarized briefly; the biblical text, of course, gives the patriarchs

5. On the vexed question of the historicity of the patriarchal narratives, see the discussions of Van Seters (1975) and T.L. Thompson (1974).

6. It should be noted that Isaac's story is also fragmentary. He is overshadowed by his father and by his son. To state the obvious: secondary characters are secondary precisely because there are no well-developed stories about them. The important question is: why are all the female characters secondary characters? See Fuchs (1988: 77). As Fuchs (1985a: 136) notes, 'The biblical mother-figures attain neither the human nor the literary complexity of their male counterparts'.

much greater attention. The fact that occasionally the matriarchs are given the spotlight and are allowed to emerge as well-defined characters whose actions shape the plot does not mean that the Genesis writers are suddenly interested in them in their own right. Rather the matriarchs step forward in the service of an androcentric agenda, and once they have served their purpose, they disappear until such time, if any, they might again prove useful.

Genesis 11. Abram's genealogy is given. Sarai is introduced as his wife and we are told she is sterile. Terah, Abram's father, takes Abram, Lot, and Sarai from Ur to Haran.

Genesis 12. In response to God's call and promise to make of him a great nation, Abram journeys to Canaan. Sarai is 'taken' along with Lot and the rest of Abram's household and possessions. Abram travels through the land of Canaan, obviously with his retinue, though Sarah and the others are not mentioned. A famine drives him into Egypt, where he passes Sarai off as his sister. Sarai is taken by the pharaoh as his wife, and consequently Abram prospers from the pharaoh's generosity. When he learns Sarai is Abraham's wife, the pharaoh returns her.

Genesis 13. Abram 'and his wife', Lot, and 'all that he had' return to Canaan. Abram and Lot have too many flocks and herds and tents to remain together in one place; their herdsmen quarrel. Abram and Lot separate, with Lot taking the region around Sodom in the Jordan valley and Abraham dwelling in Canaan. Yhwh renews the promise to Abram.

Genesis 14. Abram defeats a coalition of kings and rescues Lot, who had been taken captive by them. Sarai is not mentioned.

Genesis 15. Abram complains of his childlessness, and God renews the promise, assuring him, 'Your own son shall be your heir'. God makes a covenant with Abram, promising the land of Canaan to his descendants. God foretells a time of oppression, and then release, for Abram's descendants, and promises Abram that he will die in peace at a ripe old age. **Nothing is said about Sarai.**

Genesis 16. Sarai speaks for the first time. She gives her maid

Hagar to Abram as a wife in order to have a child by her. In response to Hagar's arrogance after she becomes pregnant, Sarai treats Hagar harshly. Hagar flees, but God appears to her (one of the few theophanies to a woman) and tells her to return to her mistress and submit to her. Hagar gives birth; Abraham now has a son, whom he names Ishmael.

Genesis 17. God appears to Abram and again renews the promise: 'I will make nations of you and kings shall come forth from you'. God changes Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's to Sarah. Only now do we learn that Abraham's heir will be his son by Sarah. God promises Abraham that he will bless Sarah and 'give you a son by her'; 'kings of peoples shall come from her'. Abraham laughs at the idea of having a child, given his and Sarah's advanced age, and pleads for Ishmael ('O that Ishmael might live in your sight!'). God promises to make a nation of Ishmael but tells Abraham that he will establish his covenant with Isaac ('whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year') and Isaac's descendants. God makes circumcision the sign of this covenant. All the men of Abraham's household are circumcised that day.

Genesis 18. Yhwh/three men appear(s) to Abraham outside his tent, and Abraham offers them hospitality. Abraham tells Sarah to prepare a meal; he serves them outside while Sarah remains in the tent. The men tell Abraham that Sarah will have a son. Sarah, who is listening at the tent door, laughs. When Yhwh asks *Abraham* why Sarah laughed, she denies having laughed. The men set out to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah; Abraham intercedes on behalf of these cities, bargaining with God for the sake of fifty righteous, then forty-five, then forty, then thirty, then twenty, then ten.

Genesis 19. The two divine emissaries destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, saving Lot's family. Lot's wife is turned into a pillar of salt. Lot's daughters get their father drunk, become pregnant by him and give birth to Moab and Ben-ammi, the eponymous ancestors of the Moabites and the Ammonites.

Genesis 20. Abraham journeys to Gerar where he again passes his wife off as his sister. Sarah is taken into Abimelech's harem and returned, untouched, when Abimelech learns she is Abraham's wife. Abraham prospers on her account.

Genesis 21. Sarah gives birth to a son and Abraham names him Isaac. Sarah expresses amazement that she has borne Abraham a son in his old age. After Isaac is weaned, Sarah has Hagar and her son Ishmael cast out so that Isaac will not have to share his inheritance with Ishmael. God saves Hagar in the wilderness and promises her that Ishmael will be the father of a great nation. Abraham and Abimelech quarrel over water rights and make a covenant.

Genesis 22. God tests Abraham, telling him to go to the land of Moriah and sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering. Abraham obeys, but as he prepares to kill Isaac, a messenger of Yhwh calls to him from heaven and stops him. Abraham sacrifices a ram instead of his son. Because of Abraham's obedience, Yhwh renews the promise. Sarah's absence is noteworthy. The chapter concludes with a brief genealogy that introduces Rebekah as the daughter of Bethuel, the son of Nahor, Abraham's brother.

Genesis 23. Sarah's death at 127 years is reported. Abraham mourns her death. From Ephron the Hittite, Abraham purchases the field and the cave of Machpelah; there he buries Sarah.

Genesis 24. Abraham sends his servant to Mesopotamia to find a wife for Isaac among Abraham's kin. The servant prays for a sign: the woman who responds to his request for water both by giving him water and by offering to water his camels will be the woman Yhwh has chosen for Isaac. While the servant is still praying, Rebekah appears at the well with her water jar, gives him water, and then waters the camels. The servant explains his mission to Rebekah's brother Laban and her father Bethuel, and they agree to the marriage. Rebekah is consulted and agrees to leave for Canaan immediately. 'So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.'

Genesis 25. Abraham takes another wife, Keturah, who bears him six children. To the sons of his wives (plural)⁷ of secondary rank, Abraham gives gifts, but he sends them away, leaving everything he has to Isaac. Abraham dies and is buried by his sons Isaac and Ishmael in the cave of Machpelah with Sarah his

7. Perhaps this refers to Hagar and Keturah; otherwise we know nothing of these wives; cf. Speiser (1964: 187).

wife. Ishmael's descendants are listed, and attention turns to Isaac. Rebekah is sterile, Isaac prays for her, and Yhwh grants the prayer. Rebekah conceives twins, who struggle within her; she inquires of Yhwh and is told that two nations shall be born of her and the elder will serve the younger. The twins are born, with Jacob grasping his brother's heel. When they grow up, Isaac prefers Esau 'but Rebekah loved Jacob'. Esau is tricked by Jacob into selling him his birthright in exchange for lentil soup.⁸

Genesis 26. Isaac goes to Gerar in time of famine (obviously he takes his family but none of them is mentioned). Yhwh appears to him and gives him the threefold promise that he had sworn to Abraham. In Gerar Isaac passes his wife off as his sister. Abimelech sees Isaac engaged in some form of sexual play with Rebekah and upbraids him for his deception. Isaac becomes very wealthy, and Abimelech sends him away. Isaac and the Philistines engage in a series of disputes over wells. Yhwh appears to Isaac and renews the promise. Isaac and Abimelech make a covenant. Esau takes Hittite wives, 'and they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah'.

Genesis 27. Rebekah orchestrates Jacob's deception of his father and theft of the blessing. When she learns of Esau's plan to kill Jacob, she gets Isaac to send him to Paddan-aram to take one of her brother's daughters as a wife.

Genesis 28. Isaac sends Jacob away with the blessing of Abraham. Esau takes another wife, this time an Ishmaelite. On the way to Haran, Jacob has a dream in which God appears to him and gives him the threefold promise. Jacob vows Yhwh will be his god if he protects him and brings him back to the land of Canaan in peace.

Genesis 29. Jacob arrives in Haran, where he meets Rachel by the well when she comes to water her father's sheep. Jacob loves Rachel and serves his uncle Laban seven years for her, but Laban deceives Jacob and brings Leah to him on the wedding night. A week later, Jacob gets Rachel as his wife in return for serving Laban another seven years. Yhwh, seeing

8. Von Rad (1961: 261); Westermann (1985: 418). Daube (1969: 194-97) suggests that Esau thought he was getting blood soup, considered to have special powers for reviving a tired body.

that Rachel is preferred over Leah, makes Leah fertile and she bears Jacob four sons (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah).

Genesis 30. Rachel, who is sterile, gives her maid Bilhah to Jacob in order to have a child through her, and Bilhah bears Dan and Naphtali. Leah gives her maid Zilpah to Jacob and she bears Gad and Asher. Leah bears two more sons, Issachar and Zebulun, and a daughter, Dinah. Finally Rachel gives birth to Joseph. Jacob wishes to return to Canaan and agrees with Laban that the speckled and spotted sheep and black lambs in Laban's flock will be his wages. Laban tries to cheat Jacob by hiding these animals, but Jacob uses a trick of his own to make the flocks breed striped, speckled, and spotted offspring, thereby increasing his flocks.

Genesis 31. In response to the jealousy of Laban's sons and to a command from Yhwh to return 'to the land of your fathers', Jacob decides to return to Canaan. He consults with Rachel and Leah, and they agree to his plan, accusing their father of selling them and using up their dowry, and claiming the property Jacob got from Laban as theirs and their children's. Jacob, his sons, and his wives depart secretly and Rachel steals her father's household gods. Laban pursues, but God tells him in a dream not to harm Jacob. Laban overtakes Jacob and accuses him of stealing his gods; he searches the tents but does not find them because Rachel sits on them and says she cannot rise because 'the way of women is upon me'. Laban and Jacob make a covenant, in which Jacob agrees not to ill-treat Laban's daughters or take other wives (Jacob's wives of secondary rank, Bilhah and Zilpah, are not mentioned).

Genesis 32. Jacob sends messengers to Esau and learns that Esau is coming to meet him. Jacob prays to Yhwh for deliverance. Hoping to appease Esau, he sends a generous present ahead of him. Jacob sends all he has, including his two wives and his two maids, across the Jabbok and remains alone, where he wrestles all night with a man, who blesses him and changes his name to Israel. Jacob identifies the mysterious stranger as God.

Genesis 33. In preparation for his meeting with Esau, which he fears, Jacob divides his household into four camps, putting the maids and their children in front, followed by Leah and her children, and then Rachel and Joseph. The brothers are reconciled; Jacob agrees to follow Esau to Seir, but instead settles in

Shechem.

Genesis 34. Dinah, 'the daughter of Leah', is raped by Shechem when she goes out to visit the women of the land. The Shechemites make a treaty with Jacob, but two of Jacob's sons avenge the rape by killing the men of Shechem and plundering the city.

Genesis 35. God tells Jacob to go to Bethel and build an altar there. Jacob and his household put away their foreign gods. God appears to Jacob again, changes his name to Israel, and repeats the promise of land and descendants. Rachel dies in childbirth. She names the child Ben-oni ('son of my sorrow') but Jacob changes the name to Benjamin ('son of the right hand'). Reuben has sexual relations with Bilhah, and Jacob learns of it (but *we* hear nothing more of it). The chapter ends with a list of Jacob's twelve sons and an account of Isaac's death.

The Absent Matriarch

Although the matriarchs are not actually absent from the narrative, they regularly drop out of view at critical points in the family's history.⁹ When the threefold promise of land, descendants, and Israel as a sign or mediator of blessing is addressed to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, there are no matriarchs in sight. When Abraham is called by God and Israel's unique relationship to God is thereby established (*Gen.* 12), Sarah is invisible. Abraham follows the divine call to the promised land and Sarah is simply 'taken' with him (12.5). When Abraham undergoes his critical test of faith and is willing to sacrifice Isaac at God's command (*Gen.* 22), Sarah is not mentioned.¹⁰ It is *his* test just as it was *his* call in *Gen.* 12.1-3, and everything depends

9. To be sure, the text acknowledges the presence of women: Abraham 'took' Sarah to Canaan (12.5); Jacob returns to Canaan with his wives (31.17). Elsewhere, however, the patriarch, as the key figure in the narrative, stands for his entire company; e.g. 12.6, 8, 9, 10, where only Abraham is mentioned as traveling through Canaan to Egypt, and 26.1, where Isaac 'went to Gerar'.

10. For a compelling discussion of the Akedah, focusing on the stakes for God as well as Abraham, see Landy (1989).

upon his trust in the divine promises, not hers. And when, in *Genesis* 32, Jacob becomes 'Israel' as a result of his wrestling match with God, the matriarchs are actually and symbolically nowhere to be seen. They are on the other side of the Jabbok, a convenient distance from the patriarch's solitary struggle:

The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two maid-servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. And Jacob was left alone... (*Gen.* 32.23-25).

In all these events not just the family's future, but that of the nation Israel, hangs in the balance. The matriarchs' absence at these crucial junctures reflects the fact that Israel is personified in its fathers, not its mothers.

The matriarchs are absent not only from these pivotal scenes but also from many other segments of the narrative. Equally revealing of the narrators' lack of interest in the matriarchs is the absence of their point of view even when they are present. How does Sarah react to Abraham's telling foreigners she is his sister, and to being taken into a foreigner's harem? What is the suspense like for Rebekah while Jacob executes her plan for stealing the blessing? Does Leah meekly accept being used by her father to deceive Jacob, and have no reservations about the fact that Jacob, who prefers her sister, is tricked into marrying her? And how do Bilhah and Zilpah, whose point of view is never shown, react to being given to Jacob by their mistresses?

There are scenes where the matriarchs are actually given center stage in the *Genesis* narratives. But despite the attention they receive, their actions are allowed to advance the plot only insofar as they have important consequences for their sons, the future patriarchs: either to ensure that the 'right' son become the bearer of the promise, i.e. become 'Israel' (as Sarah and Rebekah do), or to increase Israel (as Rachel, Leah, and their maids do by bearing Jacob twelve sons—the twelve tribes of Israel). The matriarchs appear in the narrative as the wives, or suitable wives-to-be (as in *Gen.* 24; 29.4-20), who will bear the sons of the promise to the

crucial birth announcement for which we are forced to wait so long in narrative time, and the protagonists, in chronological time—that Sarah will bear a son—is made to Abraham alone on two different occasions (17.15-16; 18.10). The second time the announcement is made, Sarah *overhears* it.¹⁴ Peter Miscall observes that Sarah's surprised response in Genesis 18 indicates that Abraham had not informed her of the birth announcement the first time it is made.¹⁵ In other words, the narrator has no interest in including her at all the first time and includes her only indirectly the second time.

The matriarchs are never more absent from the narrative—even when they are mentioned by name—than at the moment of their deaths. By contrast, the patriarchs' deaths are grand occasions, fitting conclusions to their important lives. Abraham dies 'at a ripe old age, an old man and full of years', and is buried by his sons, Isaac and Ishmael, who are united in family solidarity for the first time since Ishmael's expulsion from Abraham's household (Gen. 25.8-9). This pattern is repeated for Isaac; he, too, is 'old and full of days' when he dies, and he is buried by his reconciled sons, Jacob and Esau (Gen. 35.29). Jacob dies in Egypt, surrounded by his twelve sons, the family once again united after threatened dissolution, and his sons and their households form a large company to take his body back to Canaan for burial (Gen. 49.33-50.14). The patriarchs die peacefully, surrounded by their sons in a grand show of unity and harmony that somehow belies the deep filial discord that has characterized each generation.

loses her only child to the father'. For a woman as the recipient of a birth announcement, see also Judg. 13, discussed in Chapter 3 above.

14. In Gen. 18, the announcement is made to Abraham alone even though Sarah, and not Abraham, is the subject of it. Unlike Gen. 17.16, where God says, 'I will give you [Abraham] a son *by her*', Gen. 18.10 speaks only of Sarah, 'Sarah your wife shall have a son', without making it a son 'to [le] Abraham'.

15. Miscall (1983: 32). In Gen. 18, the narrator uses their new names, Abraham and Sarah, but he does not tell us at what point and under what circumstances Sarah learns about the name change and its meaning (she refers to herself as Sarah in 21.7)—another indication of his lack of interest in the woman's point of view.

fathers, but never as characters in their own right. The repeated story in Genesis 12, 20, and 26, in which the patriarch passes his wife off as his sister, is no exception, for although the matriarchs provide the occasion for the story, the protagonists are men. And the story reflects the narrator's interest in the matriarchs' role as mothers, for if the patriarch loses his wife to a foreign ruler, how can he have descendants? Moreover, by posing a threat to the exclusive rights to a woman by her husband, these accounts reveal their concern with the issue of the proper lineage of the chosen people. And that issue, as we shall see, lies at the heart of the patriarchal narratives. Even a story that on the surface might seem to acknowledge a greater role for the matriarchs, one less directly focused on offspring—Jacob's consultation with Rachel and Leah about leaving Paddan-aram (Gen. 31.4-16)—serves a patriarchal agenda connected to the theme of proper lineage, which we shall explore below.

It is, of course, understandable that Genesis portrays the matriarchs' lives as revolving around their sons, for it was through bearing children that women achieved status and gained some security for themselves in the patriarchal society of ancient Israel.¹¹ Having sons who will bear the promise is, of course, crucial for the patriarchs too. The promise of numerous descendants is made to them no less than eight times (Gen. 13.16; 15.5; 17.2-21; 22.17; 26.3-4, 24; 28.13-14; 35.11; see also 46.3).¹² In contrast, there is no birth announcement to any of the matriarchs in Genesis.¹³ The

11. See Bird (1974: 51-55, 61-71).

12. There are actually more references than these to the promise of descendants, depending on what references one counts; see the helpful chart in Clines (1978: 32-33).

13. In contrast to the matriarchs, the non-Israelite mother, Hagar, is the recipient of a birth announcement, Gen. 16.10-12. In the absence of a male figure (Abraham's lineage is to be reckoned elsewhere), she takes on a role comparable to Abraham's; but note that the promise to her in Gen. 21 incorporates the woman into a promise for the son's descendants. Both Hagar and Sarah suffer losses; cf. Exum (1985: 77): 'One is cast out, becoming the mother of a great nation excluded from the covenant; the other stays within the patriarchal hearth and almost

It is different with the matriarchs. For Sarah, there is only the briefest of notices, the first we hear of her since she had Hagar and Ishmael sent away, just after Isaac was weaned. The placement of her death notice immediately after the near-sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 23.1-2) barely hints at a connection—though a later midrash interpreted the juxtaposition to mean that Sarah dropped dead upon hearing what Abraham was prepared to do (Tanhuma, *Par. Vayira* 23). Sarah never sees Isaac again after his father takes him away for the sacrifice—a cruel fate for both mother and son. Isaac is later 'consoled' for the loss of his mother (24.67) when he marries Rebekah, but Sarah is not comforted after her son's brush with death. We are not told that Isaac is present at her death, as he is at Abraham's. We are told that Abraham mourned Sarah. Yet more attention is given to Abraham's negotiations to buy a burial place from the Hittites, which involves a claim to the promised land, than to Sarah's death.

Of Leah's death we hear nothing. All we ever learn is that she was buried in the cave at Machpelah, along with Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Rebekah (Gen. 49.31). The narrative neglect of her death is reminiscent of the neglect Leah suffered at the hands of her husband Jacob during her life. The circumstances of Rebekah's death are not recorded either, but, in her case, this appears to be less a case of narrative neglect than of narrative punishment for her role in securing the blessing for Jacob, her favorite son. When she sends Jacob away to her brother Laban in Haran, she expects the separation from her favorite son to be temporary: 'Stay with him a while until your brother's fury turns away ... then I will send and fetch you from there' (27.44-45). But she never sends for him and she never sees him again. When Jacob returns to Canaan and eventually goes 'to his father Isaac at Mamre' (35.27), there is no mention of his mother. Whether she is dead or alive makes no difference.

Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife, dies in childbirth (35.16-20). Are we to regard this as her punishment for stealing her father's household gods (teraphim, Gen. 31.19, 32)? In protesting his innocence of the theft to Laban, Jacob had said, 'Anyone with whom you find your gods shall not live'

(31.32). Upon whom could his pronouncement fall if not on Rachel? Strictly speaking, of course, Rachel's death cannot result from Jacob's declaration because Laban *did not find* his gods.¹⁶ But regardless of whether or not it serves as a kind of punishment, when Rachel's death is reported, it is by no means the central concern of the narrative but merely a marginal note to the birth of Benjamin.¹⁷ Whereas the patriarchs die surrounded by their sons, the matriarchs, whose lives are lived for virtually nothing else but their sons, are not accorded peaceful deaths in their sons' company. Rebekah's and Leah's deaths are not reported (nor are Bilhah's and Zilpah's, their maids). Only Sarah dies in ripe old age, but we do not learn whether she dies with a sense of fulfillment—'full of days' like Abraham—or of loss. And Rachel dies in her prime, her child-bearing years, bemoaning her lot. In contrast to the honor the narrative accords the patriarchs at their deaths, there is no sense of harmonious closure to the matriarchs' lives. For their lives, and thus their deaths, hold little interest for the biblical narrators.

The Right Wife and the Right Mother

What is the importance of the matriarchs for the biblical narrators? To answer this question we need to recognize that, as a major statement of biblical ideology, Genesis offers 'ancestral' justification to two key biblical concepts: Israel's claim to be the chosen people and its claim to the land of Canaan. Abraham (= Israel) is singled out by God as the recipient of the promise that his descendants will inherit the land of Canaan. As this promise will be passed from generation to generation, the crucial question becomes, How is a pure line of descent to be maintained? An obvious answer to this question would appear to be: through endogamous marriage. The marriage of men to women from their own patriline would ensure the offspring's patrilineage membership not simply if descent is figured in the typical biblical

16. Daube (1969: 216-17); Fuchs (1988: 81).

17. Fuchs (1985a: 132).

fashion—through the father—but even if it were figured through the mother.¹⁸ The issue, of course, is no less than the identity of Israel: who belongs to the chosen people and who does not? Ishmael, for example, though he is Abraham's son and a covenant is made with him, is excluded from the line of the promise, for God has decided that Sarah shall be the mother of the chosen people (18.15-19) and that her son will be heir to the promise to Abraham: 'through Isaac your descendants shall be named' (21.12). When it is time for Isaac to marry, Abraham makes his servant swear that he 'will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell, but will go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac' (24.3-4). Similarly Isaac charges his son Jacob, 'You shall not take a wife from the daughters of the Canaanites. Go at once to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel your mother's father, and take from there a wife from the daughters of Laban your mother's brother' (28.1-2). These passages make clear that, in the case of Abraham's descendants, the 'right wife' for the patriarch and thus the 'right mother' for his sons cannot be a local woman, a Canaanite, but rather must come from the same family line as the patriarch himself.¹⁹ Thus

18. Jay (1992: 98). It might be tempting for us to take the biblical pattern of reckoning descent through fathers for granted, but, as Jay's study shows, patterns of calculating descent have to be established; and establishing the reckoning of descent through fathers is precisely what the Genesis narrators seek to accomplish.

19. Steinberg (1991) argues that the proper wife is a woman from the patrilineage of Terah and thus the proper heir to the promises both belongs to and marries a woman from the patrilineage of Terah. She proposes that Esau, who has both the correct father (Isaac) and the correct mother (Rebekah), is excluded from the Israelite lineage because he married the 'wrong' wives, women from outside the appropriate kinship boundaries (p. 50). It is not entirely clear whether or not Abraham and Sarah's marriage is endogamous. In Genesis 20, Abraham claims Sarah is his half-sister, the daughter of his father but not the daughter of his mother; see the discussion of this issue in Chapter 5 below. It is not essential that the marriage be endogamous since Abraham *begins* the lineage (that is, there is a break between Abraham's line and Terah's); see Eilberg-Schwartz (1990: 167), and the discussion of circumcision below.

Isaac marries Rebekah, the daughter of his father's brother's son,²⁰ and Jacob marries Leah and Rachel, his mother's brother's daughters.

Anthropological studies have shed considerable light on kinship patterns in the Genesis narratives²¹ and contribute to our understanding of the ideological function endogamous marriage serves in this material. That the patriarchs belong to the same patriline as the patriarchs ensures that the patriarchs (= Israel) will not have to share their inheritance of the land of Canaan with the indigenous Canaanites and that their privileged position as the chosen people will not be compromised by intermarriage with 'foreigners'.²² The situation of patrilineal endogamy in our narrative—that is, the marriage of men to women from their own patriline—enables the biblical narrators to maintain a pure line of descent, tracing descent through fathers while at the same

On the issue of 'correct' marriages, see also Pitt-Rivers (1977: 151-70). Jacob's wives of secondary rank, Bilhah and Zilpah, are not Canaanite, but though they are from Mesopotamia, they do not belong to Jacob's patriline. Although these marriages are not endogamous, Rachel and Leah 'correct' the irregularity in the descent of Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher by accepting the maids' sons as their own (something Sarah did not do for Ishmael). Joseph marries exogamously, but Jacob corrects Joseph's sons' irregular descent by adopting Ephraim and Manasseh (Gen. 48.5); see Jay (1992: 109-10; 1988: 56).

20. So Gen. 24.15, 24, 47; on the basis of Gen. 24.48 and 29.5, one might conclude she is Isaac's father's brother's daughter (i.e. that her father is Nahor). Steinberg (1991: 52) explains the apparent contradiction by suggesting that in Gen. 24.48 and 29.5 the genealogy is traced to the significant ancestor for the text, Nahor, from whom the descent line is traced. Similarly, Wander (1981: 86).

21. See Steinberg (1991); Oden (1983); Andriolo (1973); Donaldson (1981); Prewitt (1981); Wander (1981).

22. As the work of Lévi-Strauss and others who have followed his lead has shown, ideology does not necessarily reflect social reality, and often inverts it; see Lévi-Strauss (1966); Andriolo (1973). The biblical text regards Canaanites as 'other', as 'foreign', though evidence exists that Israel was largely composed of native Canaanites; see Gottwald (1979: esp. 358-75, 464-583). Leach (1966) investigates the contradiction between the promise of the land to Abraham, which, he argues, implies a preference for endogamy, and the fact that the people in the land actually intermarry freely.

time recognizing descent from mothers. But it also, as Nancy Jay points out, 'conceals a conflict: it is unclear about which is the "real" parent through whom unilineal descent flows'.²³ Whose is the child—the mother's or the father's?²⁴ The text's acknowledgment of the importance of mothers in the line of descent does not mean we are dealing with matrilineal social structure; rather, what is at stake here is an ideological problem. The Genesis narrators are wrestling with a potential complication, an underlying tension that exists because Israel's ancestry is traced not only through its fathers but also through its mothers. Their problem is to demonstrate that it is the male line of descent that determines Israel's identity, while at the same time affirming the importance of descent from the proper mother. That such a contradiction exists is not all that unusual, for irresolvable conflicts and tensions occur in all societies.²⁵ And that the biblical narrators do not succeed in resolving it is no surprise, since the contradiction is real. Their inability to resolve the contradiction, and their efforts to obscure and evade it, aid us in exposing some of the ways gender politics have shaped Israel's picture of its origins.

The matriarchs' ambivalent status makes them a problem. They are 'other' who are also 'same', outsiders who are part of the family. In discussing the ideological difficulty they pose for a system based on the concept of family as continued through male descendants, Nathaniel Wander observes:

The advantages of organizing a society along clear lines of descent (in this case, through males) and of reckoning the relations between such descent groups in terms of genealogy tend to be lost when wives are taken from within these groups rather than from 'strangers'. In such circumstances, the lines of descent become obscured as the group of people actually living and working together are all equally related through females as through males. The ideal of unilineality (or descent measured in

23. Jay (1992: 98-99); see also Wander (1981) for a similar argument. Jay, who distinguishes between the pentateuchal sources J, E, and P, makes extremely interesting observations about their differences.

24. Jay (1992: 100).

25. See Douglas (1966: 140-58); Turner (1967: 22-39); as this applies specifically to Genesis, see Wander (1981); Leach (1969: 7-23).

a single line) is falsified and the use of genealogy to order relationships of power, authority, succession, inheritance is called into question by a contrary reality.²⁶

Acknowledging descent through mothers not only makes mothers extremely important—in itself problematic for patriarchy—it also competes with the recognition of descent from fathers; for whereas motherhood is biologically verifiable, fatherhood must be established. Patriarchy relies on a number of strategies to affirm the paternal claim to offspring, all of which entail suppression or denial of the woman's importance. Here I shall consider four of them and their role in Genesis, reserving a fifth for discussion in conjunction with the motif of the sterile matriarch below.

1. *Omitting women's names in genealogical lists.* An extremely effective strategy by which the Genesis narrators establish the paternal claim to offspring is by omitting women's names in genealogical lists. Genealogies serve to order social relations among groups, whether in the domestic or political spheres, or even in religious matters. In the Bible, these groups always have males as their eponymous ancestors. A man begets a son, who in turn begets his son, and so on down the line. A man may, of course, have more than one child, but because genealogies include only the portion of the family tree that is of interest to those who preserve them, descent is usually traced through the son or (as in Jacob's case) sons considered to be the ancestor of the group responsible for the genealogy.²⁷ To read the genealogical lists in the Bible, one would think the men did not need wives to reproduce. Women's names do not appear apart from exceptional cases, for which an explanation is usually to be found in the surrounding narrative. In Genesis 11, for

26. Wander (1981: 81).

27. See Wilson (1977: esp. 183-202). Wilson notes (p. 198) that whereas the Israelite genealogies may have once functioned in social or political spheres, they do not have this function in their present literary context. He proposes that only in oral form can genealogy function successfully in these areas because of the need for genealogies to change in order to reflect changing relations among the people involved.

example, Sarai appears because her apparent sterility poses a problem for the continuity of Abraham's line.

That not only Sarah but all the matriarchs are, in fact, exceptional cases is hardly fortuitous. They cannot be omitted from the genealogies because of the narrative insistence on descent from the proper mother.²⁸ Rebekah is mentioned at the beginning of Isaac's genealogy (*toledot*, 25.19-20), and she disrupts genealogical stability by effecting the substitution of Jacob for Esau as his father's rightful heir.²⁹ Not surprisingly, in view of their role as the mothers of the twelve tribes of Israel, the greatest attention of a genealogical nature is given to Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah. They are the subjects of a genealogical narrative (29.31-30.24; 35.16-20) and their names appear in the genealogical lists of Gen. 35.22-26 and Gen. 46.8-27, where they account for the division of Jacob's twelve sons into subgroups of different status.³⁰ Since Israel obviously has many more maternal ancestors than Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah, we can say that, in general, the strategy of suppressing women's names in genealogical lists in Genesis succeeds in confirming the paternal claim to the lineage. That the matriarchs stand out among the few women who make their way into the genealogical lists attests to their ambiguous status and their problematic presence for the narrator. They resist any simple narrative resolution that would confine them entirely to the mother's place, which in the case of the genealogies means being absent, not being remembered.

2. *Insistence on exclusive sexual rights to a woman by her husband.* Establishing the paternal claim to offspring also lies

28. On the narrative structure of Gen. 12-50 as representing movement from equilibrium (represented by genealogy) to disequilibrium (represented by the problems each of the patriarchs has in obtaining the proper heir—all of which involve the matriarchs) back to equilibrium, see Steinberg (1989: 41-50; 1984: 175-88).

29. Cf. Furman (1985: 114): 'Rebekah's deceitful action ultimately disturbs the exclusively male genealogical lineage'.

30. For a discussion of these texts, see Wilson (1977: 184-88); Wilson distinguishes between genealogical list and genealogical narrative (p. 9).

behind patriarchy's insistence on the exclusive sexual rights to the woman by her husband.³¹ The possibility that the matriarch might have sexual relations with a man other than the patriarch, which can be regarded as a threat to the purity of the line, is raised three times in Genesis. In all three accounts, the patriarch fears for his life at the hands of foreign men because of his beautiful wife. In order to prevent their killing him in order to have her, he passes her off as his sister. In Genesis 12 and 20, Sarah is taken into the harem of a foreign ruler. Whereas Genesis 12 does not explicitly deny that sexual relations took place between Sarah and the pharaoh, in Genesis 20 we hear that Abimelech did not touch Sarah. That Abraham's exclusive right to Sarah is not violated is important at this particular point in the story, since, immediately after the encounter with Abimelech, Sarah gives birth to Isaac, and the narrative can permit no doubt that Isaac is Abraham's son. In Genesis 26, Rebekah is not taken into Abimelech's harem. Unlike Sarah, she is not, *even potentially*, dispensable to the patriarch, for she has secured her place in the patriarchal household by having already borne Isaac two sons.³² It is peculiar that the issue of exclusive sexual rights to the matriarch is raised three times in a manner so similar and yet with such curious differences. These accounts are so unusual and unconventional, and traditional interpretations of them so unsatisfying, that I shall return to them in the next chapter and attempt an unconventional interpretation.

3. *Resolving the issue of descent and residence in favor of the husband.* One way the paternal claim to the lineage is reinforced in Genesis is by resolving the issue of descent and residence in favor of the husband. Lineage plays a crucial role in determining the inheritance of property and the

31. See the discussions in Lerner (1986: 101-22); Bird (1974: 51-53).

32. See Steinberg (1984: 180; 1988: 8); Clines (1990: 70, 72-77). I am not convinced by Steinberg's and Clines's proposals about the matriarch's dispensability in Gen. 12 and 20; it might make sense in Gen. 12, but it is hard to see how, in Gen. 20, Abraham could consider Sarah dispensable since God has told him in Gen. 17 that Sarah would be the mother of his heir. See the discussion below, Chapter 5.

proper lines of authority as well as for structuring relationships between groups. In establishing the proper identity for Israel, two important issues are involved, and they are interrelated—descent and residence.³³ The proper wife and mother must be related to Abraham (which means she must come from Haran), but Isaac and Jacob may not marry uxoriously (which means the 'right wife' must be brought back to Canaan from Haran). Uxorilocal marriage, in which the husband lives with the wife's family, is a threat not only because it would take the rightful heir out of the land promised to his lineage (loss of residence) but also because such an arrangement could result in Abraham's lineage being swallowed up by the woman's family (loss of descent). Abraham twice instructs his servant not to take Isaac back to Mesopotamia to find a wife (Gen. 24.6, 8). On the symbolic level, Canaan, as the residence of the patriarchs, and Haran, as the home of the matriarchs, function in the story as metonyms for the father's place and the mother's place respectively.³⁴ In Haran, in Rebekah's 'mother's household' (Gen. 24.28), the father's role is

33. Bal stresses the importance of the 'house' as 'the shifter where residence and descentance meet' (1988a: 85). Leach (1966) examines the biblical preoccupation with endogamy and land rights.

34. My point has to do with ideology and does not imply that descent was reckoned matrilineally in ancient Mesopotamia, for which there is no evidence. Nevertheless, the tension these narratives reflect regarding marriage and descent patterns is real. Jay's discussion of these narratives in terms of the conflict between descent through fathers and descent through mothers illuminates many of the difficulties the stories present; see also the similar observations of Wander (1981). The conflict between Jacob and Laban (discussed below) corresponds to what Bal (1988a: 84-86) identifies as a conflict between patrilocal and virilocal marriage in the book of Judges. Primarily for the sake of clarity, but also because in Genesis the conflict is brought to the fore by the insistence on descent through mothers, I use the terms 'uxorilocal' (marriage in which the husband resides with the wife's family) and 'patrilocal' (marriage in which the couple resides with the husband's family). It is, however, the case in Genesis that the movement is toward virilocal marriage: Isaac and Jacob establish their own households rather than living in the households of their fathers; thus I also refer to their situations as patrilineal virilocal marriage.

minimal—so minimal, in fact, that some scholars argue that he is dead, in spite of the fact that he appears in the narrative in v. 50.³⁵ Whereas Rebekah's brother and father (not insignificantly, the name of Laban, the brother, is first) agree to let Rebekah become Isaac's wife (v. 50), gifts—apparently representing the bride-price—are given to Rebekah, to her brother, and to her mother. Her brother and her mother request that Rebekah be allowed to remain with them for a brief time before leaving for Canaan, and Rebekah is the one who decides to depart immediately (24.55, 58). The blessing she receives as she departs mother-identified Haran for father-identified Canaan affirms descent through mothers: 'May your descendants possess the gate of those who hate them' (v. 60).

The story of how Isaac acquired the correct wife serves to affirm patrilocal marriage over uxorilocal marriage and, by uprooting the woman from her family, privileges the husband's line of descent, or Abraham's side of the family, into whose genealogy the woman will be absorbed. The story of how Jacob acquired his wives serves the same purpose, but here the threat is represented as more serious. Jacob flees Canaan, the father's place, and settles in Haran, the mother's place, with his mother's brother, Laban. He marries his mother's brother's daughters³⁶ and lives and serves in his maternal uncle's household for twenty years. Laban's position as head of the household is witnessed by the fact that Jacob must ask his permission to return to Canaan with his wives and children: 'Send me away that I may go to my

35. E.g. Skinner (1910: 344); Speiser (1964: 184); Vawter (1977: 272); Westermann (1985: 388). Jay (1988: 61-62; 1992: 103-104) finds the social structure described in Genesis 24 consistent with matriliney; however, Abraham's servant speaks of 'the house of my master's brothers/kinsmen' (24.27, 48) and 'the daughter of my master's brother/kinsman' (24.48). On the 'mother's house' and 'father's house' as alternate designations for the same social unit, see Meyers (1991).

36. This is, interestingly, a marriage pattern characteristic of matrilineal societies; cf. Steinberg (1991: 48); Jay (1988: 63-64); Wander (1981: 83). In actual matrilineages, the mother's brother is the head of the family. On the unique relationship of a man to his maternal uncle, see Oden (1983: 199-203).

place and my country. Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you that I may go, for you know the service I have done for you' (30.25-26).

For the promises to Abraham to be fulfilled through him, Jacob must return to Canaan to claim his patrimony, and his descendants who will possess the land must be reckoned through the male line back to Abraham. This is already stipulated and prefigured in the blessing Jacob receives from his father when he leaves Canaan.

May he [God] give the blessing of Abraham to you and to your descendants with you that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings which God gave to Abraham (Gen. 28.4).

Consequently, Yhwh commands Jacob to 'return to the land of your fathers' (31.3).

The narrative resolves the descent conflict—are the children of Rachel, Leah, and their maids to be reckoned to Jacob's household, or to Laban's (cf. 31.43)?—and 'rescues' Jacob from his uxorilocal situation in Haran in two stages. First Jacob consults with Rachel and Leah about leaving Haran for Canaan. We are now in a position to see why this consultation is not so egalitarian as it might have seemed at first glance. Since their father Laban, and not Jacob as their husband, holds authority over the household, Jacob needs his wives' support to make his move from a uxorilocal setting in Haran to Canaan, where he will establish his own household. Otherwise he would be guilty of having 'abducted my daughters like captives of the sword', as Laban later accuses him (v. 26). He makes therefore a long plea in his defense (vv. 5-13), and his success in turning his wives against their father (vv. 14-15) marks a victory for descent through fathers over descent through mothers. The women respond: 'Do we any longer have a portion or an inheritance in our father's house? Are we not regarded by him as foreign women? For he has sold us and moreover he has used up our dowry (literally, 'eaten up our money').'³⁷

37. Whether this is their dowry or the bride-price (the equivalent of the wages for Jacob's labor, which was sometimes used to provide for the woman's dowry), it is money the sisters consider theirs to pass on.

Their description of themselves as 'foreign women' (*nokriyyot*) in their father's eyes is noteworthy. Their response can be taken as hyperbole designed to show their strong support of their husband. If we understand the women to be speaking in the interest of the patriarchal text, then their characterization of themselves as foreign women symbolically places them in the position of outsiders. To be regarded as foreign women by their father is to be cut off from their line of descent, the line of descent they share with Jacob. The conflict caused by having mothers from the same patriline as fathers would thus be symbolically eliminated and the ideal of unilineal descent from fathers could be more easily maintained. The text projects onto the women a denial of the importance of descent through mothers (a double move, since they project it onto Laban) and, because they cast their lot with Jacob, an affirmation that descent will be reckoned through the father. In this case, what is in the text's interest—that the women and their children pass from the father's control to that of the husband—is also in the women's interest, as suggested by the next verse, where they lay claim to their dowry as theirs to pass on to their children: 'All the property that God has taken away from our father *belongs to us and to our children*; so do whatever God has told you' (v. 16). It bears noting that the motivation attributed to them is not loyalty to Jacob but maternal concern to preserve their sons' inheritance. It is in their interest to secure their sons' futures, for their own future well-being depends upon their sons.

The victory of patrilocal marriage and descent from fathers over uxorilocal marriage and descent from mothers is confirmed in the confrontation between Laban and Jacob, when Laban overtakes his son-in-law en route to Canaan. Laban, as the head of the household, lays claim to the lineage: 'The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children' (Gen. 31.43). The children, Jacob's children, are his because the daughters, Jacob's wives, are his; Laban's claim depends on recognition of descent through mothers. There

to their children; see Morrison (1983: 160-61); Westbrook (1991: 150).

is, however, nothing Laban can do to prevent Jacob's departure for his paternal home, for 'the God of your [Jacob's] father' (v. 29) is on the side of descent from fathers and in a dream has warned Laban not to oppose Jacob. Only divine intervention prevents Laban from doing what Jacob feared, taking his property by force (vv. 29, 31). The two men resolve the conflict by making a covenant, after which they go their separate ways, but not before Laban has reintroduced the issue of Israel's descent from the proper mother(s) by stipulating that Jacob not 'take wives besides my daughters' (31.50).³⁸ Not insignificantly at this point of triumph of patrilineal virilocal marriage, the covenant is made in the name of the God of the *fathers*, a further affirmation of descent reckoned through fathers. Laban calls upon 'the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father', and Jacob swears by 'the Fear of his father Isaac'.

4. *Constructing male relationships through blood sacrifice.* In a recent cross-cultural study of societies in which blood sacrifice has been practiced, Jay argues that the institution of sacrifice serves as a means for men in patrilineal descent groups to affirm their kinship bonds. She takes as her point of departure the widespread exclusion of childbearing women from sacrificial rites and proposes a view of sacrifice as a 'remedy for having been born of woman'.³⁹ Focusing on the symbolic opposition between sacrifice and childbirth, Jay examines how sacrifice, by socially and religiously establishing lines of descent reckoned solely through males, enables males to transcend their dependence on women's reproductive powers.

When membership in patrilineal descent groups is identified by rights of participation in sacrifices, evidence of 'paternity' is created which is as certain as evidence of maternity, but far more flexible. Kinship relations can be restructured, individuals adopted, and even subsidiary lineages incorporated into a descent group by participation in sacrifice. Conversely, it is

38. Jacob already has two other wives of secondary rank, Bilhah and Zilpah, whose sons have been accepted into 'Israel' through symbolic adoption by Rachel and Leah.

39. Jay (1992); see also Jay (1985, 1988).

extremely important to exclude improper persons because par-taking may constitute recognized alliance by descent.⁴⁰

Although there are problems with the application of Jay's theory to the biblical material (Samson's mother, for example, participates in a sacrifice), her thesis nonetheless merits consideration for the insight it provides into the nature of the conflict in Genesis between descent reckoned through fathers and descent reckoned through mothers. Among other things, it allows us to recognize that Sarah's absence from the account of Abraham's near-sacrifice of the young Isaac is no accident but rather the suppression of the maternal claim on the son in favor of the paternal one. Jay remarks, 'By this act, Isaac, on the edge of death, received his life not by birth from his mother but from the hand of his father as directed by God (Elohim), and Abraham received assurance of countless descendants'.⁴¹ (The concern of this story with the proper lineage also explains why Ishmael is ignored in the command to sacrifice 'your only son': Abraham has already been told that his descendants will be reckoned through Isaac in 21.12.)

The covenant between Jacob and Laban (Gen. 31.44-54) is accompanied by sacrifice. Jay interprets the sacrifice as a redefinition of their relationship in terms of patrilineal descent. By invoking 'the God of Abraham, the God of Nahor, the God of their father', Laban appeals first to Jacob's patrilineal grandfather, then to his own patrilineal grandfather, and finally to their common great-grandfather (Terah), who represents the point of patrilineal alliance between Laban and his nephew. In the context of this sacrifice, Laban ceases to be Jacob's mother's brother (a relationship defined through a woman) and becomes his patrilineal classificatory brother. In other words, the two men become members of the same patrilineal descent group sacrificing together.⁴²

40. Jay (1988: 54-55).

41. Jay (1988: 60); similarly Jay (1992: 102).

42. Jay (1992: 108; 1988: 67). That Laban is now reckoned as Jacob's kinsman explains why, in Jay's view, it is not said that Laban shared the meal: he is included in the 'kinsmen' Jacob invited to eat (31.54).

The examples discussed above illustrate patriarchy's reliance upon a range of strategies to establish the father's claim to progeny in response to the biologically evident claim of the mother. In the course of the next section, we shall consider how circumcision might also be seen as a strategy for privileging fatherhood over motherhood, in addition to its obvious privileging of males over females. Like sacrifice, circumcision provides a means of establishing and maintaining the intergenerational link between father and son.

The Sterile Matriarch

Given the high mortality rate for women and children in ancient times, it is understandable that great value would be placed upon women's reproductive ability.⁴³ How does patriarchy respond to the obvious importance of women's reproductive power and to its dependence on that power? Our narrative, which displays an overriding concern with offspring, insists that the 'right mother' is important, but it also tells us that the 'right mother' is sterile—three of them, anyway, and the most important three at that.⁴⁴ In other words, the Genesis narrators undermine the chosen mothers' importance by denying the very thing for which they are so highly valued, their reproductive ability. Sarah's sterility is mentioned within the genealogy of Terah in Genesis 11, a clue that it will be significant as the plot develops. Not only is she sterile at the beginning of the narrative, before the plot gets underway, but she remains sterile for an exceedingly long time. Rebekah, too, is sterile (Gen. 25.21), and Rachel endures years of apparent sterility during which her sister is fruitful (30.1-21). Sterility is the women's problem, as it is elsewhere in the Bible, where the

43. See Meyers (1988: 64-71, 95-121, 183).

44. The birth of a hero to a barren mother is a well-represented biblical type-scene; see Alter (1981: 47-62; 1983). On its features, see Brenner (1985: 95; 1986); Williams (1982: 52-55). Our question here is what social (and phallogentric) function this type-scene serves; see Fuchs (1985a).

male's role in the couple's inability to conceive is never at issue: Abraham and Jacob already have sons when their sterile wives, Sarah and Rachel, finally conceive. As testimony to his potency, Abraham begets Ishmael when he is 86, and he has more sons later.

That women needed children to give them status in patriarchal society is evident. Conversely, it is in the interest of patriarchal ideology not only that women bear children but also that they desire to do so.⁴⁵ Thus these narratives represent the matriarchs as desiring children, especially sons (Hebrew *banim* can mean both), at all costs. Indeed, Sarah's first speech, addressed to Abraham, is an acknowledgment of the problem of childlessness and an attempt to resolve it: 'See, Yhwh has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my maid; perhaps I shall be built up through her' (16.2). Similarly Rachel's first words, also addressed to her husband, express her desperation: 'Give me children/sons, otherwise I am dead' (30.1). Sarah and Rachel are presented as so eager for offspring that they give their maids to their husbands in an attempt to have children through them. Does this reflect an actual custom in Israel according to which children born to a woman's maidservant would be considered hers, or is it a male fantasy that would like to imagine women behaving in this manner—a fantasy projected onto the ancestral figures?⁴⁶ The narrator presents this particular means of obtaining children as something that is done for the woman's sake and not the man's, as is clear in both cases: Abraham could take other wives to bear him children (he does take another wife and have children by her, but only after Sarah is dead, Gen. 25.1) and Jacob already has sons by his other 'correct' (i.e. from the same

45. See Fuchs (1985a: 130-33). See also the discussion of Samson's mother in Chapter 3 above.

46. Ancient Near Eastern evidence is often adduced for such a custom; see Frymer-Kensky (1981: 211-12). See also von Rad (1961: 186); Westermann (1985: 239); Bird (1974: 53). Since I take women in the biblical narrative as male constructs and because I believe this material was composed in a period of Israelite history for which we have no evidence of such a custom, I assume male fantasy may well be involved in these narratives.

patriline) wife Leah. Indeed, by having Leah also give her maid to Jacob, although she has already borne him sons, the biblical narrator reinforces the stereotype that women will go to any lengths to have children.

Presenting the matriarchs as sterile is one way of undermining their significance; having them offer their maids to the patriarchs as surrogates is another. The replacement of the matriarch by her maid implies a denial of the matriarch's uniqueness as the 'right' wife.⁴⁷ And such a denial of the mother's uniqueness contradicts the narrative claim that the proper wife is critical for continuing the Abrahamic line. Not only does the substitution motif threaten the matriarchs' position as the 'right' wives, it also allows another patriarchal strategy to come into play. By dividing women into upper and lower class women, patriarchy prevents women from gaining power by forming alliances. Women of lower status (Hagar, Bilhah, Zilpah) are exploited for the sake of higher class women, which is really for the sake of patriarchy. Patriarchy relies upon women's cooperation, and one of its rewards for cooperation is status. Using their servants as surrogates is presented as the matriarchs' idea—not as something imposed upon them. The matriarchs consent to the exploitation of other women because from it they gain status as mothers and can thereby realize the patriarchal ideal of fulfillment through motherhood. In one case, that of Sarah and Hagar, the narrative dramatizes the conflict between women over status. Hagar's change in status when she becomes pregnant and her change of attitude that results pose a challenge to Sarah's superior status as primary wife that Sarah will not tolerate. Hagar is, of course, doubly exploited: by Sarah, who uses her to obtain a child, and by the androcentric narrators, who use her to endorse androcentric values. Her arrogance shows pregnancy and motherhood to be a source of pride. Patriarchal ideology can imagine it as nothing else; it cannot imagine motherhood as

47. On barrenness as a threat to the matriarchs' role as mothers, and substitution as a threat to their position as wives, see Wander (1981: 92-96).

unwanted.

The most important use to which the repeated theme of the sterile matriarch is put, as a patriarchal strategy, is to transfer the control over their procreative power from the women to the deity.⁴⁸ Sarah acknowledges God's role, 'Yhwh has prevented me from bearing children', and she conceives only because 'Yhwh visited Sarah as he had said and Yhwh did to Sarah as he had promised' (21.1). Her own attempt to resolve the problem of her sterility by having a child through Hagar backfires. And her own knowledge about herself—that having ceased to menstruate (18.11) she cannot conceive—is contradicted by the deity (in the form of three men), who responds to her incredulity by asserting his power over her body: 'Is anything too miraculous for Yhwh?' (18.14). In Rebekah's case, conception comes from God as the result of patriarchal intervention: she becomes pregnant when her husband Isaac prays on her behalf and the deity grants the patriarch's request: 'Yhwh granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived' (25.21). Although Yhwh is sympathetic to Leah and 'opens her womb' to compensate for Jacob's preference for his other wife (29.31), it is apparently he who is also responsible for keeping Rachel sterile. Jacob, at any rate, regards it as God's doing: when Rachel complains to him about being childless, he replies, 'Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?'

Leah acknowledges God's responsibility for conception (29.32, 33, 35; 30.18, 20), and Rachel likewise attributes her maid's fecundity to God (30.6). It is true that, in an effort to conceive, Rachel turns to aphrodisiacs (30.14-16), but apparently they play no role in her conception, for in the time before she conceives Leah gives birth to two sons and a daughter.⁴⁹ And in any case, the narrator attributes nothing

48. Fuchs (1985a: 129). It also heightens the suspense surrounding the birth of the promised offspring and offers an opportunity for the deity to intervene; see Exum (1985: 76).

49. Mandrakes were considered aphrodisiacs, promoting fertility (Speiser 1964: 231; von Rad 1961: 290; Westermann 1985: 475), but we cannot attribute to them any role in Rachel's conception unless we

to the mandrakes, but regards female fecundity as due solely to divine intervention: 'God remembered Rachel and God heard her and opened her womb' (30.22). Rachel, for her part, in acknowledging God for removing her sterility, at the same time testifies (on behalf of all the sterile matriarchs) to the stigma of childlessness and to the craving for sons imposed on women in the patriarchal world: 'She said, "God has taken away my reproach", and she called his name Joseph, saying, "May Yhwh add to me another son"' (30.23-24).

If permitting conception is the prerogative of God, impregnating women is the work of males. The counterpart to the sterile matriarch is the fertile patriarch, whose procreative role is enhanced through an implicit association of reproduction with circumcision, the mark of the covenant. In Genesis 17, when God promises to make Abraham the 'father of a multitude of nations', circumcision is the symbol of their covenant:

I will make you exceedingly fruitful and I will make nations of you and kings shall come forth from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations... I will give to you and to your descendants after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession... As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a symbol of the covenant between me and you. He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations... (17.6-12).

Now why, if some physical mark is to symbolize the covenant, is that mark to be made upon the penis and not on a part of the body where it could be readily seen? It seems self-evident that some connection with virility and procreation is implied, at least on a symbolic level. The symbolic connection between circumcision and fertility has been

assume that she kept them for some time before using them.

argued at length by Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, who cites ethnographic studies to demonstrate the association of circumcision with notions of fertility, virility, maturity, and genealogy, in cultures where circumcision is practiced as a puberty rite.⁵⁰ Even though in Israel circumcision was performed soon after birth rather than at puberty (and thus was not a symbol of virility and maturity), in Eilberg-Schwartz's view a connection between the practice of circumcision and two of these themes, fertility and genealogy, is suggested in the biblical literature. The biblical writers, he argues, view circumcision as symbolically preparing the male organ to perform its future task of impregnating women and producing offspring. Analogies can be found in the metaphorical use of circumcision in reference both to other organs and to fruit trees.

Israelite writers equated the lack of circumcision with the improper functioning of a human organ. Uncircumcised hearts, ears, and lips are organs that cannot do what God intended them to do. By extension, the removal of a man's foreskin symbolically enables the penis to more effectively discharge its divinely allotted task. That task, as suggested by the content of the covenant, is to impregnate women and produce offspring.⁵¹

Citing the widespread application of horticultural metaphors to human sexuality and fertility in general, and the reference to 'uncircumcised' fruit trees in Lev. 19.23-25, in particular, Eilberg-Schwartz argues for an implicit connection between circumcising the penis and pruning fruit trees.

[T]he priestly writings suggest an analogy between an uncircumcised male organ and an immature fruit tree. They thus associate the circumcision of the male with pruning juvenile fruit

50. Eilberg-Schwartz (1990: 141-76); see also Lerner (1986: 191-93). As Eilberg-Schwartz concedes, the connection between circumcision and fertility is not explicit in Gen. 17. The circumcision of Ishmael, recounted in Gen. 17, is used by Eilberg-Schwartz to support his theory of circumcision as a symbol of fertility and not just a sign of the covenant: Ishmael will be the progenitor of multitudes, but he is excluded from the covenantal promise (17.18-21).

51. Eilberg-Schwartz (1990: 149).

trees; like the latter, circumcision symbolically readies the stem for producing fruit.⁵²

In the verses quoted above from Genesis 17, three important themes appear together—the fruitfulness of the patriarch, the intergenerational continuity between males, and circumcision as symbol of the covenant—creating a symbolic link between reproduction, genealogy, and masculinity.⁵³ Circumcision distinguishes Abraham as the founder of a new lineage and establishes a line of descent traced through males who bear this distinctive mark in their flesh. Circumcision provides physical evidence of kinship ties between men. Like sacrifice, it establishes intergenerational continuity between males (as the emphasis on ‘descendants’ and ‘throughout your/their generations’ in Gen. 17 makes clear). As a symbol of male fertility, and as a sign of membership in a community from which women, who do not bear the mark of membership, are excluded, circumcision functions to privilege the father and suppress the mother. The effect is particularly powerful in our narrative because the repeated theme of the sterile matriarch already casts doubt on the matriarchs’ reproductive role.

As if the association of circumcision and fertility were not sufficient to secure the father’s position, a concomitant move, the designation of menstrual blood and the blood of parturition as unclean and polluting, further undermines women’s importance in procreation and provides a rationale for isolating them from the privileged society of males. Taboos regarding menstrual blood and the blood of childbirth are widespread. Jay examines from an anthropological perspective the opposition between the purifying power of sacrifice and the pollution of childbirth and menstruation.⁵⁴ Julia Kristeva proposes that pollution rites serve as protection against the generative power of women and that circumcision separates the son from maternal, female impurity

52. Eilberg-Schwartz (1991: 8; 1990: 149-54).

53. Eilberg-Schwartz (1991: 9).

54. Jay (1992, 1988, 1985).

and defilement.⁵⁵ Eilberg-Schwartz also argues for a view of circumcision as a ritual for separating the male child from the impurity of his mother, and he suggests that circumcision and sacrifice have overlapping functions: to create and to demonstrate patrilineal kinship ties among men.⁵⁶ In their different ways, these interpretations all point to patriarchy’s fear of women’s reproductive power, its need to suppress it, and its equally strong desire to appropriate it—as, for example, in Genesis 2, where the first man gives birth to woman, aided by the creator god and in the absence of a creator goddess or goddesses.⁵⁷

Both Kristeva and Eilberg-Schwartz comment on the mention of circumcision in the middle of the discussion of a woman’s ritual impurity after childbirth in Lev. 12.2-4:

If a woman conceives and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days; as at the time of her menstruation she shall be unclean. On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. For thirty-three days she shall continue in the blood of her purification; she must not touch anything consecrated nor come into the sanctuary until the days of her purification are completed.

To purify herself after childbirth, a woman offers a burnt offering and a sin offering. Kristeva proposes that the son’s circumcision is, for him, the equivalent of sacrifice, a purifying rite that ‘does away with the need for sacrifice, of which it nevertheless bears the trace’.⁵⁸ In a similar vein, Eilberg-Schwartz believes we can infer a connection between the mother’s impurity for seven days and the infant’s, which would account for the delay of circumcision until the eighth day after birth. Circumcision thus becomes, in Eilberg-Schwartz’s words, ‘a rite that marks the passage from the impurity of being born of woman to the purity of life in a

55. Kristeva (1982: 77-79, 99-101).

56. Eilberg-Schwartz (1990: 174-86).

57. On this theme, and the woman’s attempt to claim creator status in Gen. 2, see Pardes (1992: 40-58).

58. Kristeva (1982: 99-100). Kristeva goes on to say that ‘what the male is separated from, the other that circumcision carves out on his very sex is the other sex, impure, defiled’ (p. 100).

community of men'.⁵⁹

Perhaps in this context we can better appreciate the significance of Rachel's theft of her father's household gods (teraphim) and its association with menstrual blood in Gen. 31.35. The text does not give Rachel's reason for stealing the teraphim, but it is reasonable to conclude that her motive has something to do with concern with the family line, which the teraphim must in some way represent.⁶⁰ Jay argues that what is at stake here is control over the line of descent reckoned through mothers, and that Rachel's possession of the teraphim signifies her claim to her son Joseph as the one through whom the proper line of descent should be reckoned.⁶¹ If Rachel is indeed menstruating, sitting on the teraphim would be a scandalous way of defiling them—and whether or not this is the case is left open.⁶² By insinuating that Rachel profanes the teraphim, the story discredits both the woman and her implicit claim on the family line,

59. Eilberg-Schwartz (1990: 175). Eilberg-Schwartz seems to regard the new-born infant as unclean, and he conveniently ignores the father's position: either the father would not touch the infant for seven days, which is hard to imagine (and if that were the case it is even harder to imagine why it would not be stipulated in the law). Alternatively, the father is repeatedly in a state of uncleanness. I do not think this problem invalidates Eilberg-Schwartz's more general observations about the impurity of being born of woman, since, as he frequently points out, cultures are not perfectly logical systems. On the symbolic association of menstrual blood with death, see Eilberg-Schwartz (1990: 177-89); Wenham (1983: 432-35).

60. See Morrison (1983: 161-62); cf. Greenberg (1962); Huehnergard (1985); Jay (1988: 65-66); and for a summary of various views, Sherwood (1990: 308-11). To argue, as Jeansonne (1990: 136 n. 44) does against Fuchs (1988), that Rachel was motivated by revenge against her father (here Jeansonne follows a number of commentators) ignores the complexity of the issue: what could she hope to achieve? Is she simply spiteful?

61. Jay (1992: 106-107; 1988: 65-66). Jay views Rachel's theft as the reverse of Jacob's theft from Isaac and Esau, for, whereas Jacob steals a patrilineal line, Rachel steals a matrilineal line.

62. A number of features conspire to make Rachel look bad, as Fuchs (1988) shows: she steals; her reasons for robbing her own father of his sacred property are not made clear; she lies (possibly) to conceal her theft.

symbolically demonstrating that the matriarch cannot control the line of descent (recall that Rebekah upset the male line of descent by enabling Jacob to displace Esau as Isaac's 'true heir'). Jacob can steal from Esau the place of privilege in the Abrahamic line of descent and still legitimately receive it, but Rachel cannot displace her sister.⁶³ Nor would her efforts matter in the larger scheme of things, since descent reckoned through mothers will not ultimately decide the offspring's status.

In Gen. 35.2 members of Jacob's household are told to put away their foreign gods, which suggests that Rachel may not have been the only one to bring such objects with her. The significant point about the gods Rachel takes with her is that they are *stolen*: they belong to her father. This fact lends credence to Mieke Bal's proposal that possession of the teraphim represents Rachel's transfer of the child from her father to her husband. Bal reads the account in the larger social context of the transition from patrilineal to virilocal marriage; that is, from marriage in which the wife remains in her father's house and her father—not her husband—has authority over her and her offspring, to marriage in which the husband takes his wife to his own clan.⁶⁴ Jacob's exodus from his wives' father's household and his move to establish his own household is precisely the issue in the conflict between Jacob and Laban. In the narrative resolution of the conflict in favor of Jacob, Rachel's transfer of the child from her father to her husband not only supports virilocal marriage; it also undermines descent through mothers, for it symbolically removes the child from Rachel's side of the lineage (Laban's house where descent from mothers is recognized) and assigns it to Jacob's (where the ideal is to establish descent unilineally from fathers).

Whatever meaning we ascribe to Rachel's act, we are interpreting the text's silences. Precisely because we do not know *why* Rachel stole the teraphim, we cannot know what

63. On this aspect of the Rachel-Leah conflict, see Pardes (1992: 63-78).

64. Bal (1988b: 151-52); see also Bal (1988a: 84-86 *et passim*).

possession of them might mean. The difficulty is symptomatic of the contradiction that has occupied the narrator all along: how to affirm the importance of having the correct mother while ignoring the implications of such an affirmation for tracing descent. In the case of the theft of the teraphim, explaining Rachel's action would involve tacit recognition of its meaning for descent from mothers—thus the need to discredit it indirectly, which the association with stealing, deception, and, especially, menstrual blood (even if fictitious) accomplishes forcefully.

*The Matriarchs and the Plot,
and the Plot against the Matriarchs*

Israel traces its origins from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob, and the writers who preserved these stories knew this is as it should be. But as the plot of Genesis unfolds, the promises to Abraham do not pass automatically from Abraham to Isaac, and from Isaac to Jacob; rather it is the matriarchs who see to it that the promise is passed on to the 'right son' (that is, the rightful heir): it must be Isaac and not Ishmael, Jacob and not Esau. Sarah has Hagar and Ishmael cast out of Abraham's household so that Isaac will not have to share his inheritance with his half-brother (Gen. 21). It is Rebekah's idea to have Jacob pretend to be Esau and steal his father's blessing while Esau hunts game for Isaac to eat (Gen. 27). When Jacob hesitates, fearing that his father might discover the ruse and curse him rather than bless him, Rebekah boldly assumes the risk: 'Upon me be your curse, my son' (v. 13). She arranges everything; Jacob has only to follow her instructions, to 'obey me' (27.8, 13). She prepares the food for Jacob to take to Isaac, and she dresses Jacob in Esau's clothes so that his blind father will think he is Esau and bless him. Jacob has nothing to lose in this scheme, and he gains everything. When Rebekah learns that Esau plans to kill Jacob for his deception, she instructs Jacob (again, 'obey me', v. 43) to leave Canaan for Haran. And it is at her urging that Isaac sends Jacob to Haran, with the 'blessing of Abraham' (28.4), to take a wife from his mother's family

(thus ensuring that he will obtain the 'right wife').

Rachel and Leah act on behalf of their sons when they agree to leave Haran for Canaan. They are motivated, as we saw above, by maternal concern to preserve their sons' inheritance. And, of course, it is necessary to get the family to Canaan, since only in Canaan can the twelve sons become Israel. Only when it serves the text's androcentric interest do Rachel and Leah cooperate; otherwise it is competition (also in the text's androcentric interest) that motivates them. Their rivalry results not so much in a victory for either of the women (both are unhappy) as a victory for patriarchy: numerous sons are born to Jacob, ensuring that Israel will increase. The competition is not between women of different rank, as in the case of Sarah and Hagar, but between co-wives of equal status, and sisters at that. Nor are the sisters in conflict with the other wives of Jacob, who are of lower status, for Bilhah and Zilpah are needed to bring the number of Jacob's sons to twelve. Unlike Sarah, who does not acknowledge Ishmael as her son, Rachel and Leah accept the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah as their own, thereby 'correcting' the irregularity of their descent from women who are not of the proper lineage, and enabling the sons of the servant women to share in the promises to Abraham.⁶⁵ The status of their mothers, however, which corresponds to the patriarch's preferences, does play a role in deciding the relative ranking of the twelve sons/tribes, who are not treated entirely equally in the tradition (see, e.g., Gen. 49, where Jacob's blessing of his sons reflects their different valuation). The only attempt by one of Jacob's wives to claim special privilege for her son—if that is what Rachel's theft of her father's teraphim means—fails.

The biblical narrators give the mothers credit for their

65. No doubt the repetition of *leya'agov* (to Jacob) in connection with the births of sons to the wives of secondary rank serves to reinforce the theoretically equal status of the twelve sons/tribes. The fact that Hagar and Ishmael pose a problem and are not acceptable into the Israelite lineage, whereas Jacob's wives of secondary rank are, may also reflect different valuations of Israel's relationship with Mesopotamia and with Egypt in the tradition.

sons' successes, but, in the process, they make the women look bad. In having Hagar and Ishmael 'cast out', Sarah appears cruel and unfeeling. The picture of a harsh and vindictive Sarah was already prepared for in Genesis 16, where, to defend her position as primary wife, Sarah has Hagar, who is pregnant, cast out because 'I became slight in her eyes' (v. 5). When, in Genesis 21, Sarah once again defends her position against her rival, she objectifies Hagar and Ishmael by avoiding use of their names. Speaking of them impersonally makes it easier to dispose of them: 'Cast out *this slave woman with her son*'—as if Ishmael were Hagar's son alone and not Abraham's also—'for *the son of this slave woman* shall not be heir with my son Isaac'. Indeed, Abraham, in his role as father, reacts negatively to Sarah's prompting: 'The thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of *his son*'. With Sarah to do the 'dirty work', Isaac need play no role in the conflict and can remain innocent of any animosity toward his brother. The sons do not see themselves as rivals or enemies; and, according to the Greek text, they are 'playing' together when Sarah decides that Hagar and Ishmael must go.⁶⁶

Just as Sarah ensures her son Isaac's inheritance, so Rebekah ensures that of her son Jacob. To have Isaac favor his younger son Jacob over Esau, the elder, would be damaging to the patriarchal status quo, where the oldest son is the primary recipient of his father's estate. Thus the narrator makes the matriarch responsible for disrupting the natural line of inheritance. And Jacob, the son who usurps the blessing, is less culpable than if he had devised everything himself. Rebekah is cast as cunning and deceptive, while Jacob simply, and even reluctantly (though only out of fear of discovery), carries out her orders when he deludes his father into believing he is Esau. To be sure, Jacob had earlier tricked Esau into selling his birthright. But, in that scene (Gen. 25:29-34), Esau was portrayed as foolish, thinking only

66. The verb in 21:9 is *tsahaq*, a pun on Isaac's name, and the Hebrew lacks 'with Isaac her son'; cf. LXX, Vulg. The exact nature of the play is debated; see Exum and Whedbee (1984: 13); Landy (1984: 137).

of his stomach, and thus unworthy of the birthright. In contrast, Esau and Isaac are portrayed sympathetically in Genesis 27, and so their deception cannot be so easily dismissed as fitting. On the contrary, Isaac is deluded not because he deserves it but because he is old and blind. He is overwhelmed with anguish upon discovering the ruse, as is Esau, whose bitter cries cannot but arouse our pity.⁶⁷ Though Jacob is guilty of deceiving them ('Is it because his name is Jacob that he has supplanted me these two times?', v. 36), the blame does not attach to him primarily. It was, after all, his mother's idea.

The matriarchs' depiction reflects a male view both of the way mothers behave—maternal instinct leads them to protect their sons and promote their interests—and of the way women in general behave—they are jealous, manipulative, and untrustworthy.⁶⁸ If Sarah is callous and Rebekah deceptive, Rachel and Leah are envious and competitive. Women, even sisters, cannot get along, the text tells us; they cannot form bonds that transcend their own narrow interests and cannot cooperate except on rare occasions.⁶⁹ In a poly-

67. See the discussion of this scene in Exum and Whedbee (1984: 17-18).

68. To be sure, the patriarchs are also deceptive and untrustworthy: Abraham deceives the foreign ruler about his wife's status (Gen. 12 and 20) and Jacob's entire career is marked by episodes of deception and counter-deception. Jacob is punished in kind for his deceptive behavior: Laban substitutes Leah for Rachel on the wedding night, echoing Jacob's deception of Isaac; Leah trades her son's mandrakes to Rachel in exchange for a night with Jacob, echoing Esau's exchange of the birthright for Jacob's lentil soup; in his old age Jacob is deceived by his sons with a garment, as he deceived his father by wearing Esau's clothes. On the many parallels, see, *inter alios*, Cassuto (1964); Fokkelman (1975); Fishbane (1979); Sherwood (1990). The matriarchs are also narratively punished for their deeds; see below. Nevertheless, gender plays an important role in the way character traits are evaluated; consider only how differently our society evaluates ambition or competition on the part of men and on the part of women. On gender bias in the different handling of the motivation behind deception and therefore of its resolution, see Fuchs (1988).

69. See Brenner (1985: 93-96); Fuchs (1985a: 131-32). Leah and Rachel cooperate twice: when they agree to leave Haran and when they trade mandrakes for Jacob's sexual services (see below). Both

gamous household, co-wives depend on their offspring to improve their social status.⁷⁰ The competition between the sisters to produce sons takes on life and death proportions ('give me children, otherwise I may as well be dead', 30.1). It is so single-minded as to become almost ludicrous, as each sister tries to outdo the other, even to the point of giving their maids to Jacob to acquire more sons. Whereas Jacob wrestles with God in face-to-face combat (Gen. 32), Rachel's olympian struggle (*naphituley 'elohim*, literally, 'wrestlings of God', 30.8) is with her sister.⁷¹ He becomes a nation; she becomes a mother. Far from discouraging envy on the part of co-wives, patriarchy exploits it as a means of keeping women divided against one another and therefore powerless. As we have seen, patriarchal ideology rewards women for competitiveness. Jacob encourages the competition between his wives by preferring one over the other. Moreover, God encourages the competition by making one fruitful and the other sterile.

As if being envious and competitive were not enough to discredit the favored wife, Rachel is also a thief, who deceives both her father and her husband. Yet another possible interpretation of the teraphim is that they were used for divination.⁷² If Rachel took the teraphim so that Laban

times they decide issues of residence and descent in favor of patriarchy: the result in the first case is settlement of Jacob's family in Canaan (residence); and, in the second case, more children for Jacob/Israel (descent).

70. See Lamphere (1974: 105-108). The sibling rivalry between Rachel and Leah, of course, mirrors that between Jacob and Esau. The men are the rivals for the blessing of Abraham; the women, for the privilege of bearing Israel's descendants. Only one man can win (that is, can father the lineage); both women become Israel's mothers; see the discussion below under Unity and Difference.

71. The outcomes of both struggles are important for the future of Israel, but the woman's victory typically takes place in a domestic setting, on the home front, while the man's occurs against a larger backdrop, on the banks of the Jabbok, a symbolically charged point of crossing/transition. On the symbolism of the Jabbok crossing, see Fokkelman (1975: 208-22).

72. This interpretation is supported by the similarities between the account of the theft of the teraphim and the later story of the 'theft' of

could not divine the location of Jacob's entourage and thus overtake them, she fails, for Laban does overtake them. But her theft of the teraphim does have the effect of making Jacob look better. That Jacob is a thief we know: the narrator tells us that 'Jacob stole the heart of [deceived] Laban the Aramean in that he did not tell him that he intended to flee' (Gen. 31.20). But whereas Laban accuses Jacob of stealing his heart *and* stealing his gods (vv. 26-30), we know that Jacob is innocent of the latter charge: true, he stole Laban's heart by departing secretly (which he justifies by adducing his fear that Laban would reclaim his daughters by force)—but he did not steal the teraphim (about which he is righteously indignant). Rachel's crime overshadows his.

The scenes in which the matriarchs initiate the action show them to be impatient: they do not wait for the divine promises to be fulfilled but take steps to bring them about. And they are narratively punished for their 'intervention'. Sarah uses Hagar and suffers as a result. Rebekah is told the elder son will serve the younger; rather than waiting for it to come to pass, she brings it about—and, as we have seen, she never sees her beloved son again. Rachel uses aphrodisiacs in an effort to obtain children, but without success; instead Leah has two more sons.

In giving the matriarchs an active role in achieving its ends, the androcentric narrative conveys an ambivalent message about mothers. It acknowledges Israel's mothers for the part they played in determining Israel's fortunes, thereby providing models with whom women might have wished to identify. But, in the process, it offers a picture of women as mean-spirited, deceptive, and untrustworthy—

Joseph's cup (Gen. 44.1-13). In the case of the cup, which was used for divination, the stolen object is found where Joseph had it hidden, in the sack belonging to Benjamin, *Rachel's* son. In the case of the teraphim, Rachel is a thief but the stolen objects, hidden under Rachel's saddle bag, are not found. The sin of the mother, whose crime is not found out, is visited upon the child, who is not a thief but found guilty of stealing. I owe this observation to Yair Zakovitch; on such intertextual echoes, what he calls 'reflection stories', see Zakovitch (1993).

and for these reasons, a threat to the patriarchal social order. Because the matriarchs are determined and enterprising and able to get their way, they are dangerous. They must be kept in their place, the mother's place, the place for the other where patriarchy can control them.

Power and Authority

The stories about the matriarchs reflect androcentric views of women, either what men think women are like or what they wish them to be. They also mirror social reality, in addition to helping to shape it. The picture the text gives of the matriarchs corresponds in a number of ways to what we know from anthropological studies about women's position and behavior in traditional patrilateral societies.⁷³ In such societies, the subordinate position of women does not make them into helpless victims. We have already seen examples of ways in which women cooperate with patriarchy to better their lives. Various avenues are open to women for getting what they want, avenues we can identify more precisely in our text by adopting the anthropological distinction between power and authority. Power is the ability to gain compliance with one's wishes and to achieve one's ends. Authority is culturally legitimated power, power recognized by society and distributed according to a hierarchical chain of command and control.⁷⁴ The matriarchs do not have authority; they are subordinate to their husbands. But they are not powerless.

One of the most important strategies available to women for achieving their goals is influence.⁷⁵ Sarah uses influence to get what she wants where Hagar and Ishmael are concerned. She takes her complaint about Hagar's rude behavior to Abraham, making it an issue between her and her husband ('May Yhwh judge between *me* and *you*', Gen. 16.5), and only when Abraham puts Hagar in her power ('See,

your maid is in your power; do to her as you please'), does Sarah acquire the authority to mistreat her rival ('then Sarai afflicted her, and she fled from her'). Similarly, in Genesis 21, Sarah cannot expel Hagar and Ishmael from Abraham's household on her own authority. Once again she must depend on her ability to influence her husband, since he alone has the authority to send them away (21.14).

Rebekah relies on another strategy to get what she wants. She resorts to deception to circumvent her husband's authority and obtain the blessing for her favorite son Jacob (Gen. 27). On more than one occasion, the narrative shows women eavesdropping in order to learn what was going on, as when Sarah overhears the announcement that she will bear a son (18.10) and Rebekah overhears Isaac inform Esau of his intention to give him the blessing (27.5). Rebekah also has informants (27.42). On the basis of the instructions she has overheard Isaac give to Esau, Rebekah sets in motion a plan which successfully dupes Isaac into blessing Jacob. Later, when she is told of Esau's plan to kill Jacob, she uses her influence to get her way. Although she tells Jacob to flee to Haran (v. 43), the authority to send him away with the patriarchal blessing rests with Isaac. By complaining about the Canaanite women and raising the specter of Jacob's marrying one of them, Rebekah influences Isaac to send Jacob to Haran to take a wife (27.46-28.5).

Sarah and Rebekah illustrate how women can have power in areas not normally accorded them by working through those in authority. One place where women sometimes have authority of their own is in the domestic sphere. On one occasion, we see Rachel and Leah exercising such authority, when they decide between themselves with which of them the patriarch must sleep. Jacob's sexual services are traded for some mandrakes in what Rachel and Leah consider a mutually beneficial exchange, and the patriarch apparently has no say in the matter (30.14-16).

Women sometimes acquire power as a result of male fears. Ideas of purity and pollution, for example, which generally serve to circumscribe women's activities, can be turned against men and used by women to their own advantage.

73. See Lamphere (1974); Rosaldo (1974).

74. Lamphere (1974: 99); Rosaldo (1974: 21-22); see also Hackett (1985: 17-22); Meyers (1988: 40-44, 181-87).

75. Lamphere (1974: 99-100).

M.Z. Rosaldo gives an example from New Guinea, where a man will acquiesce to his wife's wishes out of fear that in anger she might serve him food while she is menstruating, or step over him while he sleeps so that blood drops on him.⁷⁶ This is the kind of power we see Rachel relying upon when she hides the teraphim from Laban by sitting upon them and claiming she cannot rise because she is menstruating. We cannot, of course, assume that Rachel is telling the truth—and this is the point. As Bal points out, the taboo of menstrual blood is a male problem. The taboo is semiotic in nature: it interprets blood as a symptom of bodily impurity, which, in turn, is interpreted as a symptom of female inferiority. In Rachel's case, menstruation, the sign of female inferiority, becomes a sign of male inferiority; that is, of male fright. Is Rachel lying to Laban? 'A woman would simply have checked, a man would not dream of trying.'⁷⁷

We might keep in mind that, due primarily to dietary factors in ancient times, menstruation was probably infrequent (we should thus not assume that women were regarded as ritually impure as often as once a month).⁷⁸ It may even be that 'the way of women' in Gen. 31.35 refers to pregnancy: thus, Rachel appeals to a difficult or advanced pregnancy as the reason she cannot rise before Laban.⁷⁹ The issue, however, is not so much Rachel's actual condition but rather the fact that she uses male fear or respect for a uniquely female condition to gain power over a man. The issue, in other words, is the testimony of a woman, the power of a woman's word.

These examples reveal ways in which women both cooperate with and resist patriarchal control. The fact that, even within the confines of patriarchy, women can exercise power poses a threat, for what happens if they use their power to undermine their husbands' authority? This is, in

76. Rosaldo (1974: 38).

77. Bal (1988b: 151).

78. See Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1990: 3). I thank my colleague Patricia DeLeeuw for drawing this fact to my attention.

79. For discussion of this possibility, see Sherwood (1990: 328-29, 368-69 nn. 164-65).

fact, exactly what Sarah and Rebekah do when they secure the promise for Isaac and for Jacob. Abraham would have been content to have Ishmael as his heir: 'O that Ishmael might live in your sight', he implores God, when God announces that Sarah will bear him a son (17.18). And Isaac prefers Esau and intends to give him the patriarchal blessing (25.28; 27.2-4). The matriarchs' ability to achieve ends that are not in harmony with their husbands' wishes is dangerous; such power threatens to destabilize patriarchy. In particular, Rebekah's use of deception to get Isaac to bless Jacob instead of Esau shows how subversive a woman could be. It also shows how women are trapped in a vicious circle, where lack of authority forces them to resort to indirect and often underhanded means to achieve their ends. Their subversive exercise of power, in turn, provides patriarchy with justification for its need to control them. In response to the threat of women's power, patriarchy seeks to recuperate and appropriate that power for its own purposes.

The Genesis narrators treat women's power in the patriarchal family and its threat in much the same way they handle women's reproductive power. The matriarchs owe their success in achieving their aims, no less than their fertility, to God; that is, Sarah and Rebekah succeed in influencing or circumventing their husbands because it was God's will. God, who has *already* rejected Ishmael as Abraham's heir and informed Abraham that his line will be reckoned through Isaac (17.19-21), supports Sarah when she tells Abraham to cast out Hagar and Ishmael: 'Whatever Sarah says to you, obey her, for through Isaac shall your descendants be named' (21.12). According to the narrator, Sarah's demand displeased Abraham, and it is apparently only because God is in favor of their expulsion that Abraham agrees to send Hagar and Ishmael away. When Rebekah orchestrates Jacob's theft of the blessing, she is also represented as serving God's plan. Before Jacob and Esau were born, Yhwh had informed her, 'Two nations are in your womb; two peoples, born of you, shall be divided. One people shall be stronger than the other, and the elder shall serve the younger' (25.23). Like Abraham, who does not tell

Sarah about God's promise that she would bear a son (chs. 17-18), Rebekah does not tell Isaac about this oracle. Isaac must be kept in the dark about Jacob's prophesied future even before Rebekah and Jacob rely on his blindness in stealing the blessing, for how could a patriarchal text portray a father preferring his younger son over the firstborn?⁸⁰ With Rebekah to intercede on Jacob's behalf, Esau can safely be his father's favorite (25.28). Because of its serious consequences for patriarchal authority and succession, Rebekah's act requires nothing less than a divine oracle to justify it (and here a woman receives an oracle from God without an intermediary).

In addition to portraying the matriarchs as the instruments through whom God works to achieve his ends (the narrators' ends being identified with God's ends), the narrators emphasize the matriarchs' maternal motives. Their power is somehow less threatening and their behavior more acceptable if they can be seen as acting not selfishly, but rather for their sons.⁸¹ Whereas acting on behalf of their sons may reflect the actual behavior of women in traditional polygamous households, where a woman's only hope of bettering her lot is to secure a strong position for her son(s),⁸² as a narrative strategy it also reinforces the patriarchal ideal of the self-sacrificing mother. In a society where curses bear serious weight,⁸³ Rebekah's 'upon me be the curse, my son' shows just how much the narrator expects a mother to risk for her son.

The Mother's Voice

We saw in Chapter 1 a dramatic illustration of the manner in which women characters in androcentric texts are made to

80. Jacob prefers Joseph over his older brothers, but Joseph is his first-born son by his favorite wife. And, of course, the preference creates problems for both father and son.

81. See Fuchs (1985a: 132-34).

82. Lamphere (1974: 100, 105-108).

83. Like the vow, discussed above in Chapter 1, the curse has power insofar as it constitutes the act of cursing and in that it invokes the power of the deity; see Thiselton (1974: 293-96).

speak and act against their own interests. As part of our investigation of the mother's place, we could examine all the speeches of the matriarchs to see to what extent and in what ways they speak against themselves. Such an investigation, however, would be repetitious since we have already looked at many of their speeches in other contexts. I propose rather to focus here on a few utterances of the matriarchs and to read them in a deconstructive vein, as places where, in spite of themselves, the narrators let the truth of women's experience of subjugation slip through. The women's experience is, of course, displaced and distorted as a result of the textual ideology that assumes and is uncritical of patriarchy. As characters created by androcentric narrators, the matriarchs share in an androcentric world-view. Thus they cannot name the source of their oppression as the patriarchal system itself and their responses to patriarchal domination are displaced. However subdued their protest may now appear in the text, each of the matriarchs at some point says something particularly revealing of the evil effects patriarchal constraints have on women. In these submerged strains of women's voices we can uncover evidence of patriarchy's uneasiness and guilt with regard to its treatment of women.

When Sarah's plan to have children through Hagar backfires, her angry words to Abraham, 'May the wrong to me be upon you!' or 'The wrong done to me is your fault!' (16.5),⁸⁴ provide an indictment of a system that encourages competition among women and values women in terms of the offspring they produce. Rachel's frustration is similarly represented in her complaint to Jacob, 'Give me children or I am as dead'. In these instances, the women's dissatisfaction with their lot receives recognition, but the real source of the problem—the patriarchal system itself—remains unacknowledged, and the matriarchs can only vent their anger at the patriarchs rather than at the true cause of their distress.

In the mouths of both Leah and Rachel, who are portrayed as fiercely competitive for the honor of bearing children to Jacob, we find speeches that belie the patriarchal ideal of

84. See the discussion of this verse by Westermann (1985: 241).

motherhood as bringing fulfillment and satisfaction in life. In contrast to Sarah's and Rachel's displaced anger at their husbands, Leah's anger has no object, and anger without an object becomes despair and hopelessness. For Leah, the way open to women of improving their position—bearing children—is her only means of fulfillment, and though she is quite successful at it, she remains unhappy with her lot. Initially she believes that by bearing Jacob's firstborn son, she will gain his affection: 'Surely now my husband will love me' (29.32). But by the time she bears her sixth and last son, she seems to have abandoned her hope of winning Jacob's love in favor of the more modest goal of earning his respect: 'Now at last my husband will honor me because I have borne him six sons' (30.20).⁸⁵ As for her sister Rachel, the woman who exclaimed, 'Give me children or I am as dead', dies in childbirth. The androcentric narrator speaks through the midwife to console her, disregarding her intense pain and anguish and affirming the patriarchal valuation of children:⁸⁶ 'Do not be afraid, for now you have another son'. Rachel's point of view, reflected in the name she gives her son, Ben-oni ('son of my sorrow'), is overwritten (overridden) by her husband, who changes the name to Benjamin ('son of the right hand' or 'son of the south'). But it is not erased; a trace of the woman's voice remains. In the name, 'son of my sorrow', we hear the woman's regret. Her complaint draws attention to the risk childbearing presented to women, who had little choice in the matter.

In Rebekah's memorable words, 'upon me be the curse, my son', we find a powerful testimony to the desperation that results from lack of authority. As Fuchs observes, 'Had Rebekah been able to express her love for Jacob through maternal blessings, she would not have needed to use deception. She would have in all probability blessed Jacob by herself.'⁸⁷ As it is, Rebekah must play one man off against another: she must both circumvent her husband and

85. See Exum (1985: 79).

86. Fuchs (1985a: 132).

87. Fuchs (1985b: 138).

manipulate her son if she is to accomplish her plan. If, to convince her son to cooperate, she must risk bringing down a curse upon herself, so be it. And is dying (disappearing from the narrative) without seeing her beloved son again not a kind of curse?

In giving us some access to women's anger, frustration, and despair at their place in patriarchal society, these few utterances condemn patriarchy's subjugation and oppression of women. Even though patriarchy may claim the last word, they stand as traces of women's resistance. Ridicule can also be a form of resistance, as when Leah informs Jacob, 'I have hired you with my son's mandrakes' (30.16). When women cooperate in spite of patriarchal pressures, as Rachel and Leah do in negotiating the exchange of Jacob's sexual services for the mandrakes, they gain strength. Only once in the entire patriarchal story, are women allowed to engage in conversation, and the result is surprising. This moment of cooperation between Rachel and Leah makes the patriarch the butt of a woman's joke. Sarah's laughter is another case of ridicule, but here the woman is humiliated. In forcing her to deny her laughter the narrator forces her to deny her knowledge about her body.

In the previous chapters, we observed that patriarchy affirms motherhood but denies the mother's sexual pleasure. Interestingly, however, in Gen. 18.12, the biblical narrator indirectly acknowledges female pleasure in Sarah's words to herself, 'Now that I am dried up, shall I have pleasure?—and my husband is old!' If, by this remark, the narrator means to deny that an old woman could be sexually aroused, he thereby recognizes the fact of female sexual pleasure. The slip has serious repercussions, for acknowledging that women experience sexual pleasure raises the issue of men's ability to satisfy women sexually, a fundamental source of male anxiety. In this case, Sarah's words suggest some doubt about Abraham's ability to please her; after all, he is old. As if the androcentric narrator senses the problem, he takes it all back, by having the deity paraphrase Sarah's comment in non-threatening, patriarchally acceptable terms.

Sarah's speech can be understood as having solely to do with sex and nothing to do with the announced conception. The verb she applies to herself, *balah*, can mean 'worn out' (as of old clothes, Deut. 8.4; Josh. 9.13) or 'dried up' (as of bones, Ps. 32.3).⁸⁸ If we allow for the possibility that here it refers to the vaginal dryness that results from menopause, then Sarah's question deals with whether or not intercourse could be pleasurable for her. But the primary question comes last, as the punch line: will intercourse be possible at all, given her old husband's questionable ability to maintain an erection? Whereas Sarah soliloquizes about sex, when Yhwh repeats what Sarah has said in order to challenge her, his version of her speech is about reproduction. And significantly, it questions only the *woman's* ability to have a child: 'Shall I really bear a child now that I am old?' (v. 13). On behalf of patriarchy, God interprets the mention of pleasure as a reference to giving birth. In addition, any doubt that may have been cast on Abraham's virility is removed by compressing two parts of Sarah's comment into one. 'I am old' does double duty, replacing 'I am dried up' and 'my husband is old'.⁸⁹ This substitution eliminates any sexual overtones and shifts the issue from the man's advanced age to the woman's, whose age represents, in this version, not an impediment to performance, but only Sarah's inability to have a child. Thus by the time the androcentric narrator has finished revising the woman's speech, there is no reference to sexual pleasure, no hint of male inability to satisfy a

88. See Westermann (1985: 281).

89. Most English translations (e.g. RSV, NRSV, JB) reinforce the androcentric reading by (1) rendering *balah* as a reference to Sarah's age, and (2) reversing the word order in Sarah's original speech: 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?' (18.12 RSV, NRSV). In these translations it is no longer apparent that 'I am old' in v. 13 is a replacement for 'my husband is old' in v. 12. In the Hebrew, however, Sarah's speech ends with, 'my husband is old', and Yhwh's version of it with, 'I am old'. The Jewish Publication Society version best captures the original: 'Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?' (v. 12); 'Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?' (v. 13). The balance between the clauses calls attention to the substitution that has taken place.

woman, and no question of Abraham's age as an obstacle. All that remains in the new version is doubt on the part of the matriarch about her ability to conceive.

Sarah is rebuked by Yhwh, but not directly at first: God asks Abraham why Sarah laughed and why she said what she said (in its revised version). When Sarah responds in self-defense, she is put in her place by the narrator, who portrays her as afraid, and, moreover, has her lie to God: 'I did not laugh'. And, of course, he cannot let her have the last word: 'No, but you did laugh'. The deity's final word is a displacement. His rebuke seizes on Sarah's laughter as the reason for reproaching her, and not on the content of her remark, with its potential for exposing male insecurity about female sexuality.

Unity and Difference

I began this chapter by observing that the book of Genesis deals with the issue of Israel's identity: who qualifies to be a member of Israel and who does not. Connected to this issue is the question of Israel's relationship to its neighbors, to the larger world outside Israel. The biblical tradition describes Israel's relation to its neighbors in terms of complex family relationships. How is it that Israel alone receives the special promises of God, while its relatives—the Ishmaelites, the Edomites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Midianites, the Arameans—are excluded? Abraham is the father of Israel, Ishmael, the Midianites and other Arab tribes of the east (Gen. 25.1-6), and Edom is his direct descendant through Isaac. The father is a source of unity; in him various peoples have a common ancestry. At the same time, he can have only one true heir. Enter the matriarch.

The mother, the other, is the source of difference. Disunity is located in divisions among women. The (m)other's place in Genesis is to differentiate Israel from (some of) the surrounding peoples. The polygamous family, with its squabbles among co-wives and its divisions based on conflicts of interest, is a microcosm of Israel's view of itself in its environment. In these stories, issues of national (male) conflict

and dominance are resolved through the women, who are seen as the source of the discord and division. Females become the locus of conflict, when, in reality, male rivalry constructs stories in which women are assigned the role of disrupting familial integrity: Ishmael's exclusion is due to Sarah; Edom's to Rebekah.

The matriarchs provide internal as well as external distinctions. In addition to differentiating Israel from its neighbors, the matriarchs determine Israel's internal diversity. The ranking among the tribes, a hierarchy among equals, is based on the status of their mothers and corresponds to the patriarch's preferences.⁹⁰ The order in which Jacob arranges his wives and children when he goes to meet Esau reveals their relative standing: first come the maids and their children, then Leah and hers, and finally Rachel and Joseph. Tribal rivalry, says the text, like the rivalry among nations, has its roots in maternal rivalry. But it is different. Where the mothers undermine their husband's authority, disunity results. Sarah and Rebekah use their power to ensure the future of the 'proper'/favorite son and to exclude the rival son. When, however, the father's preferences influence the ranking of the sons, as in Jacob's case, other sons are not excluded. Tribal unity prevails, for Israel is one despite its subdivision into twelve parts. The father, who is one, stands for unity; the mother, for difference, which is multiple—thus four mothers.

A kind of primal unity is associated with the father, and its enduring appeal despite centrifugal forces is illustrated by the display of unity on the part of their sons at the patriarchs' deaths. The unity of the father is the unity of peoples and the unity of the tribes. To resolve issues of difference and differentiation, Israel relies upon its mothers. The ideal of unity co-exists with the necessity of differentiation. Israel cannot be defined solely in terms of itself. It needs the other, the mother, to help it define its position in the world, as dis-

90. It is not necessary for us to be able to resolve the nature of tribal relations reflected here (see Gottwald 1979) to appreciate the fact that the status of the mothers is used to indicate the status of the tribes (see Wilson 1977: 184-88).

tinct from other peoples, and to clarify its identity, as an association of tribes distinct from one another.⁹¹ Difference thus has positive meaning, and the matriarchs, as the origin of difference, play an indispensable role. Their importance cannot be underestimated, but it cannot be fully acknowledged by a text in which the significant figures are the fathers. Precisely because the matriarchs are so important for establishing Israel's separateness and identity as a people, the (m)other's place in these stories of origins must be undermined. Otherwise patriarchal hegemony over women based on the opposition between self and other would be challenged, and patriarchy would have to acknowledge the value of multiplicity and difference.

91. For development of this argument, see Andriolo (1973); Oden (1983: 196).