

Introduction

The portrayal of women in the Old Testament offers a vital entry point into understanding the social values, family structures, and theological worldviews of ancient Israel. Although the biblical world was predominantly patriarchal, the women within its narratives frequently demonstrate initiative, influence, and agency. Their stories illuminate the social expectations embedded in Israelite culture, especially regarding family dynamics, marriage, lineage, and motherhood. By examining the narratives of Sarah, Rebekah, and Ruth, this project will explore how these portrayals reflect broader cultural assumptions while also revealing complexities within patriarchal structures.

This study is important because female figures in the Old Testament are central to covenantal history, family inheritance, and theological development. Modern readers increasingly seek to interpret these texts with greater sensitivity to historical context, and understanding the social world of women is essential for responsible biblical interpretation.¹ The proposed project will contribute to this by examining how specific narratives embody and reflect ancient Israelite social values.

Research Question

How do the portrayals of women in the Old Testament reflect ancient Israelite social values, particularly concerning family structure, marriage, and motherhood?

Data and Sources

Primary Texts

This study will focus on narrative accounts from the Hebrew Bible:

- Sarah: Genesis 12–23
- Rebekah: Genesis 24–27
- Ruth: Book of Ruth

These texts provide the primary data for analysing women's actions, speech, social roles, and narrative significance.

Secondary Sources

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

This project will draw on scholarly literature concerning women in the Hebrew Bible, ancient Near Eastern culture, and Israelite family structures. Foundational works include Carol Meyers's reconstruction of women's daily lives,² Athalya Brenner's analysis of literary portrayals,³ Tikva Frymer-Kensky's thematic study of female figures,⁴ and major commentaries on Genesis and Ruth.⁵ These works supply cultural context and interpretive frameworks.

Methodology

This project will employ two complementary methodologies: textual analysis and historical-cultural contextualisation.

Textual Analysis

Each narrative will be closely read to examine how women are depicted within family and social structures. Key features to be analysed include:

- dialogue and character interaction
- family responsibilities and expectations
- household authority
- themes of fertility, marriage, and lineage
- narrative emphasis and theological framing

Historical-Cultural Contextualisation

Secondary scholarship will be used to situate these portrayals within the broader cultural and historical frameworks of ancient Israelite society. In particular, studies of family life, kinship structures, and marriage customs will be essential for interpreting the social values and normative expectations reflected in the narratives. By drawing on anthropological and historical analyses of household organisation, inheritance practices, and gendered roles, the essay can clarify how these texts both reflect and reinforce the social realities of their time. This contextual approach also helps explain why certain actions—such as Sarah arranging a surrogate through Hagar to secure an heir, or Ruth's participation in levirate-like marriage obligations to preserve her deceased husband's lineage—were not merely personal choices but socially meaningful

² *ibid*

³ Athalya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985).

⁴ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 2002).

⁵ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC (Waco: Word Books, 1987); Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

responses shaped by communal norms, economic pressures, and the legal traditions of ancient Israel.⁶

Thematic and Structural Approach

Using a pyramid structure, the main question will be explored through three supporting themes:

1. Marriage and Household Authority
2. Fertility, Motherhood, and Lineage
3. Agency and Social Negotiation

These themes link the individual case studies to the overarching social values of ancient Israel.

Case Studies

1. Sarah (Genesis 12–23)

Sarah's portrayal highlights the centrality of motherhood, particularly in relation to covenant and inheritance. Her barrenness represents a profound social and theological crisis, since producing an heir was essential for family continuity in Israelite society.⁷ Her decision to give Hagar to Abraham reflects both her agency and the pressures placed upon women within patriarchal structures. Her eventual motherhood affirms divine involvement in family lineage.

2. Rebekah (Genesis 24–27)

Rebekah represents a woman whose actions significantly shape covenant history. Her arranged marriage illustrates customary kinship practices, while her decisive intervention in securing Jacob's blessing shows that women could wield considerable influence within household structures.⁸ Through Rebekah, we see how social values surrounding inheritance, birth-order, and divine election interacted with family dynamics.

3. Ruth (Book of Ruth)

Ruth's narrative reflects values of loyalty, kinship responsibility, and social protection. As a foreign widow, she occupies a vulnerable social position, yet her commitment to Naomi and participation in the levirate-like marriage system highlight the community's mechanisms for

⁶ Victor Matthews and Don Benjamin, *The Social World of Ancient Israel* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993).

⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC (Waco: Word Books, 1987); Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

⁸ Susan Niditch, ed., *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

supporting the vulnerable.⁹ The narrative emphasises hospitality, family restoration, and the inclusion of outsiders within Israel's social framework.

Preliminary Structure of the Final Project

1. Introduction
2. Historical Background: Social and Family Structures in Ancient Israel
3. Sarah: Covenant, Fertility, and Matriarchy
4. Rebekah: Marriage, Household Influence, and Inheritance
5. Ruth: Loyalty, Vulnerability, and Social Integration
6. Comparative Thematic Analysis
7. Conclusion

Conclusion

This proposal outlines a study that will examine how women's stories in the Old Testament reflect the social values of ancient Israel. By analysing the narratives of Sarah, Rebekah, and Ruth, and situating them within their cultural context, the project aims to show how these women both participated in and shaped the social and theological frameworks of their communities. The focused structure, accessible data, and strong secondary scholarship ensure that the project is both feasible and academically valuable.

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⁹Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

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