



edited by Athalya Brenner

Under conditions of oral transmission the sentence would thus have to be read with emphasis, which is why I would advocate that this emphasis be indicated in the written text by an exclamation mark at its end:

But let every daughter live!²⁸

Such an insistence on letting the daughters live is completely compatible with the role played by 'daughters' in these chapters of Exodus. It should be noted that, through Pharaoh's intercession—but contrary to his intent—the daughters are the ones who enable history to progress at this crucial stage. The fate of the twelve sons of Israel depends on the one son who was born and remained alive thanks to the intervention of the saviour's head above water.

28. Note that in vv. 17-18 the verb *hyh* is in the Piel formation too.

I never particularly liked my article, "You Shall Let Every Daughter Live": A Study of Exodus 1.8-2.10, which is reprinted in this volume, and I am therefore grateful to Athalya Brenner for giving me the opportunity, some ten years later, with the benefit of hindsight, to indicate what I think is wrong with it and what I would do differently if I were to write a feminist critique of this text today. I say I never liked the article, but it would be more accurate, and more honest, to say that I never liked the text. A story of five women and a baby. Women, it is true, are very important in these opening chapters of Exodus, but the subject of their activity is a male infant, Moses, who soon takes over the story and dominates it, while women fade into the background. His mother, his sister and the pharaoh's daughter (accompanied by women servants) are directly involved in preserving the infant Moses' life; and although the midwives do not interact with him directly, by implication they save his life when they do not obey the pharaoh's command to kill male babies. We never hear of Shiphrah, Puah and the pharaoh's daughter again after Exodus 2, and Moses' mother appears again only in his genealogy (Exod. 6.20; Num. 26.59). Of the many active female characters in Exod. 1.8-2.10, only Moses' sister has a role in the subsequent narrative, one that, apparently, the biblical writers felt the need to suppress (cf. Exod. 15.21 with 15.1-18) or discredit (Num. 12). Exod. 1.8-2.10 was not a text that I would have chosen of my own accord. My article was a revision of a paper I was invited to write on the role of women in Exod. 1.8-2.10. That paper

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SECOND THOUGHTS ABOUT SECONDARY CHARACTERS:
WOMEN IN EXODUS 1.8-2.10

and others were discussed at a joint symposium of the Women and Religion Section and the Liberation Theology Group of the American Academy of Religion at its 1981 Annual Meeting. The existence of a special joint session on the topic, "The Feminist Hermeneutic Project", was an indication of the attention feminist interpretation was beginning to receive in the field of Religious Studies, and I believe the Exodus text was selected as a topic not only because of the important role female characters have in it but also because of the traditional association of the exodus theme with liberation theology. At that time, one of the goals of the emerging feminist biblical criticism was to uncover positive portrayals of women in the Bible—as if one could simply pluck positive images out of an admittedly androcentric text, separating literary characterizations from the androcentric interests they were created to serve.¹

A few years later, in a short essay that discussed a number of biblical "mothers", I turned again to Exod. 1.8-2.10, this time using the opportunity to express my dissatisfaction with my earlier work. My conclusion bears citing here as much for what it does not say as for what it does say.

I have dealt at length in another study with the women in the protogene to the exodus, which in part justifies my brevity here. I must confess that I was never satisfied with the results. The reason, I believe, has to do with disappointment that the narrative quickly and thoroughly moves from a woman's story to a man's story. While a feminist critique might want to seize onto the affirmative dimension of our paradox [without Moses there would be no exodus, but without these women there would be no Moses], accentuating the important consequences of women's actions for the divine plan, it must also acknowledge that being mothers of heroes—albeit daring, enterprising, and tenacious mothers—is not enough; acting behind the scenes is not enough.²

Whereas I recognized the limitations of the portrayal of women in Exodus 1-2, I had nothing to offer by way of response

1. P. Trible's groundbreaking *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* appeared in 1978 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press).
2. J.C. Exum, "Mother in Israel": A Familiar Figure Reconsidered, in L.M. Russel (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), p. 82.

beyond an objection, and thus was left with disappointment. I now see that what was needed was an expose and critique of the ideology that motivates this presentation. In what follows, I would like to indicate the direction in which a feminist critique attentive to gender politics could go. In doing so, I will address two major problems with my 1983 article: (1) because I used a literary method that remained within the ideology of the text, I was able only to describe the view of women expressed in the text and not to critique it, and (2) although I mentioned the problem of the absence of women in the narrative after one moves beyond the first few chapters of Exodus, an absence as striking as the presence of so many women in the first four chapters, I did not investigate the relationship of this absence to the noticeable presence of women in the opening chapters in terms of gender politics.

Literary Analysis and the Ideology of the Text

The approach I used to analyze the text in "You Shall Let Every Daughter Live" was essentially that of close reading or rhetorical criticism, which investigates the narrative in its present form on the premise that an understanding of its literary contours will aid us in perceiving its meaning.³ Such a literary approach was, and still is, very useful. I would still not question its conclusions that the women in Exodus 1 and 2 are portrayed positively, that they are active and enterprising, and that their actions are important for the future of the Israelite people. The sustained focus on women, the subtle comparisons created by paralleling characters, the ironic twists, the artistic use of *balven* contrast to make a point—all these things contribute to a striking affirmation of the role of women in the opening chapters of Exodus. Jopie Siebert-Hommes, in articles published in 1988 (reprinted in a different form in the present volume) and 1992,⁴ describes further artistic details that highlight the

3. J.C. Exum, "You Shall Let Every Daughter Live": A Study of Exodus 1.8-2.10, *Semeia* 28 (1983), pp. 63-82 (reproduced in this volume, pp. 37-61).
4. J. Siebert-Hommes, "Twelve Women in Exodus 1 and 2: The Role of Daughters and Sons in the Stories Concerning Moses", *Amsterdamse Cahiers voor Exegese en Bijbelse Theologie* 12 (1988), pp. 47-58 (reprinted pp. 62-74 above, and *idem*, "Die Geburtsgeschichte Mose innerhalb des Erzählzusammenhangs", in *Die Geburtsgeschichte Mose* (Leuven: Peeters, 1992), pp. 1-14).

women's roles. When, for example, her analysis reveals that the twelve tribes owe their deliverance to *twelve daughters*, she shows that this method's potential for drawing out new insights from significant textual details is far from exhausted. Siebert-Hommes's essays and mine demonstrate, quite persuasively I believe, how positively women are portrayed in Exodus 1.8-2.10. The problem with this kind of literary analysis is that it places logocentric constraints on feminist criticism. By focusing solely on the surface structure of the text, on the ways literary devices and structures serve as guides to meaning, it limits us to describing, and thus to reinscribing, the text's gender ideology. I now see this method as confining, and as representative of the phallogocentric drive to control and organize reading (and reality) into clearly defined categories. If we read according to the ideology of the text available to us in the surface structure, and stop there, we are left with the ancient (male) authors' views of women, which, in the case of Exodus 1-2, happen to be affirmative. But to see how the positive portrayal of women in Exod. 1.8-2.10 nevertheless serves male interests, we need to interrogate the ideology that motivates it. Granted that women are given important roles here—and indeed, precisely because women are given such important roles here—we need to ask, what androcentric interests does this positive presentation promote? Key questions that a feminist critique of these chapters needs to consider are, what is it about the women in Exod. 1.8-2.10 that makes them characters with whom women in ancient Israel might have wished to identify? And what is it about them that makes those responsible for maintaining the social and symbolic order want to manipulate them? I shall only begin to address these questions here.

Imenhang von Exodus 1 und 2, VT 42 (1992), pp. 398-404. As R.J. Weems points out ('The Hebrew Women are not Like the Egyptian Women: The Ideology of Race, Gender and Sexual Reproduction in Exodus 1', *Semiotica* 59 [1992], pp. 25-34), the text does not question but only reinscribes the ideology of difference.

5. I speak here of women in ancient times, for whom texts like this served as a means of social control. To the extent that modern women might wish to identify with these biblical models, the Bible still serves as a means of social control.

6. J. Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater', in S.R. Suleiman (ed.), *The Female Body in*

Stepping Outside the Ideology of the Text

As feminist critics have pointed out, even though men and women share in the making of history, symbolic production has been controlled by men.⁷ Even if the Bible's authors were not all males, the dominant male world view is the world view that finds expression in the biblical literature. I begin, therefore, with the assumption that the biblical literature was produced by and for an androcentric community. I understand women in the biblical literature as male constructs. They are the creations of androcentric (probably male) narrators, they reflect androcentric ideas about women, and they serve androcentric interests. What Esther Fuchs observes about biblical mothers applies to other female characters as well: they 'reveal more about the wishful thinking, fears, aspirations, and prejudices of their male creators than about women's authentic lives'.⁸ Since as long as we remain within the androcentric ideology of the text we can do no more than describe ancient men's views of women, a feminist critique must, of necessity, read against the grain. It must step outside the text's ideology and consider what androcentric agenda these narrators promote.

Why are women allowed to play such an important role in the early chapters of Exodus? A traditional way of understanding the focus on women in Exodus 1-2 is to connect it to a familiar biblical theme: God (behind the scenes, in this case) uses the weak and lowly to overcome the strong and powerful. The Egyptian pharaoh, if there is a positive side to this characterization, there is also a negative one. This particular pharaoh, as I argued in the 1983 article, is exceedingly foolish—so foolish that even women can outwit him! Another way of looking at the important role women play in these chapters is to consider it a

⁷ See, e.g., G. Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 113-14.

⁸ E. Fuchs, 'The Literary Characterization of Mothers in Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible', in A. Yarbro Collins (ed.), *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), p. 118.

consequence of the focus on infants: it is only natural that women should appear in an account where babies are concerned. Both these explanations appeal to women's subordinate position and traditional domestic role to account for the emphasis on women in the opening chapters of Exodus, but neither interrogates the text's androcentric motivation.

In order to maintain and perpetuate itself, patriarchy depends on women's complicity.⁹ Force, threat and fear are often relied upon to keep women in their place.¹⁰ But rewarding women for their complicity is one of patriarchy's most useful strategies, because it can often achieve a level of cooperation that force or threat cannot guarantee. The honor of playing a decisive role in the future deliverance of the Israelite people is the reward the women of Exodus 1-2 receive for acting in the service of male power (the real contest in Exodus is, after all, between 'males'—between the Egyptian pharaoh and the [male-identified] Israelite god, or between Pharaoh and Moses). Women, Exodus 1-2 tells us, are important without the courage and ingenuity of women, Israel might not have survived as a people. In Exodus 1.8-2.10, the women are accorded recognition as national heroes; their bravery, cleverness and initiative are instrumental in the founding of a nation. The risks they take to preserve the lives of male babies, especially Moses,¹¹ guarantee that these women will be honored for generations to come; thus the names of the two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, are recorded, and the story later supplies the names of Moses' mother Jochebed and sister Miriam.¹²

9. See Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, pp. 5-6, 233-35.
10. I examine these various ways of controlling women in *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Sheffield: JSOT Press/Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1993).
11. The women risk punishment for disobeying the pharaoh. As I pointed out in 1983, the midwives disobey Pharaoh's edict to kill male babies by not carrying it out; Moses' mother and Pharaoh's daughter openly defy the command to expose male infants on the Nile.
12. This means that only the woman who is clearly non-Israelite, Pharaoh's daughter, is not given a name. On whether the midwives are Hebrew or Egyptian, see the discussion in Exum, 'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live', p. 48. Miriam is not identified as Moses' sister in Exodus, but only as Aaron's sister; she is identified as Moses' sister in

The text tells women how important mothers are and proposes that the domestic sphere can be a place of valor, where a woman's mettle is tested. Honor and status (the two are related) are rewards patriarchy grants women for assent to their subordination and cooperation in it. One of the few roles in which women can achieve status in patriarchal society is that of mother. Motherhood is not only patriarchy's highest reward for women, it is also presented as something women themselves most desire (witness the many biblical accounts of barren women who desperately desire and finally give birth to a long-awaited son)—and this, as Fuchs points out, is a powerful ideological strategy.¹³ The women in Exodus 1.8-2.10 perform traditional female, and especially motherly, activities, activities focused on children—though, of course, they give new meaning to their nurturing and protective roles. The midwives not only assist in birth, they save lives. As a reward for their defiance of the pharaoh's command to kill male babies, God builds them 'houses'; that is, he gives them families.¹⁴ Figuratively speaking, the midwives, Moses' mother, Moses' sister, and Pharaoh's daughter are all mothers of the exodus.¹⁵

What about the women in Exodus 1.8-2.10 makes them characters with whom women might wish to identify? They exhibit admirable qualities, such as heroism, fear of God (1.17), compassion (2.6), determination (2.2-4) and cleverness (2.7), and they show that women can contribute significantly to the life of their people. The story praises women in the spirit of the old adage that the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world. In essence, its message to women is: stay in your place in the domestic sphere; you can achieve important things there. The public arena belongs to men; you do not need to look beyond motherhood for fulfillment. In Exodus 1-2, Hebrew women do not need to kill Egyptians (fighting is men's work or the work of their male-identified God: Exodus 12.29; 15.24-31) but only to keep Hebrew males alive.

- Num. 26.59 and 1 Chron. 6.3.
13. Fuchs, 'The Literary Characterization of Mothers', p. 130.
14. See the discussion of the difficulty of v. 21 in Exum, 'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live', p. 50.
15. Exum, 'Mother in Israel', p. 80.

Indeed, by having the sister appear suddenly to put the idea of adopting Moses in the princess's mind, the narrator suggests that the deity, rather than any decision by women to work together, is responsible for the propitious outcome.

One way of dealing with women's power is to diffuse it. In Exodus 1-2 this is accomplished by having three (or five) 'mothers' rescue Moses, rather than one. Imagine the power one woman would have had if she alone had saved Moses.¹⁶ Diffusing the influence of women, I believe, is also the reason Moses' mother and sister are anonymous in this account; by withholding their names until later in the narrative, the narrator accords them less recognition and renders them less imposing.

The role the women play in the birth of the nation is comparable to the role usually played by mothers in the Bible: they yield their power, and their stories, to their husbands and sons.¹⁷ Like a child dissociating itself from its mother, Moses must separate from his 'mothers' and exchange his passive role for an active one. Thus, almost immediately after he is rescued by daughters (recall the meaningful use of *bat* in Exod. 1.8-2.10), Moses rescues daughters. In Exod. 2.16-22, Moses—who in the space of five verses has grown up, killed an Egyptian, and fled the country—delivers seven daughters from shepherds who threaten them when they come to water the flock of their father Reuel (Jethro), the Midianite priest. He marries one of these daughters and has a son of his own (the contrast between *ben*, 'son', and *bat*, 'daughter', continues throughout the chapter). But the reversal of roles is not complete. In Exod. 4.24-26, a foreign woman again saves Moses' life: Zipporah, Moses' wife, prevents the divine Father from killing her husband, through a rite of circumcision that makes him her 'bridegroom of blood'.¹⁸

16. See A. Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: The Biblical Seminar, 2, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), pp. 99-100.
17. See Exum, *Fragmented Women*, ch. 3, 'The Mother's Place'. This is a strange text that has posed numerous problems for interpretation. It is interesting that a woman here performs the rite of circumcision. For suggestive comments on this passage, see I. Pardo, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 84-93.

Sayings like 'the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world' and 'behind every great man is a woman' are meant to make women feel important, while in reality such sayings serve an androcentric agenda by suggesting that women should be satisfied with their power behind the scenes. Exod. 1.8-2.10, where women actively determine Israel's future, serves a similar agenda. It compensates women on the domestic front for the role denied them in the larger story of the exodus and journey to the promised land. But like its modern counterparts in the sayings above about women's indirect power, it has something to hide: its fear of women's power that makes it important to domesticate and confine it.

The Subversive Female Presence and its Suppression

The women in Exodus 1 and 2 are literary creations, male constructs—and they are powerful. They outwit and overcome men. Patriarchy fears women's power and seeks to circumscribe and control it. Precisely because women have power that they can use to subvert authority, they present a threat to patriarchal society. It is therefore in the interest of those who maintain the social and symbolic order to represent women characters as using their power in the service of patriarchy.

Historically patriarchy has relied on class divisions and ethnic divisions among women to prevent women from forming alliances that might further the cause of their sex. Women do not often interact or speak to one another in the Bible, yet here in Exodus 2 we find Moses' mother, his sister, an Egyptian princess and the princess's women servants all engaged in protecting the infant Moses from the pharaoh's death edict. Whereas the text offers a glimpse of the formidable threat posed to male authority when women cooperate across class and ethnic lines, it co-opts women's power for its own ends: it uses an alliance between women to defy the foreign authority that oppresses the Hebrew people. Moreover, the text describes a fairly unlikely alliance; that an Egyptian princess would openly defy her father's command to expose male babies on the Nile by taking the infant out of the Nile, and that she would adopt a Hebrew baby, could be considered 'providential'.

Typically, she drops out of the picture, and is not mentioned again until Exod. 18.2-5, where we learn that Moses had sent her away.¹⁹ Perhaps we might view the reappearance of a woman to deliver Moses violently as an instance of women refusing to be written out of the text without a struggle; in other words, as a symptom of a guilty narrative conscience.²⁰ In any event, Moses, unhampered by the woman's presence, moves on to deliver not just women again, but rather a whole people.

After Exodus 4, women are conspicuously absent in much of the narrative of the exodus and journey to the promised land in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.²¹ The feminine, however, resurfaces in another form. Patriarchy seeks to diffuse, or suppress, or appropriate female power, as the Bible's classic illustration of womb envy dramatically demonstrates: in Genesis 2, the creative power of women is assumed by the prototypical Man who—like Zeus who gave birth to Athena from his head—symbolically gives birth to woman with the help of the creator god (and with no creator goddess involved). 'Womb envy' is perhaps behind the application of female metaphors to God and Moses later in the exodus story. In Numbers 11, when the people complain to Moses about not having meat to eat, Moses complains to God about his responsibilities:

Did I conceive all this people? Did I bring them forth, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries the sucking child, to the land which you swore to give their

19. Jethro brings her and her two sons with him to meet Moses after the exodus from Egypt, but Zipporah is not mentioned in the reconciliation scene.
20. I suggest something similar about the reappearance of Michael's name in 2 Sam. 21.8; see Exum, *Fragmented Woman*, p. 38.
21. Exod. 19 indicates that the covenant at Sinai is made with men; the people are addressed with the command, 'Do not go near a woman' (v. 15). That the ten commandments, for example, are addressed to men is clear from the second person masculine singular pronouns and a command such as, 'You shall not covet... your neighbor's wife' (v. 17). On women's general invisibility in the laws, see P. Bird, 'Images of Women in the Old Testament in R.R. Ruether (ed.), *Religion and Sexism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), pp. 48-57. Cf. also the Afterword to this volume, pp. 255-58.

father?'... I am not able to carry all this people alone, the burden is too heavy for me (Num. 11.12-14).

Moses, cast in a nurturing, maternal role, finds it too hard, and his rhetorical questions imply that it is God who conceived the people of Israel and who is not doing an adequate job of mothering them. God and Moses are imaged as mothers and midwives—the important female roles in Exodus 1-2—not so much because they are better at women's roles (here they seem to have problems, but their difficulties will be resolved), but because male figures in these roles do not threaten the status quo. Applying maternal imagery to the deity and the human hero of the story is a way of appropriating maternal power. Patriarchy does not have to worry that God and Moses, acting as mothers and midwives, will subvert androcentric interests and undermine the social order because they are the guarantors of the patriarchal social order.

I suggested above that Exod. 1.8-2.10 serves as a kind of compensation for the fact that women are not given a role in the bulk of the account of the exodus and wanderings. When Miriam, the one woman from Exodus 2 to reappear later in an important role, does speak out for herself—claiming a position of leadership—she is put in her place. In Num. 12.1-2, we learn that Miriam (and Aaron)²² speaks out against Moses 'because of the Cushite woman he married'. It is noteworthy that here Miriam is set over against a foreign woman, whereas Exodus 1-2 showed the cooperation between women across ethnic boundaries. Perhaps it is because such a level of cooperation cannot be tolerated that Miriam is used to speak out against a foreign woman in Numbers 12. The complaint shifts abruptly from an objection to the woman to the issue of leadership: 'Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?' (v. 2). The strange account has baffled commentators, not the least because only Miriam is punished for challenging Moses' authority.²³ She becomes leprous and must

22. The verb is third person feminine singular, suggesting either that Aaron is a later addition to the story (it one takes a historical-critical approach) or that the story is primarily concerned with making only Miriam look bad.
23. It is not without significance that this story appears just after

be shut up outside the camp seven days, after which she is brought in again.

Miriam's punishment of being quarantined outside the boundary of the camp is suggestive of the position that feminist critics have argued is occupied by women in the phallogocentric symbolic order.²⁴ Women are at the boundary of the symbolic order, the border between men and chaos. As borderline figures, women partake of the properties of a border: they are neither inside nor outside. When women are viewed as inside the border, they are seen to have protective qualities (as in Exod. 1 and 2); when viewed as outside, they are dangerous (as here in Num. 12).

Miriam's claim to a position of authority comparable to Moses—and the rhetorical questions imply that God has spoken through her also—threatens to blur the distinction between Moses' role and hers. Her claim challenges male hegemony. Punishment is swift and devastating. For threatening to disrupt the social order, Miriam is put outside the boundary of patriarchal order, symbolized by the camp, where she becomes, literally, the outsider, the other—until she is allowed to come back *inside* the camp/symbolic order in her proper, submissive role. Some commentators have argued that Aaron does not share in Miriam's punishment because he is a priest, and the Priestly writers would not have been willing to dishonor him by portraying him as leprous and having him put outside the camp. Gender politics are also at work, I suggest: as a man, Aaron poses no threat to the symbolic order. On the contrary, his leaving Aaron unblemished and unpunished, Numbers 12 effectively humiliates and eliminates the woman.

The case of Miriam in Numbers 12 offers but one example of the way women's experience, in the biblical text as in other patriarchal texts, is expressed but has been displaced and

the account in which female imagery is used for Moses and God. In Num. 11.16-30 the problem of nurturing the people is resolved by allowing seventy men, elders of the community, to share the task. There Moses said, 'Would that all the Lord's people were prophets'; here Miriam's role as prophet (cf. Exod. 15.20) is undermined.
24. For this discussion, see T. Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 167.

distorted. To be sure, much work remains for feminist criticism of the exodus and wandering traditions. But attempting to account for the distortion or absence or suppression of female presence after the opening stories in Exodus 1 and 2 in terms of biblical gender politics, rather than treating it as if it were unmotivated, is, I think, a step in the right direction.